

Affordable internet access for all

Towards a Greater Manchester roadmap for action

October 2026



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Foreword from Mayor Bev Craig



No one should be locked out of work, learning, healthcare, support or opportunity because they cannot afford to get online.

But for thousands of people across Greater Manchester, that is the reality. As the cost of living continues to put pressure on household budgets, reliable internet access can become another expense that families struggle to meet, creating barriers that can deepen existing inequalities and make it harder for people to live well.

My commitment as Mayor is to make life easier and more affordable for the people of Greater Manchester. That means ensuring every decision we make helps people get on in life, access support when they need it, and build a better future for themselves and their families.

Today, that challenge cannot be separated from the digital world around us. Technology is creating new opportunities and transforming everyday life. But for too many people, the cost of staying connected is another barrier to overcome.

When people cannot afford reliable internet access, they risk being excluded from opportunities that many of us take for granted. They can find it harder to access employment and training, manage household finances, maintain social connections, access essential services and find the support they need. In turn, this can deepen disadvantage and widen inequalities. If Greater Manchester is to deliver good growth that benefits everyone, everyone must be able to access the opportunities being created.

This roadmap recognises that tackling data poverty is about much more than connectivity alone. It is about ensuring that everyone can participate fully in modern life and benefit from the opportunities that digital technology can bring. It is about reducing barriers, supporting those most affected by the rising cost of living, and creating the conditions for everyone to live well.

Greater Manchester has a long-standing commitment to ending digital exclusion through our [Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change](#) and the work of partners across the city region. Together, we have helped thousands of residents access devices, connectivity, skills and support. But we know there is more to do. This roadmap strengthens our collective understanding of the challenges people face and provides a foundation for the next phase of work.

Developed through a unique partnership between Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Good Things Foundation, Autotrader and a wide range of organisations and communities, it provides an important foundation for the work ahead.

By working together, we can end data poverty to build a thriving city region where everyone can live a good life, regardless of their background, circumstances or income.

Bev Craig
Mayor of Greater Manchester

...for too many people, the cost of staying connected is another barrier to overcome.

Quotes from our partners



Christos Tsaprounis,
People and Culture Director,
Autotrader

"Digital inclusion is no longer a nice-to-have; it's a prerequisite for participation in modern society. Yet people across Greater Manchester still face barriers to getting online or realising the full benefits of the digital world. This roadmap reminds that real change takes collaboration across sectors – charities, the business community and the public sector – to ensure no one is excluded from opportunities simply because they lack digital access."



Vicki Sellick MBE,
Chief Executive,
Good Things Foundation

"Internet access is essential. We rely on it to find work, use public transport, manage our money, support kids with school work, and so much more. That's why we continue to call for UK government leadership and national action to make access affordable for all. What this 5 year roadmap brings to life is the vital role of regional and local cross-sector partnership. Greater Manchester is already on this journey. It's time to get digital inclusion 'baked in' to business as usual – reducing living costs, and improving lives."



Prof. Simeon Yates MBE,
University of Liverpool

"Digital costs are a significant material barrier for many households, preventing full access to the digital world. However, digital exclusion is too often seen as everyone's problem, but no-one's responsibility. Greater Manchester has helped to change that. This roadmap builds on that record. It is vital that the household costs of internet access are built into wider policy and action to reduce a key barrier to digital inclusion."

Executive summary

No one should be locked out of work, healthcare, education or opportunity because they cannot afford to get online. Yet across Greater Manchester, thousands of households face exactly this barrier.

Drawing on new analysis of the ONS Living Costs and Food Survey, an estimated 221,000 households in Greater Manchester spend 3% or more of their income on internet costs alone, 56,000 households in poverty could not afford even a discounted social tariff, and 33,000 low-income households rely on mobile-only connectivity.

This is more than a connectivity problem. When people cannot get online reliably, they risk exclusion from essential services, such as the NHS, social security benefits, education, and employment support. People experience heightened stress, isolation and disadvantage. Being unable to afford sufficient, reliable connectivity – data poverty – compounds existing inequalities and deepens the cost of living crisis for those least able to absorb it.

This five-year roadmap is the product of a collaborative discovery project between Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Autotrader, Good Things Foundation and the University of Liverpool. It draws on desk research and expert stakeholder workshops, as well as resident and community engagement in the region. Serving as a foundation for further collaboration and development, the roadmap presents a five-year framework for action, built around four focus areas (shown overleaf on page 6).

Each focus area sets out a five-year commitment, describes the current picture, and proposes a mix of potential 'quick wins', short-to-medium term actions, and longer-term opportunities, identifying the stakeholders best placed to lead delivery.

Greater Manchester already has a strong foundation to build on, including the Greater Manchester Databank, the Care Leavers Guarantee, Connected Homes Inclusive Places, and Live Well initiative. The roadmap shows that more action is needed, and is feasible. National-level change is also essential; no region, strategic or local authority can solve data poverty alone. Greater Manchester can demonstrate what regional collaboration can achieve, and offer a testbed for the national solutions still needed to ensure that, within five years, no one in Greater Manchester is offline because of poverty.

...the roadmap presents a five-year framework for action, built around four focus areas.

Focus areas

1



Social housing

Towards ensuring every social housing tenant can access affordable broadband, by tackling infrastructure barriers, strengthening the Greater Manchester Good Landlord Charter, and embedding connectivity into new housing developments.

