


<p>Cabinet</p> <p>24 November 2021</p>	 <p>TOWER HAMLETS</p>
<p>Report of: Sharon Godman, Director Strategy, Improvement and Transformation</p>	<p>Classification: Unrestricted</p>
<p>Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan</p>	

Lead Member	Cllr Mufeedah Bustin, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion
Originating Officer(s)	Clare Matthews, Strategy and Policy Manager (Corporate)
Wards affected	All
Key Decision?	No
Reason for Key Decision	N/A
Forward Plan Notice Published	[Insert date notice was published – see forthcoming decisions webpage]
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	All themes of the Tower Hamlets Plan

Executive Summary

The Council working with its partners is committed to tackling inequality. There are a range of initiatives taking place across Tower Hamlets which aim to improve digital inclusion. Many of these began as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a need to understand and better coordinate these activities to strengthen this work, avoid duplication and identify specific gaps in provision.

Cllr. Mufeedah Bustin chaired a Steering Group made up of partners and council officers to explore these issues. The Group identified the need to undertake action to remove barriers to digital inclusion for Tower Hamlets residents. The resulting strategy and action plan, if delivered in partnership, will achieve the central vision - residents of Tower Hamlets have the tools and skills they need to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from a digital world.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Agree the partnership Digital Inclusion Strategy and priorities within the Digital Inclusion Action Plan.
2. Note the comments of finance regarding partnership funding and the growth bid.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in many ways, including impacting those already digitally excluded. The Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan identifies key actions that should be undertaken in Tower Hamlets to improve overall digital inclusion and enable all our residents to access the benefits of digital technology and the internet. Improving digital inclusion is a key theme emanating from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Commission, the Poverty Review and our Covid-19 impact assessments.

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Cabinet could choose to not approve the Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. This would mean a continuation of the status quo. While some digital inclusion interventions may continue, this would leave many of those identified as digitally excluded without support. Existing inequalities would be further compounded by the increasing trend to move services online (across both the public and private sector) and those without the access and skills to get online would be further excluded. Interventions would continue to go un-coordinated, resulting in missed opportunities for residents and inefficiencies.

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

Background

- 3.1 The internet and digital technology have transformed how we work, socialise, and consume, as well as how we learn, entertain and access information and services. Digital inclusion is important for social and economic equality, and to ensure equal access to the many benefits the internet offers, such as increased earnings, higher employability, cheaper shopping and utilities, improved communication, and time saved through online services. It is also becoming an increasingly important way to access healthcare and education.
- 3.2 However, access and use are unequal, even across Tower Hamlets, and many people remain digitally *excluded* - meaning some people lack internet access and/or have low levels of digital literacy. Those who are excluded can be limited or unable to participate fully in society and are at a disadvantage.
- 3.3 With the inextricable channel shift towards digital technology, we have a duty to both encourage our residents to move online, as well as support those that are left behind. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns has rapidly accelerated this shift. However, this has also deepened the divide between those digitally included and those digitally excluded.
- 3.4 As a council, we recognise our responsibility to ensure residents can continue to transact with us as we move more of our services online: a

responsibility which is shared with our partners as they do the same. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of children and young people having access to digital connectivity for education purposes. The [every child online campaign](#) continues to successfully support several schools and young people in the borough, with the council having co-ordinated the supply of 11,245 devices by 10 November 2021.

- 3.5 However, there is clearly an-going need to ensure children and young people have access to the internet to support their education, training and employment aspirations.
- 3.6 We must ensure the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone. Addressing these issues needs to be a key part of our pandemic recovery plans and alongside the Tower Hamlets Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequality Commission recommendations and the Poverty Review findings, provides an overarching aim of reducing inequality.
- 3.7 In delivering Digital Inclusion in Tower Hamlets, we will ensure the links are made with existing work, including the digital exclusion actions in the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Inequality Commission action plan, the digital poverty recommendations in the Poverty Review and work undertaken in the health sector to improve digital access. The common themes that run through all of these areas are the need to improve opportunity of access and the ability to take up services.

Research

- 3.8 In May 2021, a steering group of partners from Health, Housing, VCS, Business, Education and the council, chaired by Cllr Mufedah Bustin, came together to understand digital inclusion in Tower Hamlets.
- 3.9 Tower Hamlets is home to the Government Digital Service and Tech City which provide significant opportunities to work in partnership to address digital exclusion. If we harness the potential from the wide range of initiatives taking place in various geographies and with a variety of user groups across the borough, we could make a significant impact on increasing digital inclusion in Tower Hamlets.
- 3.10 To better understand this work and ensure it is coordinated, improving delivery across partners and collectively addressing any gaps in provision that might be identified, they undertook a mapping exercise. This resulted in the identification of more than 20 interventions targeting different audiences and differing issues, supporting residents to become more digitally included.
- 3.11 Case studies from the existing interventions were highlighted at the steering group. All the projects approached were happy to present to the group and share their experiences, understanding of the need in Tower Hamlets, and the issues they had encountered. This was key in allowing the steering group members to understand the challenges and question what does and does not work.

