



**Oxfordshire County Council
Digital Inclusion Strategy
2022-2025**

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Foreword

A key part of our commitment to tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire is improving digital inclusion. Digital access can improve the quality of life by increasing opportunities for Oxfordshire residents to get involved in education, employment, community activities, health services, and staying in touch with family and friends.

Our strategy involves working with business, communities, City and District councils, and partners to tackle the digital divide. We know that digital service delivery will not be right for everybody and will work to empower those who want to be more digitally enabled, whilst providing support for those who are unable or choose not to be connected.

There is a detailed action plan which underpins the long-term ambitions and commitments set out in this strategy. This strategy contributes to our wider vision to lead positive change and to work in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer, and healthier county.

Cllr Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Oxfordshire County Council

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Introduction – Why is digital inclusion important?

[Citizens Online](#) defines digital inclusion as being “about ensuring the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone”. It includes both access to the internet and the ability to use it.

This is a multi-faceted issue and includes:

1. Access to good quality and affordable broadband, wi-fi and mobile data.
2. Opportunities for digital skills training and support.
3. Devices that can access the internet, that are affordable and good quality, and meet their users’ needs.
4. The ability, motivation, confidence, and physical space to safely access the internet.
5. Accessible services that are designed inclusively to meet the needs of service users.

The “digital divide” refers to the gap between those who have the elements outlined above, and those who do not. People who are disadvantaged or vulnerable in other ways are more likely to be digitally excluded, with this issue being closely linked to other inequalities. The importance of digital inclusion has been increased following the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The benefits include access to essential services, education, information, social connection, employment opportunities, and reducing our impact on the environment by reducing travel. Poorer health, educational, and employment outcomes, and an increased risk of poverty can all be a result of digital exclusion.

We recognise that digital inclusion is a complex issue, and that those who are “digitally excluded” are hard to define. We acknowledge that anyone could be digitally excluded in their lifetime, that there is no one category of people who fit this label and that individuals might not consider themselves to be “digitally excluded”. However, [research carried out by the Local Government Association and](#)

[Socitm Advisory](#) shows that there are groups who are more likely to be digitally excluded due to a range of different barriers.

Therefore, we will place a particular emphasis on improving outcomes for:

- Young people
- Older people
- People living with disabilities or long-term health conditions
- People living in rural areas
- Refugees
- People with English as a secondary language
- People in lower income groups
- People with few qualifications
- People without a job
- People living in social housing
- Homeless people
- Small businesses
- Carers
- Care leavers
- Armed forces community
- Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities
- People living with social deprivation

What are we already doing?

Our Digital Inclusion Strategy addresses our strategic priority of [Tackling Inequalities in Oxfordshire](#). It also relates to the goals of Oxfordshire County Council strategies including our COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal Strategy, [Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\) Framework](#), Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, [Climate Action Framework](#), Domestic Violence Strategy, the Oxfordshire Way, Director of Public Health's Annual Report, Social Value Policy, Consultation and Engagement Strategy, SEND Strategy, Agile Working Strategy, [Digital](#) and [ICT Strategy](#), and our Delivering the Future Together values and behaviours.

In March 2020, Oxfordshire County Council signed-up to the [Local Digital Declaration](#). This is a government initiative which is a commitment to design services that best meet the needs of citizens, challenge the technology market to offer flexible tools and services, protect citizens' privacy and security, and deliver better value for money.

Our [Digital Infrastructure Strategy](#) is ensuring that Oxfordshire has great connectivity. The Council has a dedicated team that has been improving broadband speeds and has seen Oxfordshire residents' access to superfast broadband grow from 69% in 2013 to over 98% today. The programme incorporates direct contract-driven interventions in areas of market failure, as well as collaboration with all telecoms suppliers/operators.

Digital connectivity is also included as a policy focus area within the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP) as digital connectivity can help to reduce the need to travel by providing residents with the ability to work, shop and access services from home. When travel is required, digital connectivity is important for supporting Connected and Autonomous Vehicles and improves the journey experience for travellers using mobile phones for navigation, real time journey information or booking tickets. There are three digital connectivity policies in the LTCP that cover digital infrastructure, 5G technology and remote working. The remote working policy sets

out that the county council will work with stakeholders to ensure high quality internet connectivity and other necessary facilities are provided to all residents to reduce the need to travel and support remote working.

The Libraries and Heritage Strategy sets out several promises, priorities and actions that align to digital access and inclusion. The 2021 report [‘Digital Inclusion and Exclusion in the Arts and Cultural Sector’](#) published by Arts Council England and the Good Things Foundation provides a clear framework for the development of the digital offer across libraries and heritage. The Libraries and Heritage strategy builds upon Library services national universal offer around Information and Digital provision ([Information and Digital | Libraries Connected](#)). In line with this, Oxfordshire Libraries already deliver quality digital resources and support, enable individuals and communities to develop digital skills, and opportunities around creative and innovative technology.