2



Cost of living and financial inclusion

Towards ensuring low-income households can access connectivity that meets their needs, through effective use of discretionary funds (such as the current Crisis & Resilience Fund), and local promotion of national social tariffs.

3



Community spaces and local infrastructure

Towards ensuring free, secure public Wi-Fi is available in trusted local spaces such as libraries, Live Well Centres and community organisations, building on the GM One Network.

4



Priority groups

Towards ensuring internet access, and digital inclusion, are 'baked in' to strategic commissioning of statutory provision for priority groups, such as people and families in temporary or unstable housing, and care leavers.



The road to making digital connectivity affordable for all in Greater Manchester

Quick wins



Convene housing providers to share best practice

Highlight best practice in Good Landlord Charter



Explore using Crisis and Resilience Fund for connectivity

Convene stakeholders to promote social tariffs

Phase 1



Review Good Landlord Charter's approach for promoting access to connectivity



Pilot approach to guide people to affordable connectivity options

Phase 2



Agree that all new social housing will be connected homes

Assess cost savings of investing in smart housing



Explore opportunities to pilot national affordability solutions

Engage stakeholders to explore regional zero-rated websites

2026

2031



Identify opportunities for free Wi-Fi in community and local spaces



Explore opportunities for supporting job-seekers with connectivity



Evaluate use of Wi-Fi in Live Well Centres to inform action

Strengthen access to connectivity in Live Well spaces



Embed connectivity solutions into support for priority groups

Commit to connected social housing in Care Leavers Pledge



Embed provision for connectivity in commissioning of community services

Expand GM One Network to increase free public Wi-Fi access

Advocate for investment in digital infrastructure in community spaces



Pilot guidance for supporting priority groups to access suitable connectivity

Embed expectation for supporting digital access into commissioning of services for priority groups

Key



Social housing



Cost of living



Community and local spaces



Priority groups

Introduction

Data poverty – defining the problem

“ A minimum digital living standard includes having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect, and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.”

Minimum Digital Living Standard definition, 2024¹

In a digital society, internet access is essential for everyday life. When people are offline or their internet access is precarious and unreliable, this restricts their lives, limiting their opportunities to access services, work, and support. This includes access to benefits, debt advice, and ways to save money on household costs. It is why affordable connectivity – and enabling everyone to have internet access – is such an important component of tackling the cost of living today.

“ One in seven (14%) people referred to food banks have no access to the internet. Additionally, only two fifths (42%) have access in their homes through Wi-Fi, and half (51%) have access through a mobile phone network.”

Trussell, 2025²

In 2025, Good Things Foundation reviewed the last five years of innovation and collaboration to tackle data poverty, and set out ideas for future change³. We called for a rebalancing of responsibility and, within this, pointed to the important role of combined and local authorities. Greater Manchester Combined Authority has been a leader in tackling this challenge since 2021 – a commitment reaffirmed at the Greater Manchester Digital Inclusion Summit in October 2025. This has been the impetus for a discovery project – a partnership between Autotrader, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Good Things Foundation, and University of Liverpool – to answer the question:

Across Greater Manchester, what more can be done to ensure that no-one has to be offline because of poverty?



Aims of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide a solid basis for action, investment, and debate on ensuring affordable internet – principally in Greater Manchester, but also in other regions and nationally. It aims to:

- Propose actions that Greater Manchester Combined Authority can take, in partnership with other stakeholders, to address data poverty and ensure all residents can access affordable connectivity within five years.
- Raise awareness among different stakeholders of the need to address data poverty In Greater Manchester, and to generate support and commitment among stakeholders to take practical steps to achieve this goal.
- Act as a guide and resource for influencing place-based digital inclusion work in other regional and local areas, and to contribute to national-level conversations about devolution of power, living costs, and creating equitable growth.



Structure and key areas of focus

This report first summarises Greater Manchester's population with key demographic information about its residents. Next, it presents the problem of the nature and extent of data poverty in Greater Manchester, and the implications for residents who struggle to afford to get online.

It then proposes a roadmap for action across four 'focus areas'. These focus areas have been identified as priorities due to the scale of those at risk of data poverty, and due to the opportunities for taking practical steps to reduce it.

Each focus area includes:

- A commitment: a statement of intent for addressing data poverty within 5 years.
- A brief description of the problem of data poverty in this area.
- A summary of what's in place already to try to address data poverty.

Quick wins

- Actions that could be achieved in a shorter time-frame, using existing resource and capacity.

Phase 1 actions

- Short to medium term actions that can be taken fairly quickly, but which will likely require additional resource or capacity.

Phase 2 actions

- Medium to longer term opportunities that should be explored over the next few years, to shape future actions, and that will require additional development, resource, and capacity.

This report is intentionally focused on regional and local opportunities to get digital inclusion 'baked in' to the design and delivery of public services and industry partnerships to support local people and places. However, ensuring no-one is offline because they cannot afford internet access is a national challenge, and cannot be addressed by regional or local action alone. It also requires action at the national level by government and with industry.

