

Digital Exclusion:

A study of Wandsworth

An examination of the
extent of and effects of
digital exclusion in
Wandsworth, London



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Introduction

This report was commissioned by NHS South West London ICB as part of a wider cross organisational project aimed at reducing health inequalities across the borough of Wandsworth.

While Wandsworth is among the most digitally connected areas in the UK, with high levels of internet access and digital engagement overall, the report reveals that **not everyone is benefiting equally**. There are clear pockets within the borough where residents face significant barriers to going online – due to affordability, lack of digital skills, limited access to devices, or systems that are difficult to navigate.

Digital exclusion is not a single issue with a single cause. It is shaped by a combination of factors, including poverty, age, disability, language barriers, and housing instability – and **it often compounds other forms of inequality**. As this report shows, while the digital divide may have narrowed in terms of access, it has also deepened, becoming harder to bridge for those most affected.

The consequences are clear. People who are digitally excluded are less able to manage their health, access public services, or stay connected – leading to **worse health outcomes, greater isolation, and reduced life opportunities**.

The focus of this report is on people of working age and above. Through insights from local organisations and people with lived experience, this report outlines the challenges of ensuring that every resident in Wandsworth has the opportunity to be digitally included. Additionally, it suggests solutions to getting those hard to reach residents online safely, confidently, and with the support they need.

Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of digital exclusion in Wandsworth, this study used a mixed-methods approach:

- **Data Review:** We interrogated data already available online relating to digital exclusion both nationally and locally within Wandsworth.
- **Community Organisation Interviews:** We conducted interviews with representatives from four local organisations that work to improve digital inclusion:
 - *Power to Connect*
 - *Katherine Low Settlement*
 - *Share Community*
 - *Wandsworth Carers Centre*
 - *Citizens Advice Wandsworth*
- **Client Interviews:** We interviewed five clients who experience barriers to accessing online information. These included elderly individuals, low-income households, and people with physical impairments. All clients were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process.

Headlines

- 1. Most Wandsworth Residents Are Online – But Not Everyone Is Included**
95% of the borough's 325,000 residents have internet access, and many are confident users – but some communities are still being left behind. (1)
- 2. Digital Exclusion Hotspots in Wandsworth**
The wards of Roehampton, Furzedown, Falconbrook and Battersea Park face higher risks of digital exclusion, with low broadband access and limited internet use. (2)
- 3. Being Offline Isn't Just About Technology – It's About Missed Opportunities**
Digital exclusion affects access to education, employment, public services and financial savings – with offline households paying up to 50% more for essentials like food, and banking taking 1.5 hours longer for those without an internet connection. (3)
- 4. Those Already Struggling Are Most Likely to Be Left Behind**
Older people, low-income families, disabled people, those with fewer qualifications, and people facing housing or language barriers are most affected.
- 5. Digital Exclusion Often Comes Hand-in-Hand with Other Inequalities**
People facing digital exclusion are often also experiencing poverty, health issues or social isolation – making it harder to get support.

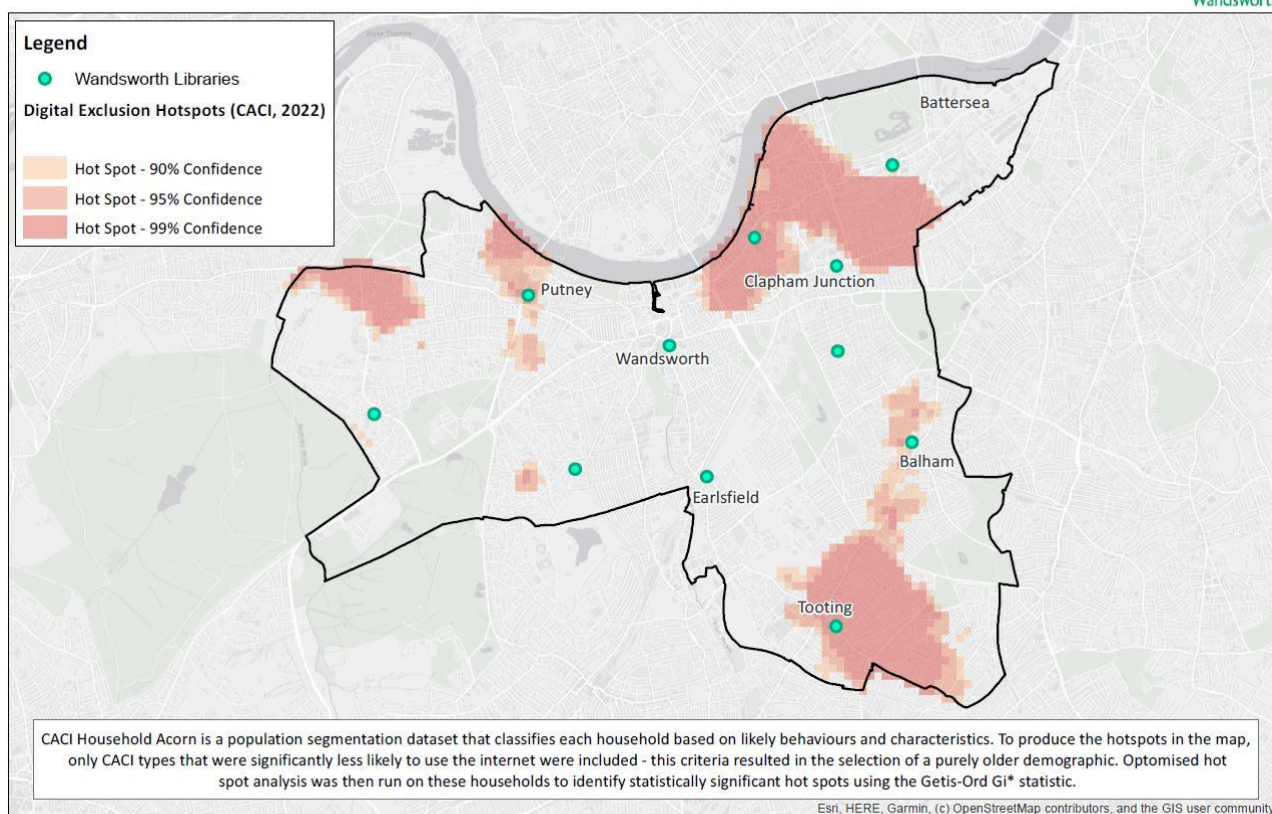
Wandsworth: A Digitally Connected Borough with Hidden Gaps

Wandsworth is one of London's most digitally connected boroughs. It has a young, highly educated, and largely English-speaking population. Half of its residents are aged between 20 and 44, and over 60% have a university degree – the highest education level across London. Nearly all residents (97.7%) speak English well, which is often a key factor in digital confidence.

Most parts of the borough fall into the 'e-Professionals' category in terms of internet use – meaning people here are typically confident and frequent users of online services. This is backed up by Wandsworth's strong digital performance in the 2021 Census, where 96.5% of residents were predicted to complete their forms online – among the top ten boroughs in the country. Internet access is also high, with 97.3% of homes having superfast broadband – slightly above the London average. (4)

Despite these high levels of digital engagement, there are clear pockets of exclusion within the borough. Some areas, such as Roehampton, Falconbrook, Furzedown, and Battersea Park, have lower levels of broadband access and fewer people going online regularly. According to the 2021 Census Digital Propensity Index, around 4,800 households in Wandsworth were more likely to submit a paper response, which may indicate limited digital access or confidence. And in 2020, around 11,000 people in the borough had either never used the internet or hadn't been online in the previous three months. (5)

CACI Digitally Excluded Population Segments



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Produced by Katherine Ive & Emily Parry,
Insight & Analytics Team, 03/07/2023

Source: Datawand

Digital Exclusion is Closely Linked to Inequality

While many parts of Wandsworth show low levels of household deprivation, not all residents share the same access to resources. Economic hardship exists – nearly 29% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals (6) and that number has grown in recent years, exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. Local charities report that thousands of families on low incomes still lack the devices or internet access needed to participate fully in digital life.

“Digital exclusion is a knock-on effect from something else... Often the people we support are affected by more than one form of inequalityWe’ve redistributed nearly 4,000 devices, but we know there are around 8,000

families on low incomes – so there’s still a big gap we need to fill.” – **Megan Barrett, CEO, Power to Connect.**

Many services which low-income families and individuals need to access, such as housing and welfare benefits, are administered digitally. This makes it increasingly difficult for those people who are not able to use digital resources to gain access to those important public services. This is true for many users of Citizens Advice.

“I manage our drop-in service, and would estimate that the majority of our clients have some level of digital exclusion. Many people request help with online forms to apply for benefits and local services, such as Council Tax Reduction, Housing Benefit and homeless help. We simply do not have capacity to assist all of these clients at the point they need that help, and therefore people are sometimes unable to access crucial services and assistance when they most need it. This can lead them to fall into debt, risk court action, or to become homeless. While the local authority team who deal with homelessness work hard to ensure there is help for digitally excluded clients to apply for support, we have seen people who fall through the net of this digital first approach” – **Ralph Seward, Advice Centres Service Manager, Citizens Advice Wandsworth**

Healthcare services are difficult to access online

Wandsworth is one of London’s most digitally connected boroughs – yet when it comes to healthcare, many residents are still not engaging with online services. Despite high levels of digital confidence in other areas of life, many patients are not using the digital options available through their GP, such as booking appointments, ordering repeat prescriptions, or accessing their health records online.

Data from NHS England’s *Patient Online Management Information* (7) shows that in some parts of the borough, up to 90–100% of patients registered with a GP are not using these online services. In total:

- **21 areas** in Wandsworth have low online access to GP services (0–49% of patients using them).
- **16 areas** have even lower uptake, with **50–100% of patients** not using online healthcare tools.
- In a **quarter of those 16 areas**, the number of patients not accessing digital health services is as high as **90–100%**.

While the exact reasons for this aren't fully clear, local organisations point to a common theme: confusing and inconsistent systems. Different apps and platforms across GP practices, hospitals and pharmacies make it hard for people to navigate and trust the process.

“People feel like the system is deliberately complicated to make access harder. There's confusion about which app to use and how to actually book an appointment.”

– **Megan Barrett, CEO, Power to Connect.**

Those most affected by this digital healthcare gap tend to be the same groups already at risk of exclusion: older adults, people experiencing homelessness, and refugee or asylum seeker communities. For these residents, the inability to access digital healthcare options deepens existing health inequalities.

COVID Deepened the Digital Divide.

Despite COVID being a catalyst for some people to develop new digital skills and get online, the accelerated shift of services to online platforms during the COVID pandemic further exacerbated digital exclusion for some.

The Government's 2022 Roadmap for Digital and Data planned to transfer 75 public services such as debt support, housing resources, health advice and medical

appointments online. The rapid move of more services online made things even harder for those already left behind, deepening the digital divide.

Digital exclusion varies in form and severity. It may involve a lack of access to devices, poor internet connectivity, or low levels of digital literacy and confidence.

“COVID put the focus on connectivity. Every public service is on digital. It’s a shame that so much of the NHS and housing related services are all online and yet older isolated people are the ones that are more likely to need those services. There is a real gap.”

– ***Christine Andrew, Elder Team, Katherine Low Settlement.***

“The world now wants you to pay and interact digitally. The extent of digital exclusion is linked to the amount of support available.”

Robert Bryce, Head of Training, Share Community.

Key Features of Digital Exclusion

Wandsworth has strong community-led support in place, but digital exclusion remains a real barrier for many. This section draws on insight from local organisations and their clients to explore the key causes of digital exclusion and how we can begin to close the gap.

1. Financial Barriers

Case Study: Client A – Affordability and the Hidden Cost of Digital Access.

Client A was required to apply for Universal Credit online but faced immediate barriers due to financial hardship. Although he was issued a laptop, he had no Wi-Fi access at home and could not afford broadband. It took him three days to turn the device on. A digital skills course helped him send one email, but the overall experience left him feeling overwhelmed and distressed. He ultimately disengaged from all digital learning and has not returned to it, citing the mental strain and the unaffordable ongoing costs of staying connected.

Analysis: This case illustrates how affordability issues—such as the cost of internet access, data plans, and additional software—can prevent meaningful digital engagement, even when a device is provided. Without ongoing, affordable connectivity and emotional support, access alone is not enough.

“A big theme is the lack of affordable devices. People are unable to afford that and internet access as well.” – **Ava Spinoza, Carers Support and Development Worker, Wandsworth Carers Centre.**

“You have to spend £30 a month on Wi-Fi, and then you get asked to pay for virus protection.” – **Client A**

2. Lack of Digital Skills

Case Study: Client B – Older Disabled Resident Facing Isolation.

Client B is a 75-year-old woman living alone with significant physical disabilities. She owns a smartphone and broadband but only uses it for WhatsApp, telephone calls, and YouTube. She doesn't use email and needs adviser support to complete online benefit applications. She is eager to develop her digital skills and buy a computer to pursue her goal of writing a book.

Analysis: This example illustrates that access to digital devices does not equate to digital confidence. Some residents who are already isolated by nature of perhaps their age or a disability may lack the foundational training needed to benefit fully from technology, often requiring patient, repeated support.

"I have got a smart phone, but I don't know how to use anything on it." – **Client B**

"People gifted computers in Covid didn't use them, didn't know how. And older clients may not have used computers in the past. They need lots of repeat training sessions."

– **Christine Andrew, Katherine Low Settlement.**

3. Limited Access to Suitable Devices

Case Study: Client C – Health Challenges and Limited Access.

Client C is in her 60s and regularly uses a smartphone but struggles with small screens due to poor eyesight. Only after receiving a donated PC she began to build her skills and prepare for a computer course.

Analysis: This client's experience highlights the limitations of smartphones for people with sensory impairments or complex digital tasks. While many people have phones, access to larger, more suitable devices like computers or tablets is critical for meaningful digital engagement.

"I did not own a PC until today and I always struggled to use my phone as a PC because my eyesight is not that good anymore." – **Client C**

4. Language and Accessibility Barriers

Case Study: Client D – People without English Language Skills and Learning Difficulties

Client D is a 58-year-old Ghanaian national who originally came to Citizens Advice with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and faced complex health and housing challenges. Although he owned a smartphone, he struggled to use it beyond basic functions. He found email and online forms unfamiliar and confusing, and needed one-to-one support from Citizens Advice to apply for housing and manage his immigration case. He remains uncertain about how to access training or obtain a suitable device.

Analysis: This case highlights how, for many people who do not have English language skills and have limited experience with digital tools, the pressure of navigating essential services online without support can be overwhelming. Similarly, for people with learning disabilities, platforms and processes are rarely designed with accessibility in mind—often assuming high levels of literacy, digital confidence, and memory retention.

“Sending an email is difficult – it’s not something I use regularly. I have not used a form for completing benefit applications. I am not very confident.” – **Client D**

“The number of adults with learning disabilities who have had to have new email addresses because they completely forgot or lost access to their initial account.” – **Robert Bryce, Head of Training, Share Community**

5. Anxiety, Fear and Mistrust

Case Study: Client E – Fear of Fraud and Literacy Challenges

Client E, a 45-year-old British national with dyslexia, avoids using the internet due to fear of fraud and low confidence. Despite owning a smartphone, he only uses it for calls and texts. He needed help to apply online for Universal Credit, PIP, and a housing transfer.

Analysis: Client E’s case illustrates how fears around scams, privacy, and personal security can prevent people from using technology, especially when compounded by learning difficulties. These fears are valid and need to be addressed through trusted, supportive learning environments.

“It’s too easy for your information to be taken. Like banking – it can all be done fraudulently. I just don’t trust them.” – **Client E**

“There’s a lot of anxiety around tech, about safety and privacy. You need essential digital skills to make a safe transaction.” – **Christine Andrew, Katherine Low Settlement.**

6. Not Enough Personalised, Local Support

Case Study: Client A – Mental Health Impacts of Forced Digital Engagement.

Client A's experience also highlights how digital learning can fail without tailored,

trusted support. Even with a free laptop and access to a skills course, the process felt overwhelming and ultimately harmful to his wellbeing.

Analysis: This demonstrates that personal, local support—ideally one-to-one—is vital to building digital confidence. Without it, people may feel abandoned and give up, reinforcing exclusion.

“It sends my brain into a spin. Took 3 days to turn the computer on. They sent me on a course to learn and I sent one email. Struggled with passwords. It was affecting my mental health and making me angry.” – **Client A**

“One-to-one sessions are really valuable. You build that rapport. We have time to run through things. There are no stupid questions.” – **Ava Spinoza, Wandsworth Carers Centre.**

Conclusions and Recommendations

Wandsworth is one of London's most digitally connected boroughs — but not everyone is included. Beneath strong broadband coverage and high levels of digital engagement, a significant minority of residents remain digitally excluded. For those already facing challenges such as poverty, poor health, language barriers or social isolation, the digital world is often difficult to access and navigate.

Digital exclusion in Wandsworth is no longer just about getting online — it's about having *meaningful access*: the right devices, affordable connectivity, digital skills, and the confidence to use online services effectively. The consequences of exclusion are wide-ranging and serious, from missed healthcare and lost income to reduced access to vital public services and increased social isolation.

Healthcare access in particular stands out as a surprising area of low digital uptake, even among a generally digitally-confident population. This reflects a deeper issue — that inconsistent, complex, and often confusing systems are putting up barriers and eroding trust, especially for older adults, people experiencing homelessness, and refugee or asylum-seeking communities.