Digital delivery has been growing across the library and heritage sectors and, in response to the pandemic, our services increased the volume and quality of our digital delivery. In 2021 the service carried out local research in partnership with the University of Oxford – [‘Libraries on the Front Lines of the Digital Divide: The Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project Report’](#), to collect data-driven insights on the digital needs of people who are under- or unconnected to the internet and other digital technologies. This review is the largest survey of the use of public computers in Oxfordshire ever undertaken and provided a unique opportunity to assess the status of our digital offer for our customers. The report emphasises the need to move away from the idea of teaching ‘Digital Skills’ and to focus instead on ‘Digital Wellbeing’: “Digital inclusion is not simply about technical competence; it is also about social inclusion. Digital needs are almost always embedded in social circumstances and needs.” (p.18) Currently, all Oxfordshire libraries provide free access to Wi-Fi and 345 PCs (across 44 libraries) with trained staff and volunteer support to help people get online and access digital resources. Over 9,000 people a year access our Digital Helper and digital activity programmes, with digital support delivery to over 8,000 adults around online applications for bus passes, parking permits and Blue Badge permits.

Our Vision and Principles for a digitally inclusive Oxfordshire

Vision:

To ensure that everyone in Oxfordshire is empowered to access, and experience the wide-ranging benefits enabled by being digitally connected and confident. There are a diverse range of barriers within Oxfordshire, and we will work in partnership to ensure that no one is left behind.

Principles:

- We will work in partnership to address digital inclusion
- We will establish a shared definition and language of digital inclusion
- We will have an evidence-based approach and continue to research the digital divide
- We will continue to listen to our residents, councillors, partners, and stakeholders

Our strategy has three strands:

1. **Digitally Inclusive Communities** – We recognise that partnership is central to the success of digital inclusion, and will work together with partners, businesses, and residents to coordinate, align, and promote initiatives. We will commit to collaboratively developing a Digital Inclusion Charter for Oxfordshire which will set out principles for signatories to follow.
2. **Digitally Inclusive Service Delivery** – We will design and deliver our services with a consideration of digital inclusion and will ensure that the council's digital transformation does not sustain or increase the digital divide.
3. **Digitally Inclusive Workplace** – We will ensure that our staff, managers, and volunteers have the digital skills, connectivity and devices required for their roles and are included in digital communications.

Engagement process to date

In October 2021, OCC held a virtual roundtable discussion with approximately 35 partners from various organisations including Oxfordshire public, health, education, and voluntary sectors. In this session, we defined what digital inclusion means to us in Oxfordshire and set out the problem that needs to be addressed. We also discussed our vision for a digitally inclusive county, which included joined-up initiatives, digital inclusion by design, and ensuring that no one is left behind. The discussion also covered barriers that need to be overcome and identified support for those who will never want to be online, funding, duplication of resources due to a fragmented landscape, rurality, online safety, and the cost-of-living crisis as particular challenges. The principles that were identified as needing to underpin collaborative work include signposting access to support, sharing best practice, promoting the benefits of digital, embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion, and recognising that digital inclusion is about people, not just technology.

In April 2022, OCC undertook a programme of engagement with external and internal stakeholders. There were three virtual workshops focussed on the Digitally Inclusive Communities strand, with approximately 40 attendees. These workshops were on a range of themes relating to digital inclusion, such as education, isolation, local businesses, and organisations. It also included specific focus on groups who are more likely to be thought of as digitally excluded. Interviews were held with service users who have lived experience of digital exclusion or using our online services, to understand barriers in our service delivery. Finally, a further two virtual workshops were held with OCC staff about how the workplace can be made more digitally inclusive.

Digitally Inclusive Communities

Long-term ambitions:

- Digital access is not a barrier to education in Oxfordshire.
- Vulnerable children and families have access to support to raise household digital capacity and address digital disadvantage
- No one in Oxfordshire will be isolated from essential services by digital-by-default barriers, or a lack of connectivity.
- Oxfordshire businesses and organisations can recruit, train, retain and support their workforce with the necessary digital skills.
- Broadband connectivity across Oxfordshire is one of the best in the country.

