

Grants Committee	 TOWER HAMLETS
January 12 th 2022	
Report of: Ann Sutcliffe, Corporate Director, place	Classification: Unrestricted
Connecting Communities – Digital Inclusion	

Lead Member	Councillor Mufedah Bustin
Originating Officer(s)	Aelswith Frayne, Head of Employment & Skills
Wards affected	All
Key Decision?	No
Reason for Key Decision	
Forward Plan Notice Published	16/12/21
Exempt information	N/A
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	<p>1. People are aspirational, independent and have equal access to opportunities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A better deal for children and young people: aspiration, education and skills • Good jobs and employment • Strong, resilient and safe communities • Better health and wellbeing.

Executive Summary

This report is seeking a £50,000 financial contribution towards the Connecting Communities Digital Inclusion Programme; a partnership between the East End Community Foundation, Tower Hamlets Council, social housing provider Poplar Harca and education provider, the Letta Trust; tackling systemic digital exclusion in the local community through the provision of free digital devices and subsidised broadband connections to low-income households with primary school aged children. With seed funding of £20k from each partner and in-kind support from broadband providers the project has been delivering since June 2020 and has supported 240+ low-income families to-date in learning and access to job search, training, employment and social engagement resources, showing very positive

results.

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the digital divide and the effects of digital exclusion on low-income communities and vulnerable residents in Tower Hamlets. Local research highlights that there are thousands of homes and families in the East End who lack access to the vital digital resources and services; services that are a basic requirement for modern day to day living, but that have become even more vital during the pandemic and its aftermath. Tackling digital exclusion has the potential to have a life-changing effect on those living in poverty. Where children cannot access online learning, existing attainment gaps have grown. Children can only access online learning through a decent device and a good quality internet connection. Our youngest learners also needed someone at home who can help them and the Connecting Communities Digital Inclusion programme is tackling both these issues.

Recommendations:

The Grants Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the contents of the report and the outcomes of the Connecting Communities Digital Inclusion project outcomes to-date.
2. To approve a grant of £50k from the Mayor's Priority Reserve to the Connecting Communities Digital Inclusion.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The Connecting Communities Digital Inclusion has been delivering digital devices and subsidised broadband connections to low-income families since June 2020. It is important for the council to engage with and support effective projects tackling digital exclusion for vulnerable communities, in order to influence and maintain a positive record of delivery in this sphere, and the CC Programme has been acknowledged by the LBTH Digital Strategy Steering Group as demonstrating best practice in their delivery.
- 1.2 Connecting Communities is a great example of a cross-sector partnership project tackling a systemic issue in the local community. Formed in Spring 2020, the partnership includes the East End Community Foundation, Tower Hamlets Council, social housing provider Poplar Harca and education provider, the Letta Trust. Each partner contributed seed funding and time to get the project up and running. Broadband provider, Community Fibre, donated free connections to the project.
- 1.3 The partnership is now fundraising for the next phase of the project and seeking renewed contributions from all partners as well as from corporate and other donors. As a borough anchor institution, it is important that the council

remains a key partner in order to influence device provision and long-term negotiations for broadband provision across the borough.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Do Nothing – this is not considered a viable option as many of our children and low-income families are excluded from accessing essential learning and social well-being resources that are now fundamental to engagement in education, employment and social engagement, for a healthy, happy and productive life.
- 2.2 Reduce the amount of grant – this is not considered the best option as it reduces the amount of funding available for the next phase of the roll-out of devices to families in need.
- 2.3 Increase the amount of grant – currently the Partnership is seeking a £50k contribution to the next phase. It is not considered necessary to increase the amount at the time as the Partnership is also fundraising from corporate donors and seeking bidding opportunities. Officers will continue to support the Partnership in these endeavours.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

