

Birmingham City Council

Report to Cabinet/Cabinet Committee

27th June 2023



Subject: Digital Inclusion - Year One

Report of: Peter Bishop – Director, Digital and Customer Services

Relevant Cabinet Member: Councillor Saima Suleman, Cabinet Member for Digital, Culture, Heritage, and Tourism

Relevant O&S Chair(s): Sir Albert Bore, Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny

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Are specific wards affected?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No – All wards affected
If yes, name(s) of ward(s):		
Is this a key decision?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, add Forward Plan Reference:		
Is the decision eligible for call-in?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, state which appendix is exempt, and provide exempt information paragraph number or reason if confidential:		

1.0 Executive summary

- 1.1 In September 2021, Cabinet Committee approved the Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan, aimed at reducing the impacts of digital exclusion. The Strategy was co-designed and endorsed by the voluntary and community sectors as well as other city stakeholders to better understand and support those at higher risk of being digitally excluded, such as people with disabilities, people experiencing poverty, and people who were adults before the introduction of the internet.

1.2 This report provides an update of the work undertaken as part of the Digital Inclusion (DI) Programme and recognises the significant contribution, support, resources and guidance provided by city stakeholders in delivering the Action Plan and the associated activities led by them to date. It also sets out the key priorities planned up to 31 December 2023 when the funded programme is due to come to an end.

1.3 Key focuses to date have been on:

- mapping existing activities in the city, amplifying awareness, engagement, sharing insight, and assist in securing funding
- identifying and targeting potential areas of digital exclusion
- strengthening learning and knowledge sharing through a collaborative governance structure to ensure better outcomes in order to support delivery.

1.4 Successes have included:

- good engagement and collaboration between city institutions such as the Department of Work and Pension, (DWP), the National Health Service (NHS), the West Midlands Police (WMP), The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and numerous VCFSE organisations.
- the creation of the Birmingham Device Bank (BDB), an excellent resource for the provision of computer devices and connectivity for the short and medium term. Already almost 2000 recycled devices have been issued and a further 7000 new and recycled devices are being made available.
- delivery of the Summer of Skills from 11 libraries supporting citizens to gain access to digital skills and devices.
- Supported the Children's Trust to secure a competitive social tariff for care leavers
- raising the awareness and amplifying the availability of digital skills courses, resulting in increased numbers of citizens taking up digital skills training.
- supporting organisations to access funding as well as attracting a further £1.1 million funding from the WMCA for devices

1.5 Despite the above successes, the first 14 months of this programme has demonstrated that there is no 'quick-fix' to this deeply nuanced issue, and that co-ordinating all council directorates and public sector services is vital to address the digital divide.

1.6 Given the complexities of digital inclusion and the limited resources and time available, it is important that the Action Plan is prioritised in order to maximise its benefits for citizens and communities and therefore has provisionally set out the following priorities for 31 December 2023.

- Build on engagement and partnership with existing institutions to reduce silo working and enable greater collaboration.
- Allocate the 3700 new computer devices and 1500 connectivity dongles for citizens who meet agreed criteria in order to maximise the opportunities these offer.

- Co-ordinate and signpost existing skills provision across multiple partners to enable greater end-to-end services. Where possible, linking to devices.
- Develop an approach to delivering digital inclusion that is sustainable beyond December 2023.

1.7 It is proposed that a further report be brought to Cabinet to outline its impacts on citizens and to determine what the next steps should be in terms of co-ordination to maintain momentum. It is clear there is still much to do.

2.0 Recommendations

This report requests Cabinet:

- 2.1 Notes the progress and achievements of the Digital Inclusion Programme to date.
- 2.2 Supports the approach to prioritise the Action Plan and agrees with the planned priorities set out in section 1.6.
- 2.3 Supports the continuation of the current Programme and agrees to receive a further report that sets out the final outcomes and makes recommendations for how digital inclusion activities could be funded beyond 31 December 2023.

3.0 What has been happening?

- 3.1 While digital inclusion has been an issue since the start of the internet era, the focus has tended to be on getting older people online. However, the pandemic highlighted that considerable numbers of citizens of all ages are excluded, many of whom need additional support to get and stay online. As services become digitised, it is vital that these groups are not designed out of statutory support.
- 3.2 There is no one cause for digital exclusion, it can refer to a lack of any or all of the following: internet access, a suitable device, motivation and digital skills. However, underlying factors such as poverty, low education and literacy levels need to be considered as well, and other barriers to access such as the rise of online scamming, hacking, and general cyber-crime emerges.
- 3.3 In order to address these issues, the Council co-designed the citywide Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan with city stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors. The Strategy was formally launched in November 2021 and led to the creation of a 2-year funded programme to run from January 2022 until December 2023. However, due to some issues with recruitment, the team were not fully on-boarded until May 2022, which led to a slight delay in getting started.
- 3.4 Although initially attached to the Birmingham Adult Education Service (BAES) under the Children and Families Directorate, the Digital Inclusion Programme has been under the wider Digital City Programme in the Council Management Directorate since January 2023. This change prompted a full restructure of the governance board function, format, and membership, a full review of our active workstreams and focus, and reprioritisation of goals. The Digital Inclusion Programme has become

part of the wider Birmingham Digital Partnership focus, which enables it to align more closely with the council digital strategy and innovation.

Establishing the governance and scoping the work

- 3.5 During the initial 6 months of the programme, while under BAES, DI Programme liaised with public, private, and VCFSE organisations, Neighbourhood Network Schemes (NNS), housing associations and across council directorates to map existing activities in the city, amplify awareness, engage, share insight, and identify funding sources. During this process, a number of key projects and organisations were uncovered that provide valuable services aimed at combatting digital exclusion as well as some gaps in existing provision.
- 3.6 The DI Programme utilised existing tools and techniques to identify and target potential areas of digital exclusion. Detailed work was carried out and 16 areas of Birmingham with elevated risk of digital exclusion according to Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) index and Internet User Classification (IUC) have been identified. Birmingham has one of the highest rates of digital exclusion in the UK, with 20% of its citizens unable and/or unwilling to access services through digital channels. Several personas have also been established to create pathways for each type of citizen: a child, an adult, someone over the age of 55, someone with a disability etc, which have been shared with city stakeholders to map out existing provisions across the city.
- 3.7 In order to maximise the existing digital inclusion eco-system, a Digital Inclusion Steering Group and a wider governance group have been established, led by an external Chair. These are supported by a number of subgroups, each led by external officers, to ensure that there is city leadership and prioritisation of delivery on a number of key workstreams agreed by the Steering group.

Progress to date in collaboration with city stakeholders

- 3.8 It was recognised that the Action Plan would require close collaboration with city stakeholders and would evolve based on emerging challenges and priorities. The Steering group continues to shape and influence the Plan. There are several key workstreams that the Steering group has prioritised. A number of key activities delivered to date as well as those that will continue until the end of the Programme are set out below.
- (i) **Policy and Sustainability Workstream** focuses on influencing the strategies and policies of key organisations to create greater alignment and to ensure that digital inclusion activities are embedded and will be sustainable beyond the life of the Digital Inclusion Programme. The workstream has done/is doing the following:
- Established a partnership with Birmingham and Solihull NHS Integrated Care Service for the delivery of their digital inclusion strategy.
 - Delivered show and tell opportunities with DWP and other stakeholders to showcase accessibility features and accessories to citizens with learning

disabilities, physical disabilities and other impairments to assist them to become more confident in the use of technology and online services. The ongoing aim is to deliver the showcase in day centres and other venues across Birmingham.

- Working with the West Midlands Police on their digitisation of crime-reporting services which will be launched in April 2023 to raise its awareness and take up especially in areas of high-digital exclusion.
- Working with OFCOM and Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sports (DCMS) to raise awareness and increase the number of zero-rated public services websites.
- Worked jointly with Digital NNS, assisted in their launch event in March 2023 and supported them by mapping out digital skills activities in the community and establishing links with the NNS teams across Birmingham, helping to build the capability of different organisations in their local areas.
- Worked with the Good Things Foundation to promote and raise the awareness of the national data bank.
- Working closely with the Early Intervention and Prevention Team to ensure digital inclusion is embedded into its future design.
- Working closely with BAES to ensure digital skills is a core element in their basic skills agenda and supporting 3700 citizens to gain digital skills since August 2022.
- Amplifying and extending the reach of the PURE project into hard-to-reach communities, by making connections and introductions for VCFSE organisations and ensured this offer is embedded in other ongoing programmes, such as the Early Intervention and Prevention approach.

(ii) **Connectivity and Infrastructure Workstream** focuses on enabling citizens and community organisations to access the appropriate digital devices they need to get and stay online and builds on earlier initiatives started during the pandemic. The workstream has done/is doing the following:

- Delivered 650 desktop computers to 80 VCFSE organisations.
- Launched the Birmingham Device Bank in December 2022 and allocated 1303 recycled devices to 103 community organisations, with a further 3500 devices being refurbished.

“The laptops have been a great asset to us as part of training for our staff and this has been really beneficial to our carers and has been able to help her to reconnect with her friends she hasn’t seen for a long time, she said to us she felt having a laptop has changed her life for the better.”