We will commit to:

- Coordinating digital inclusion initiatives with partners, aligning funding opportunities and establishing principles for partnership working.
- Supporting the early years sector, schools, further education institutions, youth groups and alternative provision and higher education institutions to safely bridge the digital divide for young people and their families, in education and home settings.
- Ensuring that residential provision and other service access points have safe and suitable digital access to support learning and educational goals.
- Working with the early years sector and schools to engage, empower, and support parental digital literacy, to enable children to access digital platforms for schooling.
- Signposting residents to support around opportunities for digital skills learning on a range of devices and accessing good quality and affordable devices and connectivity.
- Capturing good practice and technological innovation from across a range of settings and sectors in Oxfordshire to share as inspiration for future possibilities.
- Focussing on getting gigabit capable broadband into rural communities to ensure more consistent access to highspeed internet connections across the county.
- Maximising investment in Oxfordshire by broadband infrastructure-build companies.

Digitally Inclusive Service Delivery

Long-term ambition:

- Innovative solutions to problems of digital exclusion are collaboratively developed and delivered in our services.
- Citizens of Oxfordshire are provided with a comprehensive, affordable, and accessible assistive technology offer that meets their needs.
- Our Libraries and Heritage Service provides digital opportunities for people to connect and create, learn, and grow together.

We will commit to:

- Designing, procuring, and updating systems, software, and websites to be fully compliant to relevant digital and accessibility legislation and government guidance.
- Piloting and adopting new and innovative assistive technology products and approaches.
- Ensuring that our catalogue of assistive technology products available to the public is accessible, affordable, and fit for purpose.
- Designing digital inclusion programmes that adapt to the needs of different audiences.
- Increasing community outreach and awareness of library services (especially in communities that might not know about the digital offer).
- Considering digital inclusion as part of our Social Value Policy, and in our commissioning responsibilities under the Social Value Act.
- Promoting digital inclusion through our supply chain.
- Considering the needs of those who are not digitally included in our Customer Services.

Digitally Inclusive Workplace

Long-term ambition:

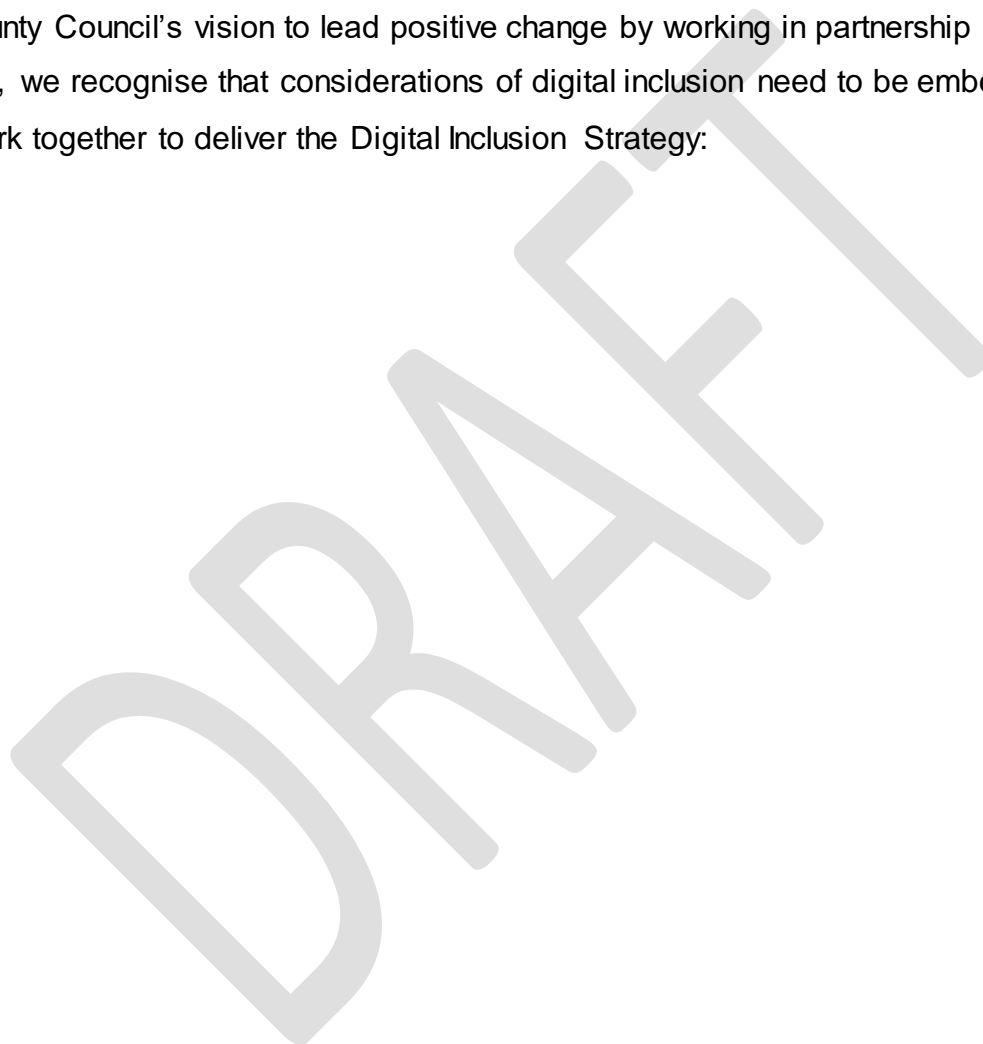
- Technology that supports agile ways of working will facilitate communication and the ability to work well anywhere, any place, and at any time.
- Our staff, managers, councillors, and volunteers have the learning and development opportunities to develop digital skills.
- Initiatives to improve digital inclusion will be promoted and championed by our staff, managers, councillors, and volunteers.