Additional resources

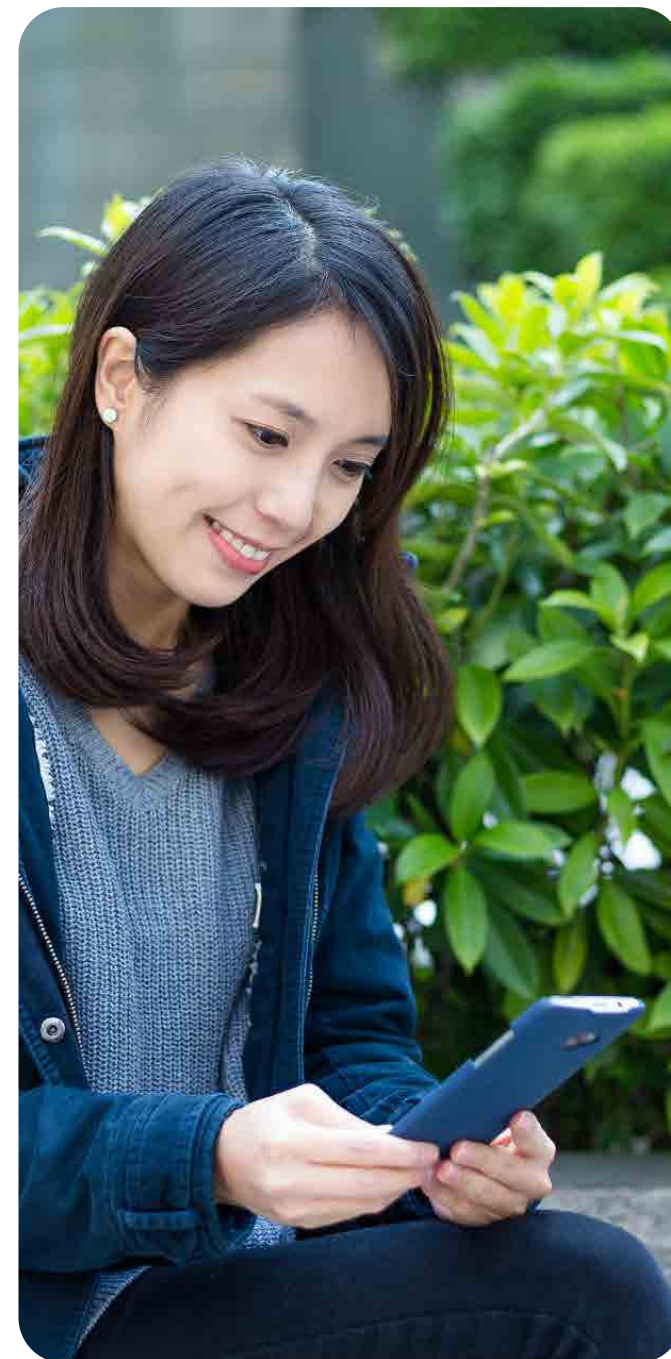
This report contains only brief summaries of the range of models for addressing data poverty that are already in place across Greater Manchester or elsewhere. For a full description of these models, including their strengths and limitations, please see the [accompanying summary of insights and evidence](#) by Good Things Foundation. The summary also includes a breakdown of the regional analysis conducted for this project by Prof. Simeon Yates, to explore household digital costs in Greater Manchester using the ONS Living Costs and Food Survey data (2023-24).

About the process of developing the roadmap

The insights and recommendations in this report have been developed through a discovery project in partnership with Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and funded by Autotrader. Between April and August 2026, a range of evidence gathering activities were undertaken to understand i) the current picture of approaches to addressing data poverty across Greater Manchester, ii) the needs and experiences of residents around data poverty, and iii) opportunities for action.

These activities included:

- Desk research and data analysis
- Workshops with local, regional and national stakeholders
- Strategic conversations with key stakeholders across Greater Manchester
- Community engagement work with residents in three local authority areas, to explore lived experience of data poverty and acceptability of proposed solutions.



About Greater Manchester and its residents

Greater Manchester is home to over

3 million residents

Since 2021, its population has seen a

5% increase⁴



Key demographic information:



Age

Median age: **36⁵**

16% of residents are aged **65+⁶**



Income

Gross disposable household income per head: **£21,730** (UK: £25,965)⁷

28% of children under 16 living in relative low income families before housing costs (UK: 19%); **33%** after housing costs (UK: 26%)⁸



Employment levels

(aged 16–64)⁹

72% employment rate (UK: 79%)

- LAs with lowest employment rate: Oldham (64%) and Rochdale (67%)

5% unemployment rate (UK: 5%), rising to 9% ethnic minority unemployment rate (UK: 8%)

- Local Authorities with highest unemployment rate: Bury and Rochdale (8%); highest ethnic minority unemployment rate: Bury (18%) and Oldham (16%)

24% economically inactive (UK: 21%)



Housing

1.2 million households¹⁰

- **58%** of households **own** their properties
- **21%** of households live in **social rented housing**
- **21%** of households live in **private rented housing**
- **1%** of households live in **shared ownership** properties

Data poverty in Greater Manchester: The current picture

The scale of data poverty in Greater Manchester

Compared to the UK as a whole, residents in Greater Manchester face higher affordability challenges for internet connection in general.

New analysis of the ONS Living Costs and Food Survey by Prof. Simeon Yates estimates the number of households across Greater Manchester facing digital connectivity affordability issues:^{11 12}

~ 221,000

spend $\geq 3\%$ of income on internet costs alone, where 3% is considered the threshold for affordability of internet costs.

~ 56,000

in poverty would not be able to afford a social tariff, even at less than 3% of their income.

~ 33,000

are on low income with mobile-only internet.

