

Southwark Essential Digital Skills Action Plan

2020-2022

Foreword to the plan

At home and at work, the ability to use go online and use internet-enabled devices securely and with confidence has become essential in our day to day lives. As the world around us expands with digital innovation and technology we have committed to ensure that all Southwark residents benefit from opportunities to take advantage of the digital revolution.

In the workplace, it is predicted that within 20 years, 90 per cent of all jobs will require some element of digital skills.ⁱ And outside of work, many businesses and organisations, including the council, the NHS, banks, recruitment agencies and government services such as Universal Credit have adopted digital first approaches, moving services and information online. While this helps people find essential information and services more quickly, and reduces the time and cost of transactions, it also requires users to have a set of fundamental digital skills in order to perform basic day to day tasks with confidence and safety.

Across the UK, 11.7 million adults (22% of the population) do not have all the essential digital skills needed for day-to-day life. This includes 5.9 million who are unable to turn on a device such as PC, smartphone or tablet and 6.5 million who do not know how to open an app.ⁱⁱ

Many people who lack these essential skills are older, and whatever their age they are more likely to be facing other disadvantages such as unemployment or living with a disability. The Covid-19 pandemic has made stark the reality of how a lack of essential digital skills, together with other measures of exclusion and poverty, have severely limited the ability of already disadvantaged individuals to access basic services and communicate with friends and family.

For those in work, lower earners are far more likely to lack essential digital skills than those on higher incomes. A lack of essential digital skills can often combine with wider disadvantages to limit people's earning capacity and their ability to access essential services, communicate and keep themselves safe and secure online.ⁱⁱⁱ

What's more, as the pace of change in digital technologies and their integration with everyday life accelerates, there is an ongoing need to regularly review what skills are most required and how people can be best supported with them.

The council has an important role in providing digital skills training directly to residents, through our adult learning service and libraries. We also hold a unique convening role, bringing local organisations together to share knowledge, develop and coordinate strategies for effectively building the digital skills of our residents.

That is how we have developed Southwark's first action plan for essential digital skills. It has been shaped in partnership with education providers, broadband companies, the DWP, NHS, voluntary sector and a wide cross-section of council teams and services. The plan is shared by all partners and will only be delivered through ongoing partnership, building on the work already underway to ensure all Southwark residents can develop the essential digital skills they need for their daily lives and work.

We have also compiled a directory of local organisations who are providing essential digital skills training for any resident who wishes to access this.

It is a two-year plan, to be delivered alongside the council's wider strategic framework, supporting digital inclusion across all our communities



Cllr Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member
for Jobs, Culture and Skills

What we mean by essential digital skills

The essential digital skills for life and work are set out in the national Essential Digital Skills Framework as updated by the Department for Education in 2018^{iv}.

They are described as ‘the digital skills adults need to safely benefit from, participate in and contribute to the digital world’.

To maintain consistency across local and national activity, the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Action Plan will follow this national framework.

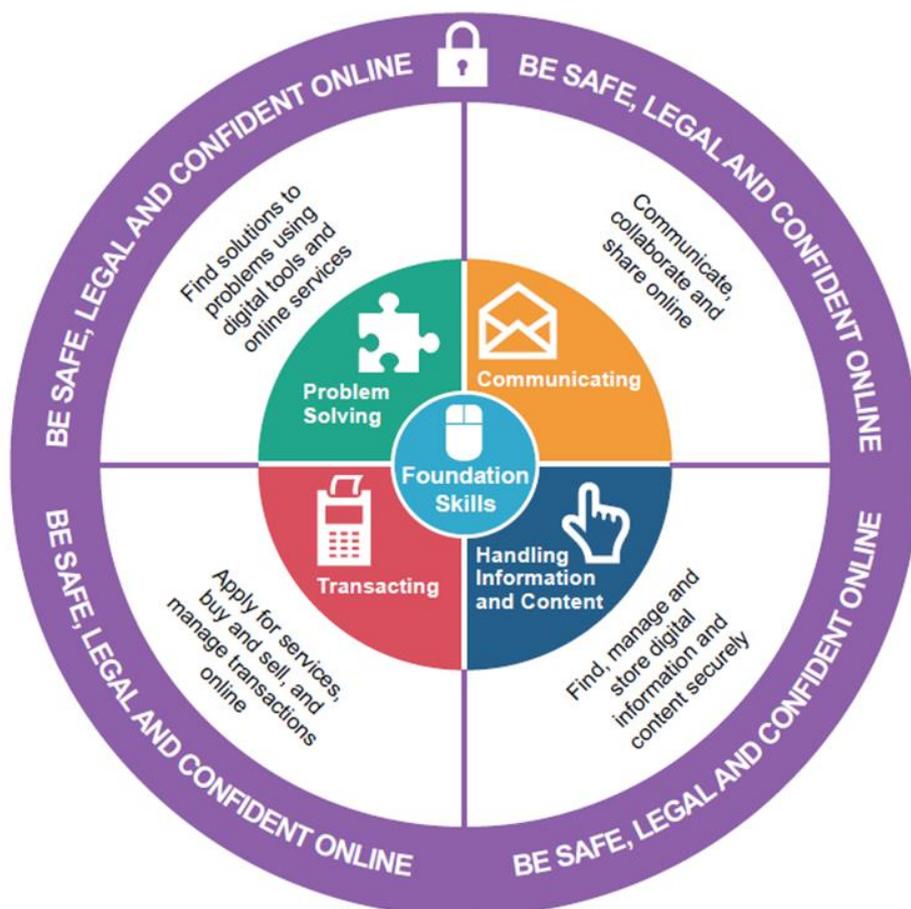
The framework includes six categories of essential digital skills for life and work. These also frame the national standards and qualifications for essential digital skills launched in 2019.

