

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Report to: Policy and Oversight Board

Date: 12 September 2022

Subject: Developing our Digital Inclusion Strategy

Report author: Nicola Ellis, Assistant Director Resident Services, Veronica Barella, Chief Digital Officer

Responsible Director: Bram Kainth Strategic Director Environment
Jon Pickstone Strategic Director Economy

Cabinet Member: Cllr Rowan Ree, Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform

Summary

This report provides information on the work to date to develop the Hammersmith and Fulham Digital Inclusion Strategy and gives information on ongoing digital inclusion activities. This responds to a request for an update report to be produced following the Board's most recent meeting

Recommendation

That Policy and Oversight Board note the content of this report and provide any comments to help shape and inform the development of the Digital Inclusion Strategy.

Wards Affected: All

H&F Priorities

Our Priorities	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Priorities
Building shared prosperity	<i>Digital exclusion is linked to deprivation. Improving digital inclusion across the Borough will enable us to support our residents to increase opportunity to prosper.</i>
Creating a compassionate council	<i>Understanding difficulties and barriers our residents face in dealing with our services and gaining wider digital access where residents are experiencing their most difficult circumstances or have complex needs</i>
Doing things with local residents, not to them	<i>Learning from our residents' feedback enables us to ensure that we are delivering services that meet their</i>

	<i>needs. This strategy is being co-produced with our Digital Accessibility Group including resident representation.</i>
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	<i>Ensuring that the strategy and actions that result deliver value for money and positive outcomes for our residents and community. Providing residents with more efficient digital access to services frees up council resources for other priorities.</i>
Taking pride in H&F	<i>Promoting and supporting a Borough that is digitally inclusive.</i>
Rising to the challenge of the climate and ecological emergency	<i>Digital engagement supports the climate change agenda reducing reliance on paper and unnecessary journeys to complete transactions in person.</i>

Background

1. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the reliance for people to get online for work and leisure, but it also accelerated and deepened the divide between digital have and have nots. During the closure of businesses and schools, online alternatives were offered but were unfortunately in many cases out of the reach of those individuals and families that lacked the ability to get online.
2. The London digital inclusion strategy paper defines digital exclusion for the purposes of the strategy as *“people who are unable to get online or who lack the basic literacy skills to make best use of the opportunities of being online. This includes regularity and range of use of the internet.”*¹
3. The Mayor of London and London Recovery programme have a vision for “Every Londoner to have access to good connectivity, basic digital skills and the device or support they need to be online by 2025.”
4. Over the last two years H&F has supported local residents and businesses in many different ways, including providing laptops and devices for school children through the Tech4Kids crowdfunding initiative. H&F supported this directly by approving up to £300,000 of spending on laptops and support to be offset by charitable donations of money and devices, and Community Infrastructure Levy funding.
5. The issues faced by our residents during the Pandemic, and now in the cost of living crisis, reinforce the importance of identifying the problems surrounding

¹ A Digital Inclusion Strategy for London,
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/a_digital_inclusion_strategy_for_london.pdf

digital inclusion and ways to break down the barriers to online access. The Digital Inclusion Strategy gives the council an opportunity to set out what we have learnt and the steps we are taking to mount an orchestrated response across all our services. As an authority we will not be able to meet all the untapped demand, so harnessing the support of our partners, the voluntary sector, third parties, local businesses, and the community itself will be an essential element of the Strategy.

H&F's proposed Digital Inclusion Vision and Mission statement

6. By 2025, Hammersmith & Fulham shall be a more digitally inclusive borough; a place where residents have the digital skills, access, and support necessary to help fulfil aspirations.

Proposed objectives of the H&F Digital inclusion strategy

7. The business collaboration has resulted in an agreed set of objectives upon which the H&F Digital inclusion strategy should be built:
 - Digital public services need to be accessible, reliable, and designed around the needs of the user
 - Staff can effectively understand the digital needs of service users
 - The borough has world-class digital infrastructure necessary for the prosperity of economy and the growth of local employment opportunities
 - All residents have the opportunity to gain the digital skills, knowledge, and access to thrive in education, work or socially in the borough
 - None of our residents are disadvantaged by the lack of digital awareness, skills, or access to equipment
 - Using data in an insightful way to design better interventions and prevent escalation and negative outcomes
 - H&F has created and is helping to orchestrate an ecosystem with our partners and businesses in the borough that continue to improve and deliver digital inclusivity when or wherever is needed

Work on developing the Hammersmith and Fulham Digital Inclusion Strategy to date

8. Since September 2021, we have worked in partnership with Agilisys (a Hammersmith based company that support transformation in the public sector) to begin work on a draft Digital Inclusion Strategy. We have engaged and collaborated with all internal departments through face-to-face interviews, workshops, and investigations to understand the digital inclusion departmental journeys, challenges, priorities and expected outcomes. In addition, Agilisys reached-out to numerous third-party organisations to get their views on our approach to digital inclusion and their potential role in the external ecosystem. We are now working with our Digital Accessibility Group to co-produce the strategy, and aim to complete this work over the next few months.