	Est. number of households (GM)	% of households (GM)	% of households (UK average)
Households spending $\geq 3\%$ of their income on total telecoms	485,000	41%	38%
Households spending $\geq 3\%$ of income on internet costs alone	221,000	19%	18%
Households in poverty who would not be able to afford a social tariff, even at less than 3% of their income	56,000	5%	4%
Households with mobile-only connectivity and in poverty	33,000	3%	2%
Households that are online and can afford a social tariff or better	1,000,000	85%	87%

Barriers to connectivity

Our community engagement and stakeholder research identified four core categories of barriers that prevent Greater Manchester residents from accessing sufficient, reliable connectivity.

Affordability

- The cost of standard broadband and mobile contracts are out of reach for many people on low income (as demonstrated by the affordability analysis above). This can be exacerbated by mid-contract price rises, and/or exit fees which may prevent people from switching providers.
- The relative high cost of pay-as-you-go data for those who can't afford or can't access a contract for broadband or mobile data.
- The difficulty in being able to afford enough connectivity to meet the needs of the individual or household.

“ Families are on multiple devices all at the same time, people doing homework, people gaming, people watching TV and often either the signal isn't strong enough or they can't afford enough data”

Industry stakeholder

Knowledge, confidence and trust

- Lack of awareness of support services for those experiencing data poverty.
- Lack of confidence and/or capability to navigate and understand options for connectivity, compounded by language, literacy and accessibility barriers.
- Mistrust of council and/or other services.

“ It's like, 'mobile data'. What the hell are they talking about, you know? I kind of know what it is, but then when it comes to doing it...”

Greater Manchester resident

Infrastructure

- Poor connectivity and/or mobile signal 'black spots' in some areas.
- Challenges to accessing broadband in social housing, private rental or temporary accommodation.

“ I was given 6 months Wi-Fi but it wasn't working at home. It was a [mifi] box but because I'm in the basement it just didn't work”

Greater Manchester resident

Wider digital exclusion

- Lack of access to a suitable digital device (due to poverty, accessibility needs, knowledge and / understanding).
- Lack of wider digital skills and confidence.

Impacts of data poverty

The implications of digital exclusion are wide-reaching, affecting access to a range of resources, services and aspects of modern life, as illustrated in the Periodic Table of Internet Elements.¹³

Key areas of impact of not being able to go online enough, or at all, due to data poverty include:

Being locked out of essential services

including accessing healthcare, Universal Credit requirements, accessing housing, supporting children's education, financial services, managing utilities, immigration processes, and other welfare and support services:

" There's a big expectation from all these organisations, be it utilities, be it your GP, they want you online. And that can be so stressful for people just to even try to get online"

Greater Manchester resident

Feeling isolated

and lacking confidence to go out and about due to lack of connectivity for navigation, for accessing information about public transport or for using digital parking apps:

" There's so many parking apps... there's always a struggle... so I don't drive anywhere where you've got to park your car. I think that is something else that causes isolation really, 'cause you're limited in where you go"

Greater Manchester resident

Stress, anxiety and frustration

caused by services requiring online engagement, contributing to feeling demotivated to go online, and to feeling like you are being forced to pay to access services digitally that used to be free, and amid widespread rising costs:

" They close the banks and everything, expect people to go online and not only that, they're expected to pay for the privilege of using their services"

Greater Manchester resident



Focus area 1: Addressing data poverty in social housing



The commitment

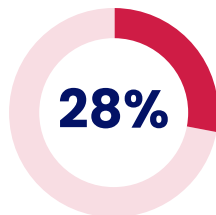
Within 5 years, everyone living in social housing will be able to access affordable broadband connectivity.



The problem

Residents in social housing may face additional barriers to broadband connectivity due to:

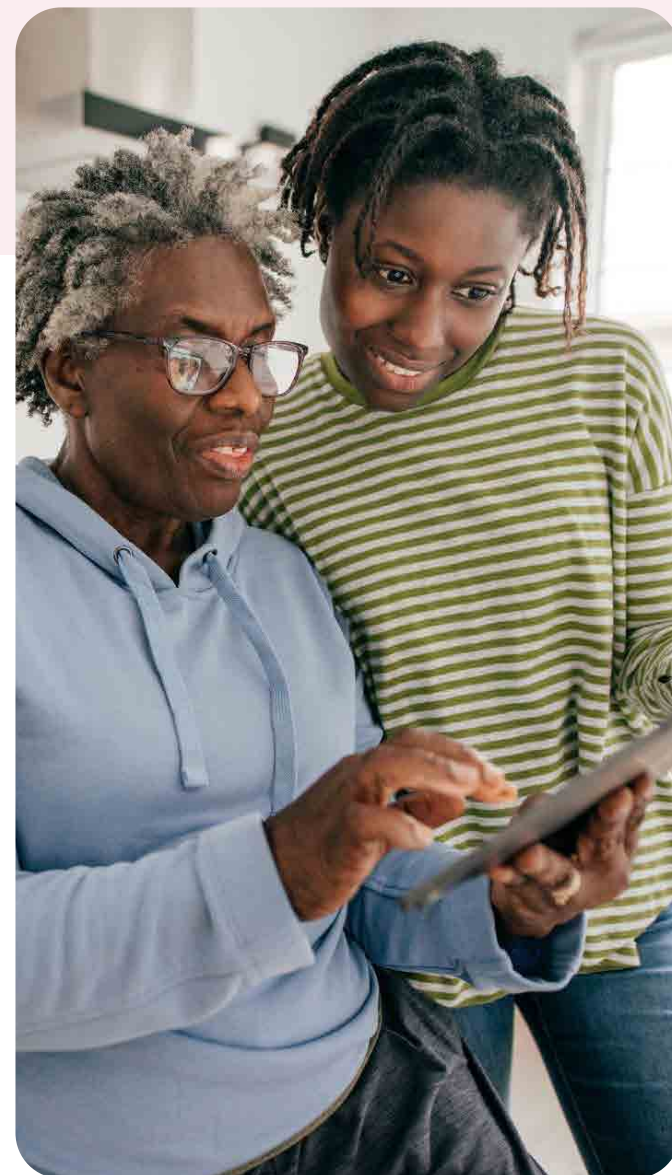
- Building infrastructure
- Legal and administrative challenges for housing providers to install connections
- Residents' concerns about affordability and accessibility of contracts, and
- Low trust in housing providers and / or broadband options among residents.



