

| | |
|--|---|
| Cabinet 4 March 2015 |  TOWER HAMLETS |
| Report of: Chris Holme, Acting Corporate Director - Resources | Classification: Unrestricted |
| Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan | |

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Lead Member | Cllr Aminur Khan, Corporate Director for Strategy, Policy and Performance |
| Originating Officer(s) | Ellie Kuper Thomas, Strategy, Policy and Performance Officer, Law Probity and Governance / Louise Russell, Service Head, Corporate Strategy and Equality |
| Wards affected | All wards |
| Community Plan Theme | One Tower Hamlets |
| Key Decision? | Yes |

Executive Summary:

- 1.1. This paper contains the Draft Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan.
- 1.2. Both the Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission and the Council's Strategic Plan highlighted the need to make Tower Hamlets an "online borough".
- 1.3. In addition, the push for digital is also emerging from central Government, who's *Digital by Default Agenda* was launched in 2012. This agenda works to both incentivise citizens to go online by moving more information and services online and by obliging citizens to go online by making some services digital only. Of particular importance for Tower Hamlets residents are the new DWP Universal Job Match requirements which require residents in receipt of JSA to apply for jobs on line and the introduction of the Universal Credit, which can only be applied for online. Tower Hamlets has just been chosen to be in tranche one of the national roll-out, which is scheduled for March 2015.
- 1.4. Finally, one of the emerging themes from the Council's future savings planning is *Resident-centred Service Re-design*, which includes the delivery of more online services.
- 1.5. Digital Inclusion can be viewed as an individual's effective and sustainable engagement with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in ways that allow full participation in society in terms of economic, social, cultural, civic and personal well-being. Being digitally included is fast becoming an essential life skill and helping our residents to become digitally included is now a priority for the Council and partners.

1.6. This strategy and action plan respond to this challenge.

Recommendations:

The Mayor in Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Agree the Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan (Appendix 1).
2. Note the partnership approach and consultation activity, outlined in section 3, which has helped develop the Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan (Appendix 1);

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 This paper fulfils the commitment made by Cabinet in April 2014 in the “Response to the Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission” report and in the Council’s Strategic Plan to create and implement a Digital Inclusion Strategy.
- 1.2 Supporting our residents to be digitally included is becoming increasingly important due to Central Government’s *Digital by Default Agenda*; the range of financial, educational, employment and health benefits of being online and the growing preference of service providers to move more transactions online.
- 1.3 Demand for digital inclusion support is increasing and without a co-ordinated partnership strategy there is a risk that residents will be excluded from the benefits of digital inclusion, and may possibly risk losing access to some benefits and services.

2. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 The Mayor in Cabinet may choose not to agree the strategy. This course of action is not recommended as the need for a more co-ordinated and targeted partnership approach to tackling digital exclusion has been identified, particularly as demand for digital inclusion support services is increasing in response to the Government’s digital by default agenda and the evidenced benefits digital inclusion can provide.
- 2.2 The Mayor in Cabinet may choose to amend the strategy prior to approval. Should he wish to do so, any amendments should reflect local needs. The resource and equality implications of any changes will also need to be considered.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1. Why we need a partnership approach to tackling Digital Exclusion

Being digitally included is fast becoming an essential life skill and helping our residents to become digitally included is now a priority for the Council and partners.

- I. The social and economic benefits of digital inclusion include:
 - Employment Benefits
 - Financial inclusion
 - Education and learning
 - Overcoming social isolation and improving wellbeing
- II. Central Government's *Digital by Default Agenda* is moving more information and services online.
- III. Efficiencies for the Council, other public sector organisations and wider partners of offering services online.

3.2. The 3 elements of Inclusion

Access: To a computer, laptop, tablet or mobile and the internet

Skills: The ability to fully use the internet to access a range of services, requires a wide array of skills.

Motivation: A lack of understanding of the relevance and benefits of going online is one of the most frequent reasons given by residents who aren't online.

3.3. Who is excluded?

Older residents: Only 55% of those aged 50 and over have access.

Disabled Residents: Only 60% of disabled residents have access

Social Rented Tenants: Are less likely to have internet access (82%) compared with private renters (93%) or owner occupiers (84%).

Low Income households: Internet access was lowest (76%) for Tower Hamlets households from social class DE (which typically includes low income households) and highest for those in social grades AB and C1 (94% and 96%).

3.4. How we will overcome this exclusion:

- I. Develop the Tower Hamlets Get Online Campaign to promote the benefits of digital inclusion and the support available.
- II. Work in partnership with a range of organisations to improve co-ordination, mapping and learning between organisations
- III. Resident focused and flexible with different approaches for different excluded groups
- IV. Embed digital activities and learning across services and programmes
- V. Develop locality based solutions to address gaps in access and skills training

4. DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY

Tackling Digital Exclusion is a key priority for both the Council and other partners across the borough, many of whom already undertake work to promote digital inclusion.

The strategy and action plan have been developed and will be delivered in partnership with these organisations.

The following provides the background on the development of the strategy.

4.1. Digital Inclusion Workshop:

On the 26th of June 2014, the Corporate Strategy and Equality Service held a Workshop on Digital Inclusion. Over 40 participants attended, from a range of services and partners including:

Housing and Registered Providers
Third Sector Learning Providers and Advice Agencies
Idea Stores
Economic Development
ICT and Agilisys
Benefits
JCP
Public Health
Health Services
Communications
Children's Centres and Parental Support

The purpose of the workshop was:

- I. To understand the nature of digital exclusion in the borough
- II. To understand what work is already going on in the borough to increase digital inclusion
- III. To discuss ideas and options to increase digital inclusion in the borough

IV. To agree shared priorities for digital inclusion

All the feedback and suggested actions have been fed into the development of this strategy.