The categories are:

- Communicating
- Handling information and content
- Transacting
- Problem solving
- Being safe and legal online

These are underpinned by foundation skills, which cover the very basics of operating a device and connecting to the internet safely.

Each category contains a set of essential skills and examples of their use, divided into skills for life and an additional set of skills for work.



Links to other policies

This plan has been developed within a wider context of national, regional and local initiatives to promote essential digital skills and other aspects of digital inclusion. It sits comfortably alongside these to provide a focus to activity in Southwark, while remaining flexible and fit to respond to changes in need, resourcing and priorities as they arise.

Council Plan 2018-22

Southwark's Council Plan defines the council's priorities up to 2022. It sets out commitments to:

- Make sure everyone has a basic qualification in English and maths and that residents have the digital skills to get the jobs of the future; and
- Ensure all residents benefit from opportunities to take advantage of the digital revolution.

This action plan will be a key tool in the ongoing delivery against these commitments.

Economic Renewal Plan

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will be far-reaching and difficult to predict. In response, we've developed an Economic Renewal Plan with immediate, short, medium and long term priorities. Digital resilience and inclusion is identified as a key workstream to support our residents to access new opportunities as the London economy emerges from the pandemic. This approach also aligns with the London Recovery Board's focus on digital access for all as one of the eight missions for London's recovery programme.

Connected Southwark Strategy 2020-22

The Connected Southwark Strategy will shape the council's wider delivery of commitments to improve digital connectivity, inclusion and access across the borough. This action plan will support delivery against the strategy and their delivery periods have been aligned for this purpose.

Southwark Stands Together

Southwark Stands Together is a long-term programme of positive action, education and initiatives for the council to work in solidarity with Southwark's communities and the council's staff to tackle racism, injustice and inequality. Pre-existing and deep-rooted inequalities can be emphasised and reinforced through the inability to access digital resources. As many services move online, the emphasis on digital can lead to a greater 'disconnect' between local authorities and disengaged communities and residents, particularly in such times of crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic. The implementation of this action plan will seek to directly address such injustices, targeting resources at where they are most needed.

Southwark Skills Strategy

The Southwark Skills Strategy was developed with learners, employers, providers and funders. It sets out actions to help more people in our borough gain the skills they need now and in the future, helping to make Southwark a full employment borough.

Delivery of the strategy is led by a partnership of local stakeholders under a number of work streams. This action plan falls within the work stream 'Shaping essential skills provision', which includes an aim to establish a common approach across the council and local providers for the delivery of essential digital skills in Southwark.

Workforce Strategy 2019-22

Southwark Council introduced a digital skills framework and self-assessment tool to support our staff's digital literacy in 2017. Our workforce strategy has specific commitments to support all of our staff, whether they are office based or out and about delivering services around the borough. Our learning offer supports their ability to use technology, undertake research and transactions and consider how digital advances can help them carry out their roles. This is grouped under the following headings:

Tools & Technologies: The technical and practical aspects of technologies which support learning, managing and thriving in the digital age.

Communicate & Collaborate: Connecting with each other and sharing ideas, regardless of distance or time.

Create & Innovate: Being confident with using technologies to make new resources, express yourself and develop new ways of interpreting ideas.

Find & use: Having the skills needed to find relevant information and apply it effectively. This could be for learning, research or service improvement for example.