of GMCA social housing tenants rely solely on mobile data, in contrast to **24%** of social housing tenants across the UK¹⁴

" A wayleave was granted two years ago and we've got fibre in the building... but the people living in the building can't afford to buy a service"

Industry stakeholder



What's already happening

Free / reduced cost broadband for tenants

There have been multiple pilot partnership initiatives with housing providers and internet service providers to install broadband in properties, and provide free or low-cost contracts to tenants.

Promotion of social tariffs

Some housing providers have worked in partnership with internet service providers to promote and facilitate access to social tariffs for broadband, for eligible tenants.

Free community Wi-Fi

Mesh systems, such as in [Rochdale](#), provide access to free Wi-Fi, amplified from a fixed broadband connection, to residents living in specific areas.

Provision of free mobile data

Some housing providers provide free mobile data SIMs to tenants through the [GM Databank](#), delivered, for example, through tenant support initiatives.

Enabling interventions

The [Wayleaves Agreement](#) – a standardised process between internet service providers and housing providers to reduce legal and administrative barriers to installing broadband in social housing.¹⁵

Smart housing initiatives, such as the [Connected Homes Inclusive Places programme](#) ('CHIPs'), install smart systems in social housing, to enable better monitoring of housing stock and delivery of remote care.¹⁶ These create opportunities for broadband installation, with emphasis on housing providers to facilitate tenant access to free or low-cost broadband.

Case study



Be One Homes in Bolton has taken a proactive approach to digital inclusion, recognising digital connectivity as an essential component of modern social housing. Through a range of initiatives, the organisation has improved access to affordable connectivity for residents, including providing free broadband connections in social housing, offering access to free mobile data through the National Databank, and supporting residents to identify and switch to lower-cost social tariffs.

Wider considerations

People on low income living in private rented accommodation will likely be excluded from the impact of these actions, except for changes to the Good Landlord Charter, which includes private landlords. The needs of this large group will need to be met through other focus areas (such as cost of living, see below).

GMCA will be well positioned to contribute to national-level conversations, to help set a standard for increasing the availability of connected social housing around the country.

What needs to happen next

Quick wins

Convene social housing providers and stakeholders across all 10 LAs to share learning and best practice about initiatives to support tenants with access to free or low-cost broadband in homes. Focus on:

- Overcoming infrastructural challenges
- Building trust and understanding with tenants around installing broadband
- Facilitating access to choice of affordable broadband options

Work with the Greater Manchester Good Landlord Charter to identify and share case studies of good practice for providing connectivity to tenants in social housing.

Who?

- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- GMCA Housing First Unit and LA housing leads
- Housing providers
- Internet service providers
- GM Good Landlord Charter implementation unit



Phase 1 actions

Review the approach within the Good Landlord Charter to facilitating access to broadband connectivity and other data poverty mitigation initiatives in social housing.

Who?

- GM Good Landlord Charter implementation unit
- Housing providers
- GMCA Housing First Unit and LA housing leads
- GMCA and LA digital equity leads



Phase 2 actions

Secure agreement that all new social housing in Greater Manchester is developed as 'connected homes', with broadband-ready infrastructure and resident support in place from day one. This should be embedded within GM's commitment to new social housing and incorporated into commissioning and procurement processes.

Assess the potential cost-savings from investing in connectivity in social housing, for benefits to health and social care, and to housing providers – as part of evaluating the Connected Homes Inclusive Places programme.

Who?

- GMCA Housing First Unit and LA housing leads
- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- GM Connected Homes Inclusive Places programme leads
- GM Housing Providers
- Internet service providers
- Academic and other learning stakeholders

Focus area 2: Cost of living and financial inclusion



The commitment

Within 5 years, every low-income household will be able to access affordability connectivity that meets their needs.



The problem

The rising cost of living means that many households in Greater Manchester struggle to afford sufficient connectivity for their needs, facing debt and / or difficult choices about cutting back on broadband or mobile connectivity costs. People facing financial crisis and rising costs of living may:

- Struggle to access support if they cannot afford to get online, and
- Be reluctant to sign up to longer-term contracts, for fear of not being able to afford them in the future.

33,000

households in Greater Manchester have mobile-only connectivity, and are on low income.