4.2. Digital Inclusion Partnership Group:

In order to refine the actions from the Workshop and receive agreement from the range of delivery partners, a small Digital Inclusion Partnership Group has been established, with representation from the key services and partner organisations who will be involved in delivering the strategy.

This includes representatives from:

Housing and Registered Providers
Third Sector Learning Providers and Advice Agencies
Idea Stores
JCP
Economic Development
ICT and Agyllisis
Public Health and Adult Health
Communications
Children's Centres and Parental Support
Customer Access

This has held two meetings so far, with a third meeting planned for January to hear feedback from CMT and MAB.

The current action plan has been agreed by this group.

4.3. Consultation:

In addition to the Workshop and Partnership Group, additional consultation has been held with:

Local Voices, disability forum
Third Sector Advisory Group
Tower Hamlets Housing Federation
Interfaith Forum

The responses from these consultations have been embedded into the evidence base for the strategy and the action plan.

And has been planned for:

Tower Hamlets Health and Wellbeing Board
Head Teacher's Consultative
Digital Entrepreneurs
Linkage Plus

5. DRAFT ACTION PLAN:

5.1. Key principles

- I. Work in partnership with a range of organisations to bring co-ordination, mapping and learning between organisations
- II. Resident focused and flexible with different approaches for different excluded groups
- III. Embed digital activities and learning across services and programmes
- IV. Develop locality based solutions to address gaps in access and skills training
- V. The strategy should be linked to Partners' Digital Strategies, including the Council's, to ensure service design and ICT provision improve digital inclusion.
- VI. All elements should be underpinned by a shared Communications Strategy.

5.2. Full Report

The Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan is attached as Appendix 1

5.3. Monitoring

The Digital Inclusion Partnership Group has agreed to meet at six monthly intervals to monitor the progress towards the action plan and organise any partnership activities, including communication campaigns and events.

6. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 6.1. This report asks Cabinet to agree the Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. There are no financial implications arising from the recommendation within this report.
- 6.2. The action plan included within pages 25-32 of the Digital Inclusion strategy provides an analysis of the key activities, the majority of which are expected to be funded through existing resources. Any requirements for additional funding will need to be approved through the Council's financial procedures.

7. LEGAL COMMENTS

- 7.1. It is proposed that the Council support improved infrastructure, such as Wi-Fi and computers, and that it provide support for job seekers and small

businesses. The Council has power under section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 to do anything that individuals generally may do, subject to specified restrictions and limitations imposed by other statutes. As an individual may provide the sort of support which is planned, this is something that the Council may also do provided there is a good reason for doing so. The relevant justification is set out in the report and may be supportive of the Council's strategic objectives, as set out in the Community Plan and other strategies such as the employment and enterprise strategies.

- 7.2. The action plan proposes a range of adult learning measures. The Council has power pursuant to sections 15A and 15B of the Education Act 1996 to secure the provision for Tower Hamlets of full-time or part-time education suitable to persons who are over compulsory school age who have not attained the age of 19 (16 – 18 provision) and also to persons who have attained the age of 19. This may include provision for persons from other areas. The Council may do anything that it considers necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with, the provision of such further education.
- 7.3. When considering its approach to digital inclusion, the Council must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful conduct under the Equality Act 2010, the need to advance equality of opportunity and the need to foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristics and those who do not (the public sector duty). An equality analysis is required which is proportionate to the exercise of any relevant function.
- 7.4. The “protected characteristics” under the Equality Act 2010 are as follows: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. The report sets out an intention to prepare specialised support for older residents.
- 7.5. The Council is not generally permitted to discriminate in favour of or against a protected group in the delivery of services. However, section 158 of the Equality Act 2010 permits the Council to take positive action where it reasonably considers that: (1) persons who share a protected characteristic suffer a disadvantage connected to the characteristic; (2) persons who share a protected characteristic have needs that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it; or (3) participation in an activity by persons who share a protected characteristic is disproportionately low. Positive action may be taken to overcome such difficulties, provided it is not prohibited by a statute other than the Equality Act 2010. There appears to be some justification in the report for the approach, but this will need to be further supported by the equality analysis.
- 7.6. The communications proposed in the action plan should be supportable either by the general power of competence outlined in 7.1 above, or by the Council's incidental power. By virtue of section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council has power to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of any of its functions. This may

involve expenditure, borrowing or lending of money or the acquisition or disposal of any property or rights. In carrying out any communications, the Council should comply with the restrictions on political advertising and the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, unless there are valid reasons for not doing so.

8. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1. An Equalities Impact Analysis Screening has been undertaken and appended to the report (Appendix 2). This indicates that no target group will be adversely affected and most groups will be positively impacted. The action plan includes activities to help overcome any digital exclusion experienced by all residents, with particular targeted activities for those residents who may not be able to access mainstream activities.

9. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

- 9.1. There are no major implications for a green environment, however an impact of more residents being digitally included may be to reduce the need for printed material and help move towards a paperless Council.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. Supporting more residents to be digitally included will reduce one of the key risks around the implementation of Universal Credit.

11. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. Including e-safety training in digital learning provision will reduce the risk of residents becoming victims of online crime.

12. EFFICIENCY STATEMENT

- 12.1. The planned activity in the strategy is due to be funded through existing budgets. In addition improving co-ordination and co-operation between different partners will improve provision. Finally, digital services can be a more efficient way of providing services, supporting digital inclusion will increase the take up of more efficient online services.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan
- Appendix 2: Equality Impact Assessment Screening

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

- NONE

Officer contact details for documents:

- N/A