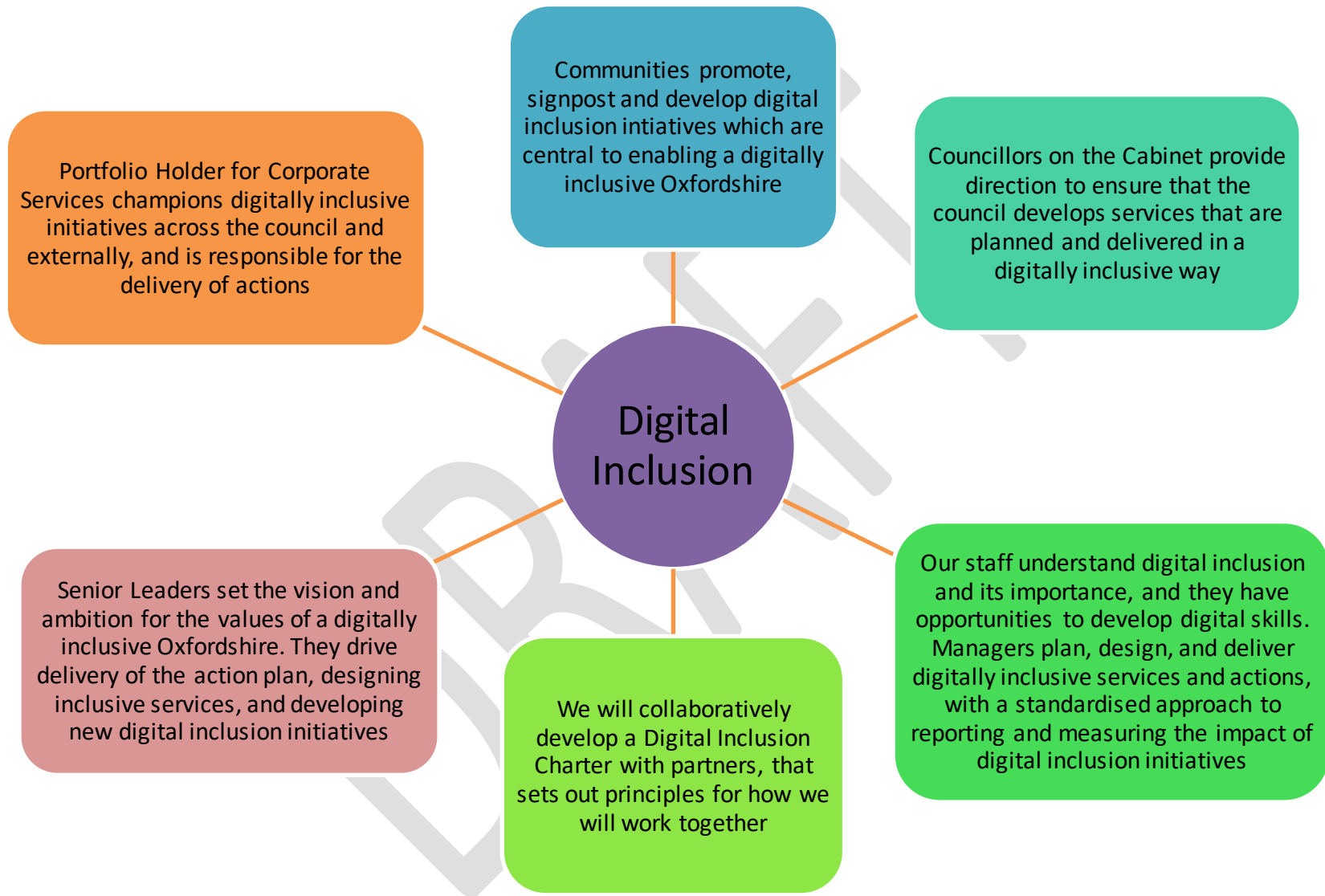
We will commit to:

- Being at the forefront of real-world testing of new technology that will benefit our workforce and communities.
- Developing the physical ICT infrastructure and online/digital resource provision to meet growing and changing needs.
- Using technology that enables us and our 'customers' to get the best outcomes, and have flexibility, security and access through the right choice of channels.
- Promoting best practice for communicating digitally.
- Embedding and promote digital inclusion at an organisational level, particularly for our frontline, part-time, and non-desk-based staff.
- Continuing to ensure that staff who do not have regular access to digital services, due to the nature of their jobs, still have opportunities to access important information and engagement opportunities.
- Investing in staff capacity, digital mindsets, skills, knowledge, and willingness to deliver digitally.
- Supporting staff with technology that meets their different needs so no one is left behind, everyone delivers their best and can reach their potential.

Responsibility for delivering a Digitally Inclusive Oxfordshire

As part of Oxfordshire County Council's vision to lead positive change by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer, and healthier county, we recognise that considerations of digital inclusion need to be embedded into all we do. The diagram below sets out how we work together to deliver the Digital Inclusion Strategy:





How we will work in partnership

As a Council, we recognise that each organisation in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), private, public, education and health sectors will have their own challenges, and are accountable for their own digital inclusion activities. We will align through partnership, with our digital inclusion charter being an example of this. We strongly value the range of work that is already ongoing to tackle digital exclusion in Oxfordshire, with the local VCS (with initiatives such as [Getting Oxfordshire Online](#) and the [Connect! Project](#)), City and District councils, and health sectors already carrying out a range of initiatives. Following our process of engagement, we heard and recognise that the digital inclusion landscape within Oxfordshire is fragmented, and that through the Council's strategy we can provide coordination and signposting around the range of important initiatives already ongoing.

Monitoring and reporting progress

The long-term ambitions and commitments of our Digital Inclusion Strategy are set every 3 years. Sitting beneath this strategy will be an annual action plan that will be published on our website. This reflects the different ways in which we are working to make our organisation, services, and our Oxfordshire communities more digitally inclusive. The action plans will have indicators to help us measure progress against our ambitions. We will engage in the development of our action plan each year and will seek feedback on our progress as part of the reporting process. An Annual Report will go to Cabinet and Scrutiny to update on the progress against the action plan, and any work outstanding.

References and resources

- [Getting Oxfordshire Online](#)
- [Libraries on the Frontline of the Digital Divide - The Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project Report](#)
- [Digital Inclusion Strategy - Birmingham City Council](#)
- [Digital Inclusion and Exclusion in the Arts and Cultural Sector, Good Things Foundation, July 2021](#)
- [Digital Exclusion and Health Inequalities - Good Things Foundation, August 2021](#)
- [The Charity Digital Skills Report 2021 - Skills Platform](#)
- [Fostering Digital Inclusion in Oxfordshire - Oxford University Student Consultancy Report for Oxfordshire Community Foundation](#)
- [Four essential steps for delivering digital inclusion projects and initiatives | Local Government Association](#)
- [A new tool: The Digital Exclusion Risk Index - Good Things Foundation](#)
- [UK Digital Poverty Evidence Interim Review - Digital Poverty Alliance](#)
- [Digital Inclusion Toolkit](#)
- [Broadband Coverage and Speed Test Statistics for Oxfordshire](#)
- [Including Everyone - Equalities, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework](#)
- [Digital Inclusion - Citizens Online](#)
- [Digital Infrastructure Strategy | Digital Infrastructure Programme \(digitalinfrastructureoxfordshire.co.uk\)](#)
- [Good Things Foundation - Improving lives through digital](#)
- [Libraries Connected](#)
- [Cornwall Digital Inclusion Strategy](#)

- [Digital Inclusion Strategy - Norwich City Council](#)
- [Age UK Briefing Paper - Living in a Digital World after Covid-19](#)
- [Digital Glasgow](#)
- [Digital Wigan](#)
- [Getting Online in Kensington and Chelsea](#)
- [Digital Inclusion Resources, Statistics and Reports - Digital Inclusion Toolkit](#)
- [Healthwatch - Rural Isolation in Oxfordshire Report, March 2022](#)
- [Digital Inclusion Innovation Programme - LOTI](#)
- [Evaluation of the Local Digital Skills Partnership](#)
- [100% Digital Leeds](#)
- [Mental Wellbeing Needs Assessment \(oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](#)

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, i.e., easy read, large text, audio, Braille, or a community language, please get in touch.