Identity & Wellbeing: Being mindful of your own and others' online self, data, privacy and protection in an ethical and respectful way

Teach & Learn: How to get the most out of technologies to encourage learning, develop yourself and make sense of new knowledge.

These headings complement the Essential Digital Skills Framework.

Skills for Londoners Strategy

The Mayor of London's skills strategy recognises the importance of essential digital skills for all Londoners. It commits to working towards providing a digital skills entitlement for Londoners through the devolved Adult Education Budget (AEB), to ensure that all Londoners gain a basic level of digital skills to ensure they can fully participate in society. This includes plans for a new digital skills entitlement under which all adult Londoners who lack essential digital skills will have access to free training through the AEB.

UK Digital Strategy

The UK Digital Strategy (2017) contains the government's policy position and priorities for developing a world-leading digital economy that works for everyone. Chapter 2: 'Digital skills and inclusion – giving everyone access to the digital skills they need', provides the policy basis for interventions including the National Digital Skills

Partnership and emphasises the role of libraries and partnerships with tech companies in improving access to essential digital skills.

National Standards and Qualifications for Essential Digital Skills

Linked to the Essential Digital Skills Framework, the National Standards for Essential Digital Skills (2019) define the standards against which the new national qualifications for essential digital skills will be produced, due to be available from August 2020.

Libraries Connected digital universal offer

Southwark Libraries are members of the Libraries Connected network (the sector support organisation for libraries in England). Libraries Connected commits to a universal 'Information and Digital' offer through which libraries enable individuals and communities to develop learning skills to find answers and to inform life choices.

NHS Widening Digital Participation programme

Improving digital literacy can have a significant impact on improving health outcomes for patients by helping them to take control of their health and care. The NHS widening digital participation programme is working to increase awareness of and access to digital health technologies.

Development and delivery of the plan

Development

This action plan has been developed through the ‘Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group’. This is an informal partnership of local organisations that have an interest in working together to improve outcomes for Southwark residents who lack essential digital skills.

The group was convened by the council in early 2019. It emerged from the digital inclusion working group established under the Southwark Digital Strategy 2016 and was initially established to explore common issues relating to digital inclusion

in Southwark and links to essential digital skills. The group brought together for the first time organisations that deliver digital skills training and those that provide services and support people who lack essential digital skills, who are often also vulnerable or disadvantaged. Partners met throughout the year to scope, develop and begin implementation of the action plan.

The group is open to new members that have an interest in supporting essential digital skills in Southwark. We are keen to involve private sector partners as well as public, educational and voluntary sector bodies.

Partners involved in the development of the action plan to date

Southwark Council (Local Economy / Libraries / Adult & Community Learning / Customer Services / Digital Delivery / Public Health / Communities)	St George the Martyr Charity
Southwark College	Community Southwark
Morley College	Southwark Pensioners Centre
Blackfriars Settlement	University of the Third Age, Dulwich
Southwark Works	Citizens Advice Southwark
Hyperoptic	NHS CCG
Community Fibre	DWP

Delivery

The plan’s delivery will continue to be led through the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group, with additional partners brought in as required.

The group is facilitated and administered by the council and is scheduled to meet approximately 6 times per year. At each meeting the action plan is monitored and updated. A full refresh will also be carried out annually to ensure local activity remains relevant and appropriate in the fast-moving landscape of digital skills.

Actions in year one will focus on developing a deeper understanding of local needs and gaps, embedding and securing greatest value and impact from existing provision, and maximising the benefits of existing relationships.

The plan’s delivery will align with the emerging plans for other essential and functional skills

including literacy, numeracy and ESOL, as the target groups, provider organisations and patterns of need may often overlap.

Our aim and objectives

The aim of the action plan, endorsed by all partners involved in its development is:

To work collectively across the community to ensure all Southwark residents can develop the essential digital skills they need for their daily lives and work.

This aim will be delivered through actions working across three objectives.

Objective 1

A shared understanding of need and demand for essential digital skills in Southwark

Objective 2

Collectively deliver sufficient, accessible provision that responds to learner needs

Objective 3

A collaborative approach to innovation

Objective 1: A shared understanding of need and demand for essential digital skills in Southwark

We have an incomplete understanding of local need, with no common assessment framework in place.

According to the 2020 Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index, 18% of Londoners do not have one or more of the essential digital skills for life. In Southwark this would be 47,000 people aged 16 and over.

The same research reports that 43% of Londoners in work do not have one or more of the essential digital skills for work. For Southwark this would translate into over 81,000 of our working residents.