Background

- 3.1 Connecting Communities is a great example of a cross-sector partnership project tackling a systemic issue in the local community. Formed in Spring 2020, the partnership includes the East End Community Foundation, Tower Hamlets Council, social housing provider Poplar Harca and education provider, the Letta Trust. Each partner contributed seed funding and time to get the project up and running. Broadband provider, Community Fibre, donated free connections to the project.
- 3.2 COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on a digital divide and the effects of digital exclusion on low-income communities and vulnerable residents in Tower Hamlets. Local research highlighted that there are thousands of homes and families in the East End who lack access to the vital digital resources and services. Services that are a basic requirement for modern day to day living, but that have become even more vital during the pandemic and its aftermath. Tackling digital exclusion has the potential to have a life-changing effect on those living in poverty.
- 3.3 Tragically periods of school closure have had the most profound impact on the most disadvantaged children in our school communities. Where children cannot access online learning, existing attainment gaps have grown. To access online learning, children need a device *and* a good quality internet

connection. Our youngest learners also needed someone at home who can help them.

Project Delivery

- 3.4 At the start of the pandemic, we learned quickly that any solution to digital disadvantage needed 3 things: a device, a high-quality internet connection and training for families. The project therefore provides:
- a. Families are connected to high-speed broadband provided by Community Fibre. This is free for at least 12 months.
 - b. Each family is given a new device to ensure children have access to on-line classes and homework portals, counselling, and other educational opportunities. This also means families are able to access online opportunities that can support pursuit of employment as well as health and wellbeing resources. To-date the project has provided Chromebooks.
 - c. Each family receives a seven-step training programme to ensure they know how to use their device, to ensure online safety, to enable access to educational resources and their GP, and to ensure they know how to manage their finances online.
- 3.5 To date there are 9 schools and in excess of 240 families involved at different stages of the project. Primary schools involved to-date are:
- Bygrove
 - Stebon
 - Clara Grant
 - Lansbury Lawrence
 - Marner
 - Manorfeild
 - Woolmore
 - Cyril Jackson
 - Cayley

Selection Criteria

- 3.6 Families are selected by schools based on free school meals eligibility. The schools send EECF (East End Community Foundation) a list, which is checked against their postcode to identify the landlord.

Internet installation

- 3.7 The internet is installed through the broadband company. Currently Community Fibre is the key broadband provider. They receive a list from the project team and contact the families directly to arrange connection dates. The Connecting Communities Partnership has established a strong working relationship with cable broadband providers Community Fibre and Hyperoptic. Community Fibre has provided a number of free 12-month connections, which has been very helpful over the last 18 months of the programme. The providers also offer free connections to larger landlords including housing associations that the Connecting Communities Partnership has also been

able to take advantage of. In cases where cable broadband is not available, the Partnership has been trialling free 12-month hotspot connections offered by BT through an arrangement with the Borough.

Training Delivery

3.8 Training to the families is delivered through schools. Each school allocates a member of staff to deliver the training to families. We then train these people and provide them with resources. Some schools do this online and some face to face depending on circumstances.

Monitoring

3.9 Families are monitored via surveys they complete on date of collection of their device and then 6 months later. This is an impact survey to understand that having been connected and having a device has helped the family.

School involvement

3.10 The schools are involved at the outset and are the conduit between the families and the partnership. They communicate with the families, provide the family training and encourage families to let us know how having the device has helped their families. Schools provide achievement data on the pupils whose families are part of the project. All family updates are through the schools. The schools also provide some of the funding.

Partnership Board

3.11 The partnership board which includes representatives from EECF, LBTH, the Letta Trust and Poplar Harca meets fortnightly. Every member of the Partnership provides a specialist service and has a role to play. EECF for example, is a grant giver and philanthropy co-ordinator so it is sourcing funding opportunities and general programme co-ordination.

Connection costs

3.12 To meet the objectives outlined above the project need to raise approximately £1,000 per household to cover devices, connections and training costs.