56,000

households in Greater Manchester are the most vulnerable to data poverty and would not be able to afford a social tariff at less than 3% of their income.¹⁷

" I am very scared about this yearly contract. Most of the contracts, they're like yearly, 2 years, and I said, "Oh, I'm on credit. Anything can happen"

Greater Manchester resident



What's already happening

Free mobile data through the GM Databank

Free mobile SIMs and data vouchers are distributed through a network of organisations through the Greater Manchester Databank (part of the National Databank supported by Good Things Foundation). This provides adults with a set amount of mobile data, refreshed each month, for up to 12 months.

Free mobile data through the Databank has also been used in initiatives to provide households with Wi-Fi through 'mifi' boxes, such as the [Jangala 'Get Box'](#), which can be an option for people in transient or temporary accommodation, who cannot access a fixed broadband connection.

Promotion of social tariffs

Some local authorities (such as [Salford City Council](#)), VCSFE organisations and housing providers provide information and guidance to residents about accessing social tariffs for mobile or broadband connectivity.

Use of the Crisis & Resilience Fund

The Crisis and Resilience Fund (replaces the Household Support Fund) can be used to support people experiencing a financial shock or who cannot afford essential costs. There are a few examples of the Fund being used to support digital inclusion, such as in Stockport where trusted community partners are using the Fund to help people purchase suitable digital devices.

Case study



In Wigan, the [Access for All](#) programme provides residents aged 18+, on a low income, with access to 6 months' free mobile data (via the Databank), plus a refurbished digital device and digital skills support. Referrals are made through a range of council and community partners, including members of Wigan's Digital Communities Partnership. The programme has been funded in part through DSIT's Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund.

Wider considerations

Many of the potential solutions to making it easier for residents to access affordable mobile or broadband connectivity will require engagement at a national level, not just within Greater Manchester. However, GMCA will be well-placed to contribute to discussions with national stakeholders and to host pilot or discovery projects within the region. This can help to test feasibility and accessibility of existing and emerging solutions, and enable the sharing of learning and accelerate adoption of best practice.

What needs to happen next

Quick wins

Convene the Crisis & Resilience Fund Working Group and relevant stakeholders from GMCA and the 10 LAs to:

- Explore opportunities to support access to connectivity through the Crisis and Resilience Fund, sharing current practice
- Agree best practice guidelines for use of the Fund to help individuals and families with mobile and/or broadband costs.

Convene utility providers and telcos in GM to explore opportunities for cross-sector targeted promotion of social tariffs and discounted rates for people on low income.

Who?

- GMCA and LA cost of living / poverty / hardship support leads
- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- GM Crisis and Resilience Fund Working Group
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations
- Telecommunications and internet service providers
- Utility providers



Phase 1 actions

Deliver a test-and-learn pilot for embedding guidance for front-line and community workers across GM to support residents to access more suitable connectivity options for their needs:

- Co-design a simple toolkit to help identify people's connectivity needs, and signpost appropriately;
- Pilot and evaluate the value of this guidance in one local authority area.

Who?

- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- LA service design leads
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations
- Academic or other evaluation partners



Phase 2 actions

Explore opportunities for regional piloting or testing of potential national innovations (such as a 'Connected Homes discount' or broadband discount voucher^{18 19}) for people on low income.

Engage with telcos to explore a regional approach to white-listing and zero-rating sites for GM public services, so residents can access essential public services without using up data.

Who?

- GMCA and LA cost of living / poverty / hardship support leads
- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- Citizens Advice and other VCSFE organisations
- Telecommunications and internet service providers
- Utility providers

Focus area 3: Community spaces and local infrastructure



The commitment

Within 5 years, all Greater Manchester residents will be able to access free, secure public Wi-Fi in trusted, local spaces.



The problem

People who struggle to afford sufficient mobile data may:

- Find it difficult to access the internet when out of the home, such as for navigation or accessing key services,
- Restrict their use of mobile data, and
- Prioritise paying for home broadband over mobile connectivity, to meet the needs of others in the household.

Access to free, secure public Wi-Fi is important for these groups, with some people needing trusted support to be able to connect, but this access is not consistently available to Greater Manchester residents.

12%

of Greater Manchester residents with a mobile phone run out of data at least every two to three months.

5%

run out of data every month.²⁰

" I used to use Wi-Fi on the bus... They don't allow it anymore... I have to wait till I get to the library... I have to travel to the library, I have arthritis, sometimes I struggle to get to the bus stop without aches and pains"

Greater Manchester resident



What's already happening

Free Wi-Fi rollout across public sector buildings including libraries

The GM One Network, building on the roll-out of local full-fibre networks, is establishing a single active network infrastructure across public sector organisations, to make it easier for users to move between free public Wi-Fi networks in public spaces across the region.²¹

Local authorities have established free public Wi-Fi connectivity in public buildings such as libraries, for example via Salford's 'freebee' network and Manchester City's public network. Some have restrictions on what sites can be accessed, for example in libraries in Stockport.

Free public Wi-Fi in Live Well Centres

Under the Live Well initiative there are a set of 'hallmarks' for Live Well Centres, Spaces and Offers across Greater Manchester²², to ensure a consistent experience for people seeking wellbeing support. The hallmarks for Live Well Centres include the expectation for all Centres to be 'digitally enabled and community-connected', providing free Wi-Fi, devices and support to accessing online services.