Southwark-based organisations have a wide range of contact points with people with a low level of digital skills. These include places where people go to learn, such as libraries, digital champions, colleges, etc. and also places where people access support services for a wide range of reasons that are not directly related with lacking digital skills, but may nonetheless find themselves at a disadvantage if they cannot navigate digital resources. There are also occasions where partner organisations engage with people who would benefit from support with their digital skills but the issue is entirely unrelated to the interaction and may not be raised at all.

All these scenarios lack a shared approach to assessing and recording a digital skills need, and as a result we have only a fragmented and anecdotal understanding of the patterns of need in our borough.

A key action under this objective is therefore to develop and test a common assessment for essential digital skills that can be used simply by all partners, including remote assessment, and the data shared to inform our understanding of need and demand for support with essential digital skills.

Even without this data, there are nonetheless some patterns observed by partners involved in the development of the plan.

- Further education colleges report a steady drop-off in the numbers of people presenting to them with very low or no digital skills in recent years. Instead, their learners needs reflect an increasing focus on essential digital skills for the workplace.
- Around 20% to 25% of new clients registering with Southwark Works, the council's employment support programme, say they either could not complete an online job application or could not upload a CV to a job site.
- All partners report that many people lacking essential digital skills present with other support needs as well.
- Covid-19 has highlighted especially strong essential digital skills needs amongst older people, residents with an ESOL background, and parents, a particularly under-supported group when it comes to digital skills.

The number of people being supported with essential digital skills in Southwark annually can only be broadly approximated. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Morley College, Blackfriars College and Southwark College supported around 900 learners per year on lower level digital skills courses. Southwark Libraries provided around 6500 sessions of support per year, but learner data is not currently collected. Added to these are the digital champions, supported under the full-fibre broadband roll-out, which are targeted to train 50 digital champions and deliver 200 learning sessions in the first year. We are also aware of a number of other learning providers (see the support directory under Objective 2) for which typical learner numbers are not yet known.

The number of people receiving support through funded advice services to make online Universal Credit applications is over 1,500 per year. Full migration to Universal Credit has not yet taken place

and these numbers can be expected to increase sharply when that happens. The growth in unemployment from the economic slowdown will also increase demand on advice services from people needing support to carry out online claims. This is a particular area for attention as advice services are not equipped to address the key lack of digital skills in their clients and are therefore reliant on up to date information to make referrals to learning support.

The actions under this objective reflect the need in the short term to work from a common understanding of need, and to improve the capacity of partner organisations to refer individuals to the right support.

In the longer term, we will look to use this improved understanding to identify gaps, as well as work with a wider range of organisations, extending our capacity to engage people with low level digital skills and link them to the essential support they need.

Actions

What we can do now	What we will work towards
Identify and adopt a common approach to assessing digital skills needs and pool data to improve our understanding of local needs	Jointly identify gaps in local provision and under-served groups
Map and share available provision to support referrals between organisations	Identify and work with partners who engage with people more likely to be lacking essential digital skills

Objective 2: Collectively deliver sufficient, accessible provision that responds to learner needs

As needs are changing, so must support.

All learning providers are aware of the need to adapt their current provision, to keep in line with developments in learner needs and to increase accessibility.

Providers particularly recognise the need to offer clearer opportunities to progress past the essential digital skills to improve employability and earning potential in work.

A good example of a new area for exploration is the free online offer from companies such as Barclays, Lloyds and Microsoft, as well as more extensive and advanced learning resources hosted by Google. Partners are exploring how self-guided courses can be blended with classroom and supervised tuition to improve access to learning and flexibility in the offer.

Together we can offer more and make learning more targeted and accessible

There are many opportunities to explore collaboration across organisations to maximise the accessibility of training and improve referrals from advice services.

A number of services such as libraries, Jobcentre Plus and Southwark Works are exploring how they can use the digital champions model to train frontline staff and volunteers in providing informal support and advice on essential digital skills, and act as trainers to service users. This includes providing remote support when public health physical distancing measures are in place.

We are also looking at how key contact points for people with low-level digital skills, such as the council's contact centre and Jobcentre Plus, can make improvements in how they signpost people to appropriate essential digital skills support, to encourage uptake and allow for improved tracking of referrals and outcomes.

Improving access to remote learning

Locations that, pre-Covid, were able to offer open and accessible community use of IT infrastructure such as libraries and Jobcentre Plus have had to radically change their delivery models in response to the pandemic.

People who used these sites to access equipment, for learning and/or for everyday tasks have struggled to access online resources in other ways.

Training organisations also moved to remote service delivery. This generates new challenges, as a certain level of digital skills is needed to access training, and many residents lacking essential digital skills also experience difficulties in accessing equipment and an internet connection.