Quote from Crossroads Caring for Carers who have received 7 laptops to gift to carers

- Secured £1.1million funding from West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) for the provision of over 3700 new computer devices with almost 1500 dongles for connectivity.
- Worked with Good Things Foundation to increase the number of active registered online centres from 7 to 33 since May 2022, resulting in them securing 4,921 sim cards for citizens providing access to free data, texts, and calls for a period of 6-12 months each, with no contractual/financial obligation on an ongoing basis to the user.
- Working with Birmingham Children's Trust, a commissioning exercise has been completed to procure a specific competitive broadband offer for the care experienced adults (care leavers) that the Council has a duty to support. The offer will be wholly funded, for a cohort of 1,000, for a period of two years with potential scope to procure more at the same competitive price. This offer was positively acknowledged by Ofsted on their recent inspection with the go-live being May 2023
- Working with DWP and OFCOM to promote the Social Tariff broadband offer which provides home broadband to customers in receipt of certain benefits at a much-reduced market price. Previously only 1% of eligible customers had taken up this offer.
- Worked with DWP work coaches to remove confusion and concern on the use of the Flexible Support Fund, which enables job seekers access to free broadband through TalkTalk. Carrying out this work has meant that Birmingham is one of the best areas in the West Midlands region for utilising this fund.

(iii) Skills and Capacity Building Workstream recognises that developing citizens' and organisational capability to establish lifelong skills is a key element for addressing digital exclusion. It aims to ensure that they maximise the use of the device banks and available connectivity. The workstream has done/is doing the following:

- Delivered the Summer of Skills project, working with 22 volunteers and 11 libraries. Following the training, a further 75 laptops were made available to citizens.
- Raising the awareness and take up of the DCMS Cyber Explorers Programme from 3 schools and 119 KS4 learners to 35 schools with over 2199 learners. According to DCMS, Birmingham is in the top 5 areas of priorities nationally for this programme.
- Working with Barclays Digital Champions to pilot a scheme with the Primary Care Networks (PCN) to train Social Prescribers and Care Co-

ordinators as Digital Champions during January 2023-May 2023. If successful, this will be extended to all 27 PCNs.

- Secured a pilot pod for installation at Shard End Library for private consultation in communal spaces. The pod will allow people to conduct primary and secondary healthcare appointments, DWP work coach appointments, Children's Trust check-ins, interviews, etc in a private space supported by digital champions where required. This will be particularly powerful for people who might live in temporary accommodation or HMOs, people experiencing homelessness, etc.

"Our clients are from refugee backgrounds and often have to rebuild their lives when they resettle in the UK. Whether it's learning English, retraining or applying for jobs to gain work and financial independence, there are many barriers to doing this, one being digital access.

Many of our clients do not have access to laptops, so being able to receive laptops for them from Digital Birmingham has really opened up doors of opportunity and assisted with their integration to the city. Some have been able to apply for jobs, better manage their Universal Credit accounts and others access online English classes which they are very grateful for.

Employment and Integration Adviser, Breaking Barriers

(iv) **Funding and Innovation Workstream** focuses on working with city stakeholders to connect them to funding opportunities and encouraging collaborative projects to enable end to end services. The workstream has done/is doing the following:

- Worked with the Good Things Foundation to secure approximately £110K from the UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) to deliver digital skills training and devices in registered online centres in Birmingham.
- Supported AbilityNet to secure £50K for a pilot media literacy project to run from December 2022-February 2024. The project delivers skills support to ExtraCare Villages in Northfield for adults aged over 55 and adults with disabilities and mental health issues.
- Secured £1.1million from the WMCA for devices and connectivity in priority areas of the city under the Connected Services Programme from Devolution Funding.

Summary, next steps and key priorities

- 3.9 It has become clear during the last 14 months of this Programme that there is no 'quick-fix' to this deeply nuanced issue, and that the function of bringing together and co-ordinating all council directorates and public sector services is vital to ensure the city fully understands and works in symbiosis to address the digital divide.

- 3.10 This Cabinet Report highlights some of the digital inclusion activities that have taken/are taking place within Birmingham. The DI Programme has been working across Council teams and with external stakeholders to deliver the Digital Inclusion Strategy of providing devices, connectivity and skills training as part of place-based approach. It has been partially successful in delivering key elements of the Action Plan but recognises that there are several challenges both in resources and time limitations that could hinder its achievements.
- 3.11 Digital inclusion activities continue to be dispersed within various directorates and divisions, such as, Adult Social Care, Children and Families, Early Intervention and Prevention and Council Management, each with their individual focus. The DI Programme has made some inroads in pulling these together, but further work is required to fully co-ordinate and map the needs of citizens, both as individuals and as family units.
- 3.12 The Council has put in place excellent facilities for accessing devices and connectivity for the short to medium term through its Birmingham Device Bank. However, more work needed to ensure that devices alone are not seen as the solution for digital inclusion. Devices must be accompanied by wrap-around skills support to ensure that citizens have equitable access to digital services, and the opportunities these offer.
- 3.13 This Report recognises the important role and contribution city stakeholders has made in delivering the Action Plan and associated activities to reduce digital exclusion across the city. It is imperative that the governance structure established through this Programme is sustained beyond the life of this Programme.
- 3.14 The next steps for the remainder for the Programme are to work with the Digital Steering group to galvanise, co-ordinate and prioritise key aspects of the Action Plan for delivery. The Steering Group recognises the need for a digital inclusion function beyond December 2023 and will work with city stakeholders to develop a sustainable approach. A number of key priorities have been already agreed moving forward:
- (i) Further engagement and partnerships with existing institutions to reduce silo working and enable greater collaboration to reduce duplication and siloed working especially with organisations such as NHS, DWP, DCMS and WMP and to establish a digital inclusion charter
 - (ii) Appropriate and targeted distribution of the 3700 new computer devices and 1500 connectivity dongles for citizens who meet the criteria. This will require considerable partnership working and engagement with public sector institutions and community and voluntary organisations
 - (iii) Closer working with West Midlands Skills Partnership, Birmingham Adult Education Service, the NNS and the Childrens and Families programme to ensure that a comprehensive and coordinate skills wrap around services is established which supports citizens of all ages and ensure end to end delivery

- (iv) Develop an approach to deliver a digital inclusion programme that is sustainable beyond December 2023.

4.0 Options considered and recommended proposal

- 4.1 Option 1: **Do Nothing** . The Digital Inclusion Programme is in its final year of delivery with a proposed end date of 31 December 2023. It has substantial partnership support from external stakeholders and aims to deliver the Digital Inclusion and Action Plan approved by Cabinet Committee in September 2021. Key priorities have been identified and plans are being developed to enable their delivery.
- 4.2 Option 2: **Close down the Digital Inclusion Programme in June 2023**. The current Digital Inclusion Team has limited capacity, and it has been established that it is unlikely to deliver the fully scope of the Action Plan within the limited timescale.
- 4.3 Option 3: **Continue as is and explore proposals for continuation beyond December 2023**. In light of the successes to date, and in anticipation of gathering momentum during the year, continue the existing programme and prepare a detailed proposal for potential continuation of the Programme. in order to ensure it is further embedded in communities.
- 4.4 Given the successes achieved by the DI Programme to date, the need to deliver the key priorities of the Action Plan and address emerging needs and challenges it is recommended that Option 3 is considered.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 All relevant Cabinet Members and the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee have been consulted. This Cabinet Report has been shared with relevant directorate Department Management Teams.
- 5.2 The Cabinet Report has been shared with the Chair of the Digital Inclusion Steering group and any comments incorporated.

6. Risk Management

- 6.1 The relevance and importance of ensuring citizens and the voluntary and community sector organisations that support them are digitally included remains highly significant as more and more services come online. There is a risk that those that are most vulnerable will become further disconnected from society and will not be able to access essential public services, leading to greater inequalities and digital poverty.
- 6.2 There is a risk that alternative non-digital channels will continue to decline, leaving many vulnerable citizens and communities unable to access services easily, increasing further inequalities especially for those already in poverty.

7.0 Compliance issues

- 7.1 The aim of the city-wide Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan is to support Birmingham citizens and communities to build their skills, confidence and trust in using digital in order to tackle inequality as a result of increasing digital poverty. The Digital Inclusion Strategy supports the Council Plan 2022-2025, and its activities and

impacts are monitored through the Corporate Priority Delivery Plan 2023. It is also a key recommendation within the Breaking Down Barriers: Working towards Birmingham's future Report 2021.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1 The City Council will carry out this work under its General Power of Competence Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1 There are no additional financial implications set out in this Cabinet report as funding for this Programme is available until December 2023. However, if option 3 is approved then further plans will be developed to determine how to continue the Digital Inclusion function beyond December 2023. A further proposal will be submitted to Cabinet Committee as these plans develop.

10. Procurement implications

- 10.1 There are no procurement issues at this stage of the Digital Inclusion Programme.

11. Human Resources implications

- 11.1 The Digital Inclusion Team has been recruited on fixed-term contracts which are due to end on 31 December 2023. Any redundancy because of the closure of the Digital Inclusion function will be in line with Birmingham City Council's Human Resources procedures and protocols.

12. Public Sector Equality Duty

- 12.1 This Cabinet report is a progress update and therefore the initial screening for an Equality Analysis (EA) previously undertaken under the Equality Act 2010 reference number EQUA731 is still valid.

13 Background Documents

- 13.1 Report of Cabinet 7 September 2021 – Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan
- 13.2 Report to Cabinet 21 July 2020 - Initial Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on Birmingham's Communities (specifically Sections 3.4.56 and 3.8.8)
Breaking Down Barriers: Working Towards Birmingham's Future (Recommendation Six: Design and implement a city-wide Digital Inclusion Strategy)

14 Appendices

- A – Equality Impact Assessment
B – Environmental and Sustainability Assessment