Free Wi-Fi in trusted community spaces run by the VCSFE sector

Some community organisations delivering support and services locally are able to provide free connectivity to people attending their spaces and using their services. In some spaces, staff are able to provide support to residents to connect to the Wi-Fi, where needed, as well as other digital inclusion support such as providing free mobile data through the Databank.

Free Wi-Fi connectivity in public spaces

There have been a range of initiatives establishing free Wi-Fi connectivity in public spaces, such as across public buildings in Manchester City centre, and the SWIFT network in Tameside.

Previously, there has been free Wi-Fi connectivity on public transport (buses and trams) across Greater Manchester.

Case study



In Oldham, Action Together provides support to the local VCSFE sector, including as part of the Live Well initiative. In 2026, they distributed funding via a Capital Grants Programme, through the One Oldham Fund, to multiple VCSFE organisations to help them improve the physical infrastructure of their community spaces. Some of the funding was used to install or upgrade Wi-Fi connectivity in these spaces, to make it available for free use by people attending the community spaces. Action Together are intending to offer grants for VCSFE organisations to help them meet the hallmarks for Live Well Spaces, which may include funding for Wi-Fi connectivity.

Wider considerations

National organisations providing support to the VCSFE sector could be engaged in efforts to advocate for resource to build community-level infrastructure, including Wi-Fi connectivity, to ensure residents can access free Wi-Fi in trusted spaces.

What needs to happen next

Quick wins

Convene stakeholders from existing initiatives focused on community spaces to identify opportunities and best practice for enabling access to free public Wi-Fi in these spaces, with trusted support. To include:

- Live Well Spaces
- Registered Warm Spaces
- Family Hubs
- Pilot initiatives, such as community grocers and community banking spaces.

Who?

- GMCA and LA Live Well leads and providers
- Warm Spaces leads and providers
- Family Hub leads and providers
- Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership and NHS GM stakeholders
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations



Phase 1 actions

Evaluate the use of free connectivity at Live Well Centres, to identify opportunities for promotion and engagement, and to inform approaches to rolling this out across Live Well Spaces.

Support Live Well Spaces to deliver the existing digital connectivity and inclusion hallmark by strengthening access to free digital connectivity and support, enabling locally determined approaches that reflect community need, existing provision and local priorities.

Who?

- GMCA and LA Live Well leads and providers
- Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership and NHS GM stakeholders
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations
- Academic or other evaluation partners



Phase 2 actions

Provision for digital infrastructure when commissioning local services, to enable community spaces to provide public connectivity in trusted spaces.

Expand the GM One Network for seamless access to free WiFi across public and community settings. Use learning from other regions, such as Newcastle's city-wide free network in partnership with Purple.²³

Advocate for including digital connectivity in business cases for investing in community infrastructure, eg as part of the planned commission for social capital and infrastructure within the Live Well 'spaces of hope and connection' initiative.

Who?

- GMCA and LA digital equity and digital infrastructure leads
- Live Well leads and health and social care commissioners
- Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership and NHS GM stakeholders
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations
- Internet service providers

Focus area 4: Supporting priority groups



The commitment

Within 5 years, all communities facing particular vulnerability to data poverty in Greater Manchester will be able to access tailored support for connectivity.

66,000

Greater Manchester residents are unemployed²⁶

11%

of 16–24 year-olds are estimated to not be in education, employment or training²⁷



The problem

Some communities in Greater Manchester face more barriers to affording access to the internet, due to a range of factors outlined earlier in the roadmap, including around trust, understanding, and access to services. Without suitable connectivity, these groups are at risk of not being able to access services at points when the right support can help prevent future social, health, and educational inequalities and reduce impact on acute services.²⁴ Examples of these groups include:

- People seeking employment
- Care leavers
- People in temporary or unstable accommodation (who may not be able to benefit from broadband social tariffs)
- Young people not in education or employment (NEET), and
- Families with disabled children (whose connectivity needs may be higher than in other families).²⁵

Reflecting the expertise of stakeholders we engaged with and wider priorities in Greater Manchester, we focus on three priority groups: unemployed people seeking work; people and families living in temporary or unstable housing; and care leavers.

7,500

households are estimated to be living in temporary accommodation²⁸

4,200

the approximate number of care-leavers under 25 across Greater Manchester²⁹

“ We’ve had lots more people who have always been employed and they’ve recently lost a job. So they are in poverty within two months. But they have no idea what they’re entitled to, they’ve got no clue who to speak to or where to go because they’ve never had to rely on those services”

VCSFE stakeholder

What's already happening

Access to connectivity for people who are out of work

The Flexible Support Fund is a discretionary payment administered by local Jobcentre Plus offices to help reduce practical and financial barriers to jobseeking, for people receiving Universal Credit. The Fund can be used to cover costs of digital access, required for jobseeking and interviews, but this may not be administered consistently across Greater Manchester.

Previously, TalkTalk partnered with DWP to deliver a pilot in Greater Manchester offering 6 months of free broadband to people seeking work. This was delivered via Job Centre Plus work coaches to eligible jobseekers, with costs covered through the Flexible Support Fund. This initiative was subsequently rolled out across other regions in the UK.

Support for people in temporary and unstable accommodation

Portable Jangala 'Get Boxes' (providing personal mifi connections) have been distributed to people living in temporary accommodation, and other vulnerable groups, in several areas of Greater Manchester. Through a pilot programme in Trafford, community partners provided Get Boxes to people in unstable accommodation and experiencing homelessness, including people with no recourse to public funds, and also to vulnerable older people. Bury Council also worked with Jangala to distribute Get Boxes to refugees, asylum seekers and care leavers.