Applications and management of welfare benefits and social housing are primarily managed via online systems. Digital exclusion puts vulnerable adults who rely on these systems at a disproportionate disadvantage and makes managing these applications extremely difficult without support from elsewhere.

Digital exclusion is both a symptom and a driver of wider inequalities. Tackling it requires more than just distributing devices or improving infrastructure. It demands a coordinated, person-centred approach — one that builds confidence and skills over time, is rooted in trusted relationships, and connects people to broader support systems.

To close the digital divide, action must be taken at every level. This includes:

- **Affordable, ongoing access** to suitable devices and reliable internet
- **Tailored one-to-one digital skills support**, especially for vulnerable groups. This needs to be free and tailored to the needs of users. Support also needs to be available over time so that individuals know that they can access support frequently in order to develop their skills.
- **Simplified, user-friendly public services** that people can trust and navigate. In particular health, benefits and housing services need to be joined up, easy to access and use.
- **Stronger collaboration** between statutory services, community organisations and local residents

It is clear that there is support available in the borough for those who are digitally excluded but this is still not accessed by many people who need it the most. Of all the clients that we interviewed as part of this study, all expressed a wish to be better digitally connected but none had any idea how to go about this. It is important therefore that we consider social isolation at the same time as digital exclusion and ensure that every adult who wants to, knows how to access support.

The work of organisations in Wandsworth like Power to Connect, the Carers Centre, Share Community, the Katherine Low Settlement and Age UK show the power of local partnerships and community-led solutions. With sustained investment, cross-sector collaboration, and a focus on digital inclusion as a matter of equity, Wandsworth can ensure that no one is left behind in an increasingly digital world.

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1. [Wandsworth Borough Council Digital and Data Strategy 2024](#)
2. [Wandsworth Borough Council Digital and Data Strategy 2024](#)
3. [Good Things Foundation UK's Digital Divide 2024](#)
4. [Wandsworth Borough Council Digital and Data Strategy 2024](#)
5. [Office National Statistics 2020](#)
6. [Cost Of Living Crisis DataWand 2024](#)
7. [NHS England's Patient Online Management Information 2024](#)

Appendix One: Digital Support Available in Wandsworth

Age UK Wandsworth : Drop-in digital support sessions run at libraries and community centres across the borough for adults aged 60+ living in Wandsworth.

- Website: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/wandsworth/>
- Email: digital@ageukwandsworth.org.uk
- Telephone: **020 8877 8940**

CDARS Digital Inclusion Programme is for people who are affected by mental health and the effects of addiction to alcohol or drugs.

- Website: <https://www.cdars.org.uk/>
- Email: info@cdars.org.uk
- Telephone: **020 3872 8217**

Dons Local Action Group A local organisation which aims to help the local community to fight poverty. The Keep Kids Connected initiative offers support for children who do not have access to online learning.

- Website: <https://donslocalaction.org/>
- Helpline: **0203 301 4511**
- Email: info@donslocalaction.org

Katherine Low Settlement (KLS) Digital Inclusion Programme helps people aged 55+ who want to learn how to use a digital device. This includes Tech Beginners and Tech Together to learn and develop new skills.

KLS also offer an outreach home visiting service to help with trouble shooting technical issues.

- Website: <https://www.klsettlement.org.uk/>
- Email: info@klsettlement.org.uk
- Telephone: **020 7223 2845**

Power to Connect offer free digital skills workshops and one to one support at schools, libraries, and community spaces across Wandsworth.

- Website: <https://www.powertoconnect.co.uk/>
- Email: hello@powertoconnect.co.uk
- Telephone: **07934 553192**

Share Community's Digital Inclusion Programme is for adults with learning disabilities and/or autism. The programme focuses on financial digital capability.

- Website: <https://www.sharecommunity.org.uk/>
- Email: info@sharecommunity.org.uk
- Telephone: **020 7924 2949**

Wandsworth Carers Centre's Digital Inclusion Programme is mainly for unpaid carers who are new to technology and includes allocation of access to a device and one to one support.

- Website: <https://carerswandsworth.org.uk/>
- Email: support@wandsworthcarers.org.uk
- Telephone: **020 8877 1200**

Wandsworth Lifelong Learning - A series of entry level digital courses for beginners. The courses cover the basics of using Excel, Word, navigating the internet, using a device and more.

- Website:
<https://www.wandsworthlifelonglearning.org.uk/guide/digital-skills/>
- Email: edlifelong@richmondandwandsworth.gov.uk
- Telephone: **0208 8718055**

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