- 3.12 The group also commissioned the Toynbee Hall Community Researchers to hold conversations about Digital Inclusion (and exclusion) as part of their research for the Tower Hamlets Poverty Review¹. They found that digital exclusion is more than a lack of digital skills “[a]long with lack of digital literacy, poor internet access, limited devices, and the fact that many low-income households used mobile data or pay as you go internet limited the time, they could be online.”
- 3.13 During the development of this work, the steering group received feedback from 39 different organisations including officers from the council. Additionally, the council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee were given early sight of the findings and developing actions and their comments and suggestions have been incorporated into the resulting strategy and action plan.
- 3.14 Alongside these qualitative experiences, the steering group reviewed findings from national and regional research into digital use and digital barriers, as well as results from the Tower Hamlets Residents’ Surveys.

Findings

- 3.15 The research undertaken by the steering group has confirmed there are four main barriers to digital inclusion:
- **Access** - the ability to go online and connect to the internet, including having appropriate device and internet connectivity
 - **Skills** - to be able to use the internet and find what the individual needs
 - **Motivation** - knowing the reasons why using the internet is a good thing
 - **Trust** - the risk of crime, or not knowing where to start to go online
- 3.16 Exploring how Tower Hamlets residents are affected by these issues, the steering group found certain groups of people are impacted disproportionately by these barriers.
- 3.17 Overall, access to the internet has increased for residents of Tower Hamlets, from 9% of resident in 1998, to 88% of residents in 2013, rising again to 95% of residents by early 2021. However, the Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey 2019² found only 57% of Tower Hamlets’ residents aged 60+ have access to the internet compared to 99% of residents aged 18-34 years old. The same survey found only 69% of disabled residents have access to the internet compared to 95% of non-disabled residents.
- 3.18 A 2020 survey by Tower Hamlets Healthwatch about residents accessing health services found that 15% of those surveyed either had no access to internet-accessing devices or did not know how to use the internet³. The same survey found that compared to other respondents, the digitally excluded were more likely to be residents from Black, Asian and Minority

¹ [Tower Hamlets Council aims to create a fairer, stronger borough after publishing its Poverty Review](#)

² https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/2019_AR_S_Briefing_Paper.pdf

³ <https://cdn.whitebearplatform.com/hwtower/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/21172311/WEL-Digital-inclusion.pdf>

Ethnic Communities, aged over 65, and/or disabled or in poor health. Reinforcing these findings, the groups of people most likely to say they would use NHS services online were in-work, middle-class and/or under 50.

- 3.19 The steering group has also recognised the need to continue identifying and monitoring further metrics to measure digital inclusion. This was established when reviewing the challenges of rapidly evolving digital technology and the changing context within which this work will need to take place. This point is illustrated by the recent example below from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- 3.20 While preparing for the 2021 Census, the ONS looked at each area of the country to identify households that would be unlikely to complete the census online and therefore would require the paper form. They used demographic data to provide an indication of the likelihood to engage with online tools, then determined which households would be digital first and which would be paper first. In Tower Hamlets, 4% of households were identified as needing paper first, higher than other inner London boroughs. However, when the census took place, 72% of paper first respondents ignored the paper survey they had been sent and completed the survey online after all.
- 3.21 Tower Hamlets had the highest online response rate to the 2021 Census in the country at 97.3%.
- 3.22 Our findings show that between 2% - 5% of residents are digitally excluded, however within that certain groups are disproportionately impacted.

Strategy and Actions

- 3.23 The overall vision of the Digital Inclusion Strategy is:
Residents of Tower Hamlets have the tools and skills they need to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from a digital world
- 3.24 The strategy identifies the following outcomes to achieve this vision:
- Outcome 1 - Every resident is able to access a device and affordable high-quality broadband at home and in the community for education, seek employment and access public services
 - Outcome 2 - Every resident has the skill or access to the training, to enable them to get online and complete online transactions
 - Outcome 3 - Every resident has access to the support needed to enable them to understand the benefits of digital and to do so safely
- 3.25 Overall, 19 actions have been identified by the steering group to deliver the outcomes and vision for the borough. The following 10 actions have been prioritised as the key areas of focus:
- Agree funding from partners across the borough to support the creation of a fixed-term partnership based Digital Inclusion Ambassador role and appoint to this role
 - Identify and monitor further metrics to measure the ongoing impact of the digital inclusion work and meet the needs of our residents