Access to connectivity for care leavers

The Greater Manchester Care Leavers Guarantee is a formal commitment to young people aged 16 to 25 leaving care, made by all 10 local authorities in the region, with other partners³⁰. The Guarantee recognises the additional financial and social challenges that young people leaving care can face, and pledges a range of support, including access to 12 months free digital connectivity (typically provided via the Databank for 18+ year-olds), plus a device and skills support. This is framed as part of supporting young care leavers to 'get ready for work', and is delivered via existing council or community services.

Wider considerations

As noted above, there are also other priority groups and communities who would benefit from action and funding to provide tailored support around accessing digital connectivity, such as families with disabled children.³¹ Understanding digital inclusion needs should be embedded in the development of new policies, strategies and funding streams, encouraging approaches to meet connectivity and inclusion needs.

Case study



In Trafford, Jangala partnered with a local VCSFE organisation, St. John's Centre, to pilot the distribution of 'Get Boxes' (personal mifi connectivity with free mobile data connectivity) to people in temporary accommodation, including asylum seekers and students.³² This support has enabled people and others in their household to access key services online, even with no recourse to public funds, and when being moved frequently to different accommodation.

What needs to happen next

Quick wins

Convene DWP, LAs, Prevention Demonstrator leads and other employability support stakeholders to identify opportunities and share best practice for ensuring access to connectivity for people out of work and seeking employment. To focus on:

- Awareness and uptake of the Flexible Support Fund for paying for mobile or broadband connectivity
- Opportunities for frontline workers (such as work coaches or providing support around education and training) to ask about digital barriers, identify data poverty needs, and signpost to solutions like social tariffs.

Who?

- GMCA and LA education, work and skills leads
- Prevention Demonstrator and Live Well leads
- DWP and Job Centre Plus managers and work coaches
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations



Phase 1 actions

Embed access to digital connectivity solutions (such as Jangala Get Boxes, mifi connections, or fixed wireless access models, as well as fibre connectivity) for priority groups. For example, by building this into the commissioning of support for people in temporary or unstable accommodation, and of supported housing for care leavers.

Revise the Greater Manchester Housing Providers Care Leavers Pledge to include a commitment to providing connectivity in social housing for care leavers.

Who?

- GM and LA housing stakeholders
- VCSFE organisations and infrastructural organisations
- Greater Manchester Housing Providers
- GMCA and LA social care stakeholders
- Telecommunications and internet service providers



Phase 2 actions

Deliver a test-and-learn pilot for embedding co-designed guidance for front-line teams across the region, so they can better support priority groups to access more suitable connectivity options for their needs.

Commission services for priority groups which build in requirements for supporting internet access and signposting to suitable support. Consider a similar approach when grant funding VCSFE organisations to provide support to priority groups.

Who?

- GMCA and LA service commissioners and programme leads (education, work, skills, cost of living)
- GMCA and LA digital equity leads
- Prevention Demonstrator and Live Well leads
- VCSFE organisations
- Charitable and independent funders

Wider recommendations and conclusions

Reducing living costs is a priority in Greater Manchester and nationally. In the region:

Nearly
1 in 5

households spend 3% or more of their income on internet costs alone.

1 in 20

households cannot afford a discounted social tariff even if it costs less than 3% of their income.

Data poverty can tip people deeper into poverty by locking them out of essential services, and it can create and compound stress, anxiety, and isolation.

This 5-year roadmap shows how sustained action by a range of stakeholders (such as local authorities, social housing providers, NHS and industry partners) could go a long way towards ensuring no-one is offline due to poverty, and promoting digital inclusion. Much more can be achieved through existing funding mechanisms (such as the Crisis and Resilience Fund) and initiatives (such as Live Well, Connected Homes Inclusive Places, the GM Good Landlord Charter, the GMHP Care Leavers Pledge and the GM Care Leavers Guarantee).

Making internet access more affordable should be an integral part of broader approaches to reducing the cost of living for Greater Manchester residents and to making key services inclusive and accessible for all. It should be baked into the design and delivery of services, especially in areas such as social housing, cost of living support, as well as strategic commissioning of statutory provision for priority groups.

There are also limits to what can be achieved without national, systemic change. Internet access is an essential service. Action and policy change beyond local and combined authority levels is also urgently needed. Good Things Foundation and several other organisations have put forward innovative ideas for national change (e.g. a 'Connected Homes' discount, removing VAT on social tariffs, zero-rating NHS services).^{33 34 35 36}

At a time when millions face higher living costs, and telecoms is already a competitive market, how best can the affordability barrier be lowered for those least able to meet the costs, or to access existing support? There will be no single solution, and no simple answer, especially to the question of 'who pays?'.

National policymakers need to convene and collaborate with the telecoms industry, civil society, regulator, and strategic authorities to address this challenge. Greater Manchester Combined Authority is well-placed to sustain a leading role – both by showing how to spread and scale existing local good practice across the region, and also as a potential testbed for new national solutions.

Additional resources

-  Greater Manchester Combined Authority's vision and commitment for promoting [digital equity across Greater Manchester](#).
-  A [summary of the insights and evidence](#) that have informed the development of this five-year roadmap.

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Thank you

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