Evaluation of Benefits To-Date

3.13 Phase 1 of the project was evaluated by researchers at the Institute for Global Prosperity at UCL in collaboration with two citizen social scientists. They found the following areas of beneficial impact:

- d. The provision of the Chromebook and related IT training significantly improved children's ability to carry out with their schoolwork and engage with other learning activities and their teachers during lockdown and beyond. It also improved children's digital skills and confidence to use the Internet.
- e. Bygrove and Stebon Primary Schools analysed their progress data for children whose families were part of the project. Their progress is much greater than the other children at both schools (Reading +27%, Writing +31%, Maths +11%)

- f. Engagement in online learning during Lockdown - Full engagement in online learning, i.e. logging in to every activity every day and completing every piece of learning, was 80% across all year groups from Nursery to Y6 in both schools. In Y5 and Y6 this rose to 95% plus. In Y1 it was 86%. Over 90% of pupils in all year groups engaged in 50% or more of their learning.
- g. Parents have benefitted by being able to search for jobs and online opportunities, as well as to work from home.
- h. Some families in the households participating in the pilot were able to engage with physical activities through online video streaming sessions, especially those in high-risk groups. Parents reported feeling less anxious as they were able to stay connected and carry out essential tasks online (e.g. pay bills, contact the GP, do online banking).
- i. Having free broadband Internet, has allowed participants to save the money that they would have spent on a private broadband service to use on other household essentials.

Budget

Supporting Education Recovery

3.14 At the time of writing the Covid cases locally were much lower than they had been, but the Omicron variant is likely to change that situation very quickly. When cases do arise, children have the means to continue their learning at home. Children are also able to use their Chromebooks independently in school. This enables teachers to spend time working with others 1-1 or in small groups to help them catch up on learning.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

4.1 We know there are thousands of families who would benefit greatly from this project. With over 240 families already connected we believe we are now in a strong position to scale up the pilot and support our Mayor in achieving his ambition to connect 10,000 homes in Tower Hamlets. We believe that by coming together with the Local Authority's Digital Inclusion strategy group, we could roll the project out faster and further and put Tower Hamlets first in line to become a fully digitally inclusive borough.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 By working with a fundraising partners to gather external donations, we are ensuring best value

5.2 A number of schools have been consulted with and this will be ongoing as the programme rolls out

5.3 There are no environmental implications

- 5.4 Risk Management; there is a risk that the anticipated fundraising will not materialise. However, a number of corporates have already been approached and responded favourably so this risk is thought to be low. There is also a risk that hardware may be misused by the recipients, but again, this is felt to be a low risk
- 5.5 Crime Reduction; through helping to improve educational attainment and thereby life chances it is believed that this programme could contribute to crime reduction
- 5.6 Safeguarding; There are no safeguarding implications as schools are involved in all interactions with children
- 5.7 Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment; Data sharing will only take place with the consent of the appropriate families and only to organisations who need the information for the purpose of delivering the project
- 5.8 Digital Inclusion Strategy; This project contributes to the Council's digital inclusion strategy by ensuring that children and families who would not otherwise be able to afford a good level of digital access have both hardware and an internet connection, along with appropriate training in how to use them.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

This report is seeking approval for £50K of funding from Mayor's Priority reserve. If approved this will be match funded by the East End Community Foundation, the combined funding will allow support to approximately 100 households preventing disadvantaged families from digital exclusion.

The pandemic has emphasised the importance of online learning and the necessity for young people to connect remotely for their learning, development and social interaction. This funding will help to ensure that disadvantaged families have on-line access and the same opportunities as their peers. The scheme is following a model that has already been identified as an example of best practice and has received the Mayors support.

By having it administered as a grant, it will comply with the established controls, checks and reporting requirements of the Grants Working Party.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 The grants sub-committee has the authority to approve the grant described in this report.
- 7.2 The grant approval should be made in compliance with the requirements of the Mayor's Priority Reserve.

- 7.3 The grant monitoring will be supported by appropriate agreement terms and ensure the funds are used in accordance with the purposes stated in the grant application and the conditions highlighted in this report. This will assist the Council achieving its statutory Best Value obligation.
- 7.4 There are legal equality issues arising from this report. However, the grant monitoring process will assess any equalities issues that may arise and ensure that these are addressed appropriately.
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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

- **None**

Officer contact details for documents:

N/A