Covid-19 has therefore revealed an increasing need to embed the skills to access remote learning, along with access to equipment and an affordable internet connection, into essential digital skills learning.

Organisations are also moving to ensure that tutors, case workers and volunteers are trained to support remote delivery. However, there is a recognition that face-to-face learning is still essential for some groups and blended models of in-person and remote support may be most appropriate, where this can be achieved.

Actions

In the short term, we will focus on making existing provision more accessible, through extending community-based provision, supporting the digital champions programme to become embedded across the borough, partnering skills training with initiatives to make devices and internet connections more accessible, and more effectively publicising available support.

In the medium term we seek to develop and test alternative models of support more suited to people's availability, such as blending online resources with face-to-face support. We will also look to more effectively integrate essential digital skills with skills for work, reflecting the relationship between a lack of digital skills and lower-paid work.

What we can do now	What we will work towards
Build on learning from Covid-19 to support effective models of essential digital skills support and improve access to equipment and resources for remote learning	Build relationships with tech companies and improve access to online learning resources
Develop partnerships to extend community-based provision in Southwark, including roll-out of the Digital Champions programme	Create local partnerships to deliver essential digital skills in new ways that meet identified local needs at a range of levels, including skills for work
Publicise a directory of local essential digital skills support, including free online resources	

Objective 3: A collaborative approach to innovation

Seeking out new partnerships and future-proofing the offer

As digitisation of daily life continues with the rapid growth of smart cities, Internet of Things and data science technologies, the essential skills needed to function well in the world will evolve.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated this trend, while reinforcing the essential nature of digital skills for life and work. It has also highlighted the strong relationship between a lack of digital skills and wider aspects of digital poverty – such as lack of a suitable device, or number of devices, in a household, and the prohibitive cost for many of broadband and mobile data.

Learning providers are keen to explore how to bring together partnerships for funding and develop innovative approaches to provision that meet future needs.

As we better understand the changing digital skills needs of our residents, digital technologies also allow for greater opportunity for learning to take place in different spaces, at different times and through new tools and methods.

There are also many opportunities to explore developing closer relationships with a wider set of partners.

Higher Education learning providers are pioneering the teaching of new digital skills locally, including UAL at its three colleges in Southwark, and London South Bank University.

Local employers in the digital industries can support improved employer involvement in learning provision and forecasting changing workplace needs.

The voluntary and community sector and actors within health and social care can be better engaged to integrate essential digital skill support within the support offered to individuals, to enhance independent living and wellbeing.

The voluntary and community sector is also leading the way in responding to digital poverty through the Hubbub/O2 Community Calling project, which distributes recycled smartphones and data vouchers to those in need, working through Community Southwark and local partners.

And funders such as the GLA, operating the devolved Adult Education Budget can be better engaged to develop a local funding case for increased flexible, non-accredited provision in community settings.

Actions

Immediate actions will focus on broadening the range of the partnership and exploring new relationships to drive innovation and improvements in local essential digital skills support.

Over the longer term we will seek to integrate a 'future-proofing' approach to essential digital skills, exploring needs related to new workplace and home technologies that are affecting the way we live and work.

What we can do now	What we will work towards
<p>Through the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group identify immediate areas for improvements, partnerships, and innovation in local provision</p>	<p>Develop a shared approach to future-proofing essential digital skills provision (as around issues such as smart cities and the internet of things)</p>
<p>Explore wider partnerships and introduce new organisations to the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group</p>	

Delivery plan

As the delivery of the plan progresses under the oversight of the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group, a range of detailed activities will sit under each action.

This delivery plan will form the basis of monitoring activity and progress against the action plan. The delivery plan is maintained as an appendix to this document and regularly updated.

Monitoring and evaluation

The Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group will monitor progress against the delivery plan at each meeting. In addition, we will undertake an annual refresh of the action plan, to ensure it reflects changes in the local policy and delivery landscape, and incorporates learning from the previous year's delivery.

The annual refresh will be accompanied by a progress report. It is intended that this includes an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Southwark Essential Digital Skills Group from partners and recommendations for adjustments over each forthcoming year, in order to keep the group relevant and valuable to all partners, and effective in addressing essential skills needs in Southwark.

ⁱ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2017) 'UK Digital Strategy', Chapter 2: 'Digital skills and inclusion – giving everyone access to the digital skills they need'. Accessed from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy>

ⁱⁱ Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index, 2020. Accessed from https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Essential digital skills framework, Department for Education, 2018. Accessed from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework>