

Report to CABINET

Get Oldham Working's Digital Innovation Fund

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Fida Hussain, Cabinet member for Business Enterprise and Employment

Officer Contact: Matthew Bulmer, Director of Education, Skills and Early Years

Report Author: Jonathan Phillips, Head of Service, Get Oldham Working

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15th December 2025

Reason for Decision

To seek approval for Oldham Council to formally accept £266,084 awarded by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) under the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund, enabling the delivery of the Oldham Digital Futures: Scaling Skills, Access, and Opportunity project.

This funding must be fully spent and delivery completed by 31 March 2026, and operates on a payment-by-results and milestone-based schedule, requiring Cabinet approval due to the financial and operational implications.

The delivery window is extremely limited — from November 2025 to 31 March 2026 — meaning only 5 months to fully deliver all funded activity.

The funding is payment-by-results, requiring GOW to deliver at risk ahead of receiving the final tranche of grant payment.

Executive Summary

Oldham Council has been successful in securing £266,084 through the national Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund. This short-term, high-impact funding enables GOW and partners to deliver a programme addressing digital exclusion across Oldham, including:

- Establishing two fixed digital hubs
- Creating a mobile digital hub for neighbourhood outreach
- Delivering 150 digital inclusion workshops
- Recruiting and training 30 Digital Champions

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- Distributing 300+ devices to digitally excluded residents

The delivery window is extremely limited — from November 2025 to 31 March 2026 — meaning only 5 months to fully deliver all funded activity.

The funding is payment-by-results, requiring GOW to deliver at risk ahead of receiving the final tranche of grant payment.

Despite the tight delivery schedule, this presents a major opportunity to:

- Equip residents with essential digital skills
- Reduce device and data poverty
- Improve access to online public services
- Support people closer to the job market
- Build a longer-term digital inclusion offer for Oldham

Recommendations:

That the Cabinet:

1. Approves acceptance of the £266,084 DSIT Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund award.
2. Approves GOW to deliver the “Oldham Digital Futures” project within DSIT conditions, including the requirement for delivery by 31 March 2026.
3. Notes the payment-by-results nature of the grant and the requirement for GOW to deliver at risk until DSIT milestone payments are released.
4. Delegates authority to the Head of service at GOW to manage delivery, reporting, and compliance with DSIT conditions.
5. Notes the short timeframe and endorse accelerated recruitment, procurement, and neighbourhood engagement to enable delivery.

GOW's Digital Innovation Fund

1 Background

- 1.1 DSIT launched the Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund to support local authorities in delivering innovative, high-impact digital inclusion interventions. Oldham Council submitted a bid led by Get Oldham Working (GOW) and has been successful in securing **£266,084**.
- 1.2 The project directly addresses digital exclusion in Oldham, where poverty, low skills, disability, and lack of equipment are significant barriers to employment, health access, and participation in public services.
- 1.3 The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between DSIT and Oldham Council sets clear conditions, including:
 - Delivery and full spend must be completed by 31 March 2026
 - The project runs on a payment-by-results / milestone-based model
 - The Council must maintain monitoring, evaluation, and data return requirements
 - Activity must focus on residents who are digitally excluded
- 1.4 The funding aligns with the Corporate Plan priorities around **Thriving Communities, Better Jobs, Reducing Inequalities, and Improving Access to Services**. It also supports neighbourhood delivery, community cohesion, prevention, and economic development outcomes.

2 Current Position

- 2.1 The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has confirmed the award of £266,084 to Oldham Council. However, the funding must be **fully spent and all activity delivered by 31 March 2026**, leaving a very short delivery window of approximately **five months**.
- 2.2 Due to the tight timescales and payment-by-results structure of the grant, **Get Oldham Working (GOW) has already begun early mobilisation and is delivering key preparatory activity at risk**, ahead of formal acceptance by Cabinet. This approach is necessary to ensure the project achieves its milestones and remains compliant with DSIT deadlines.
- 2.3 At-risk activity already underway includes:
 - Early recruitment preparations for the Project Coordinator and Technical Lead
 - Soft procurement preparation for devices, Wi-Fi dongles, and hub equipment
 - Engagement with neighbourhood teams and partners (Inclusive Bytes, Libraries, Lifelong Learning, Oldham College)
 - Development of workshop materials and delivery model
 - Identification of locations for both fixed digital hubs and the mobile hub
 - Initial local promotion planning
- 2.4 GOW's proactive early mobilisation is essential to meeting the project's **ambitious targets** within the constrained timescale, including the establishment of digital hubs, delivery of 150 workshops, recruitment of 30 Digital Champions, and distribution of 300+ devices.

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- 2.5 Formal Cabinet approval is required to proceed with full delivery, establish the dedicated cost centre, and ensure governance, compliance and financial controls are in place for the remainder of the grant period.

3 Options/Alternatives

3.1 Option 1: Accept the Funding (Recommended)

Advantages:

- Enables 500+ residents to access digital training, equipment, and support
- Tackles device and data poverty
- Moves residents closer to employment
- Supports children, older people, disabled residents, and low-income families
- Strengthens Oldham's digital ecosystem and neighbourhood offer
- Aligns with GM and national priorities

Disadvantages:

- Short five-month delivery timeline
- GOW must deliver at risk under the payment-by-results structure
- Requires intensive mobilisation and governance

3.2 Option 2: Do Not Accept the Funding

Advantages:

- Avoids delivery risk

Disadvantages:

- Loss of £266,084 investment into Oldham
- Residents lose access to 300 devices and 150 workshops
- Reduced ability to tackle digital poverty
- Missed opportunity to scale proven local practice

4 Preferred Option

- 4.1 **Option 1 is recommended** — accepting the funding maximises benefit for residents and strengthens Oldham's position as a GM leader in digital inclusion. The short delivery period is challenging, but achievable with accelerated mobilisation and strong governance.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with:

- Get Oldham Working
- The Director of Digital transformation
- AD for customer Experience
- Oldham Libraries Service
- Inclusive Bytes
- Lifelong Learning and Oldham College
- Finance and Procurement (initial scoping)

All parties support accepting the funding.

6 Financial Implications

6.1 Approval is sought to accept a Digital Innovation Fund grant of up to £266,084 from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). This funding will enable delivery of high-impact digital inclusion initiatives across the local authority between November 2025 to March 2026.

6.2 The spend as per the grant application will be as follows:

Category	Cost
Trainer (x 2) delivering 150 workshops, one-to-ones, volunteer training	£43,570
300 Devices & Connectivity laptops/tablets at £250 each plus data packages	£90,000
Portable Hub Setup portable equipment, screens, carry cases, Wi-Fi dongles	£24,000
Hub Equipment & Refurbishment for 2 fixed hubs (desks, chairs, storage, printers)	£28,000
Training Materials & Software licenses, curriculum resources, e-learning	£5,000
Trainer travel Taxi fares for transporting equipment and trainer to outreach venues	£800
Training Licences, courses for volunteers and ongoing support	£60,000
ICT data capture, case studies, final impact report	£1,000
Marketing social media, leaflets, targeted engagement campaigns	£5,000
Overheads	£8,714
Total Project Cost	£266,084

6.3 Grant payments will be released in arrears based on a payment by results/ milestone basis, in line with the terms set out in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The project must be completed and the funding fully utilised by 31 March 2026. A dedicated cost centre will be established to manage all expenditure, enabling robust financial control and compliance with DSIT reporting requirements

6.4 As outlined in section 2.3, the service has already begun early mobilisation and is delivering key preparatory activity at risk, ahead of formal acceptance by Cabinet, this approach is necessary to ensure the project achieves its milestones and remains compliant with DSIT deadlines.

6.5 Clearly there is risk in the pre-approval mobilisation, 'payment by results' as the project progresses and the very clear requirement to have completed the project and fully utilised the funding by 31 March 2026. The Service acknowledges that the short delivery period is challenging, but is of the opinion that it is achievable with accelerated mobilisation and strong governance, backed up with the experience of having delivered projects with the same funding and delivery requirements.

Catherine Dunkerley - Accountant

7 Legal Implications

7.1

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) issued by DSIT is non-binding, however it sets out conditions the Council must comply with, including the requirement for full spend and delivery by 31 March 2026, milestone reporting, monitoring obligations and audit requirements. The service area must ensure they can meet these conditions within the available timeframe.

The grant operates on a payment by results basis meaning expenditure will be incurred before all funding is received. Legal cannot advise on delivery feasibility or financial risk, the service and Finance must be satisfied that the necessary governance, controls and risk-management arrangements are in place before committing to activity.

All procurement required to deliver the project must comply with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. Procurement have confirmed support for the recommended option and these comments are provided on the basis that Procurement will determine and manage the appropriate compliant route to market.

Where third-party partners or organisations contribute to delivery, suitable written agreements must be in place, setting out roles, responsibilities, safeguarding, reporting requirements, and data-handling obligations.

The project involves processing personal data, including potentially data relating to vulnerable residents. The service area is responsible for ensuring UK GDPR compliance, including completing any required DPIAs and establishing lawful information sharing arrangements with DSIT and delivery partners.

No subsidy control concerns are anticipated for a publicly funded digital inclusion programme however, if any financial benefit, equipment, or grant is provided to external organisations the service should seek further advice prior to award.

Sukie Kaur – Solicitor 3rd December 2025

8. Procurement Implications

8.1 Commercial Procurement Unit supports option 1: accepting the funding maximises benefit for residents and strengthens Oldham's position as a GM leader in digital inclusion. The short delivery period is challenging, but achievable with accelerated mobilisation and strong governance.

Upon approval of the report, Procurement will work closely with the project team to ensure all third-party spend is procured in full compliance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

Senga Henstock, ICT Senior Buyer, 2nd December 2025

9 Equality Impact, including implications for Children and Young People

9.1 Yes

The project positively impacts:

- Low-income households
- Older people
- Disabled residents
- NEET young people
- Unemployed adults

10 **Key Decision**

10.1 Yes – value exceeds £250,000 and affects multiple wards.

11 **Key Decision Reference**

11.1 EE-04-25

12 **Background Papers**

12.1 DSIT Memorandum of Understanding
GOW Digital Innovation Fund Application
Digital Inclusion Project Cost Breakdown
Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund – Guidance
(All available on request, from the report author)

13 **Appendices**

13.1 n/a