- Develop, promote and implement best practice on loaning and gifting devices that can be used by any organisation in the borough, include disclaimer template/example for gifted devices, different guidance for loaning (including maintenance), safeguarding and so on
- Map and promote free wi-fi provision and access to free internet-connected devices across the borough
- Develop policy / process for distribution of new and repurposed devices across the borough, including creating a list of approved providers / pathways to repurpose / recycle equipment (to be shared and promoted across the borough)
- Undertake coordination role to drive forward the social value elements of the fibre broadband wayleave, working with those providers who are undertaking the rollout in Tower Hamlets and negotiate and promote range of 'affordable' connections from different providers to TH residents
- Identify branding or similar, to promote mapping of free access and other borough digital resources and activity and use 'Get online week' (each October) to expand promotion, creating an ongoing digital campaign to promote positive benefits of going online
- Create and share best practice guidance for digital training including: digital skills as part of other training (e.g. ESOL, benefits advice) – include digital element in all adult skills training. Alongside a directory of skills training provision, including free to access online learning e.g. Good Things Foundation, Lloyds digital and financial skills, and work together to market and promote
- Partner organisations to provide digital skills training for staff that do not use ICT as part of their work and those with limited digital skills
- Maximise impact of digital buddying (buddies, champions, ambassadors) programmes mapping provision, giving access to community spaces/hubs and linking resources (link with volunteering schemes e.g. Volunteers Centre, ELBA corporate volunteers and others)

3.26 Our partners are supportive of the strategy and the approach outlined above and will work in partnership with council to address the issues. We have adopted a partnership approach via the Digital Inclusion Steering Group who will have oversight of the actions and will be responsive to any changes in need.

3.27 Most of the activity is already taking place so can be refined and realigned to the outcomes of the strategy from existing budgets. The action to create a fixed-term partnership-based Digital Inclusion Ambassador role will be pivotal in delivering the action plan and ensuring that momentum is maintained.

3.28 The role will cost approximately £215k for salary and on costs, over three years. It is proposed that the funding will be shared with partners contributing approximately £110k, and the rest from the council. Recruitment costs will be met from existing budgets. Partners are positive about the development of this role and conversations regarding financial contribution remain ongoing with some indicative support offered subject to the development of further detail.

Next Steps

- 3.29 Once the final documents have been agreed, the actions can commence, including development and recruitment to the pivotal Digital Ambassador role. The partnership Digital Inclusion Steering Group will have a key role in overseeing the delivery of the strategy.

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The proposals to strengthen digital inclusion across the borough will improve social equality. The steering group has identified people with disabilities, older people aged 60 and over, people from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background, children and young people and those with lower incomes have been excluded disproportionately, particularly during the pandemic. Other recent workstreams such as the Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Inequality Commission, Poverty Review and our Covid-19 Impact Assessment reports have also provided the evidence base of impacts on these groups. The Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan has been developed to address these needs and improve digital inclusion across the borough. This will include targeted interventions for these groups and specific consideration in the best practice guidance that will be developed and shared with service providers across the borough.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
- Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.
 - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 6.1 The post will be a FTC for 3 years on Grade L. This will cost approximately £215k for salary and oncosts and includes any anticipated cost of living pay increases. The recruitment costs will be met from existing budgets.
- 6.2 The intention is to fund £110k from partners contributions and approximately £105k from Council budgets. Partner contributions are still to be agreed and there is currently no agreed council budget to fund the costs, A Growth Bid for

£70k funding in 2022-23 (100% of the salary costs) and £35k funding in 2023-24 (50% of the salary costs) will be submitted for consideration alongside other growth bids as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy report to Cabinet in January

- 6.3 There will be redundancy costs to consider as this is a 3 year post. It is difficult to estimate these costs as it depends on the length of service and age of the post holder. The minimum we could expect to pay for redundancy and severance is £2k and the maximum would be £43k. There will be £10k included in the Growth Bid for 2024-25.
- 6.4 In relation to the action plan, the majority of the activities are already taking place and any spend will be funded from existing budgets which has been agreed with the officers who sit on the Steering Group.

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 The Council has the legal power to undertake the activities detailed in this report.
- 7.2 Some of the aspects of the action plan (appendix 2) require further council expenditure. Such expenditure will occur in line with the council's procurement procedures and require separate approval before proceeding in line with the value and the ascribed process under the constitution.

Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- NONE

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Tower Hamlets Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Appendix 2 - Tower Hamlets Digital Inclusion Action Plan

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

- NONE

Officer contact details for documents:

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