Actions to date:

Activity	Date	Status
Digital Inclusion maturity assessments circulated	November 2021	Complete
Digital Inclusion Intro & requirements workshop #1	December 2021	Complete
Digital Inclusion Intro & requirements workshop #2	January 2022	Complete
Departmental interviews & engagement	December 21 to April 22	Complete
Departmental playback of requirements captured	February 2022 (As Req'd)	Complete
Evaluation workshop (Dept Leads) – Prioritisation session based on agreed requirements	February 2022	Complete
Draft Digital Inclusion strategy produced	April 2022	Complete
Start Digital Accessibility Group Co-production activities	June 2022	Started
DAG Digital Inclusion Strategy agreed	TBC	Open
Departmental action plans agreed	TBC	Open

Co-production of the Digital Inclusion Strategy

9. A Digital Accessibility Group comprising of 11 residents (of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities) and 11 council officers across five departments was set-up in May 2022. The group meet monthly, with three meetings held so far.
10. One of the key focuses of the group is to shape, influence and co-produce the council's Digital Inclusion Strategy, which will be done in three phases. Work is currently ongoing on the first phase and the aim is to complete this in September. The workplan and timescales for the future phases are to be confirmed with DAG following completion of phase one.

Phase one:

- Identify the Barriers to Digital Inclusion.
- Examine the current provision of Services within the Borough.
- Discover possible solutions to overcome the barriers that exist, and support and expand the current provision where needed.

Phase two:

- Work with council departments and 3rd sector organisations to produce a working plan to implement the changes needed to meet the council's vision of a digitally inclusive borough.
- Create a network of trainers, Digital Champions, devices, and infrastructure needed to support council's vision.
- Create a management system to oversee services and combine resources.

Phase three:

- Engage with all relevant groups/stakeholders.
- Evaluate options and priorities.
- Form final Strategy.

11. The groups work on phase one to date has identified potential barriers that they are considering and evaluating solutions for.

Where are we now

12. There are currently approximately twenty digital inclusion projects mobilised across the council. All projects are aligned to the proposed priorities of the overall strategy in development. We are confident that the work undertaken aligns to external areas of focus and priorities identified at a Pan-London and national level for digital inclusivity.

Devices

13. We aim for our residents to be able to access digital services either through their own devices or by using free-to-use public devices. Schemes are in place to provide laptops, tablets, wi-fi dongles and SIMs to those most in need. In February 2021 Digital Services and Children's Services teamed up with charities United in H&F and ReadyTechGo to kick off a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for devices to help digital disadvantaged children in H&F. With the help of schools, students in need were identified and 700 Chromebooks were purchased to help those struggling (and their families) get online.

Connectivity

14. We continue to improve connectivity in the borough by working in partnership with West London Alliance and other partners to improve the provision of fibre, broadband and 5G technologies.

Data

15. We collect, store, analyse and use data about our residents to improve and target our services. Data is held and controlled securely, and we work collaboratively with our partners to share data to improve service provision and integrate where possible. The council is considering ways to better collect and utilise data, to provide services more efficiently and better understand residents' needs.

Skillsets

16. We aim for our residents to have the appropriate skills to enable them to access services online. We continue to improve our knowledge about the demographic and groups that require additional support or tailored services, and we are putting the appropriate measures in place to accommodate them.

Climate & Ecological engagement and Leadership

17. There is a need, now more than ever, to address the climate emergency that is with us. Fortunately, digital technologies have the potential to reduce CO2 emissions directly and indirectly for example, by reducing the need to travel to access services and engage with service providers.

Developing our digital ecosystem

18. The council will build on its work bringing local charities, businesses and the community together to devise solutions for children without online access through the Tech4Kids programme. We will improve the support network that will help us become a digitally inclusive council and help us deliver on digital needs.

Pan-London and the ecosystem strategy alignment

19. Our Digital Inclusion Strategy will be forward-looking and account for the needs of our residents and businesses with a pan-London perspective. The Greater London Assembly (GLA) strategy provides a pan-London framework and strategy that defines the themes, programmes and expected outcomes that need to be delivered.
20. There are also other areas of work and collaboration that will help us apply a wider lens, such as the work taking place through the London office of technology & innovation (LOTI) and its members.
21. We can create opportunities by building an ecosystem of our stakeholders, partners, businesses, charities, and the voluntary sector that will collaborate to deliver local initiatives that meet the digital needs of our residents and businesses. Instead of concentrating on individual service delivery, adopting an ecosystem mindset moves the focus towards how each party can bring value to others and the borough.
22. The role of the council could then be seen as the ecosystem incubator or orchestrator, connecting the various organisations and creating shared value throughout the borough.

Current Digital Access to Hammersmith and Fulham Services

23. Hammersmith and Fulham Council currently offers access to a number of services through digital channels, and is looking at increasing this further. For the majority of our residents this improves access and increases convenience and efficiency.
24. However, this is not currently the case for all, so unlike some transformation programmes elsewhere, our programmes do not seek to close off other channels such as telephone or face to face. Programmes like the Residents Experience and Access Programme (REAP) and Housing Transformation programme will free up resources in these areas to enable us to focus on residents that are not

digitally enabled. This is why work to develop our digital inclusion strategy are integral parts of these programmes.

25. REAP is a significant programme of digital transformation. It will change the way residents interact with many council Services. It aims to bring more council services online so residents have the option to self-serve from initial contact to fulfilment and remove internal silos by tracking a resident's interaction with different departments and services.
26. In addition, this will ensure those who require an assisted service (who cannot self-serve) will still have access over the phone and face to face. It is important to emphasise that REAP will not just to shift all services online and remove other methods of interaction. The goal is to provide higher quality choices and nudge people into using easier, lower cost methods where these are appropriate.
27. Currently, a resident can access several services online via their 'My Account' - a portal through which residents can report issues, make applications, pay for services, make bookings and track progress on all requests. REAP will include developing an improved and more consistent approach to identity and address verification so that this only needs to be done once.
28. As well as being able to directly access the above services via 'My Account', Residents are also able to:
 1. Report It – Residents or visitors to the borough can use either Love Clean Streets or relevant online forms to report an on-street issue (fly-tip, graffiti, abandoned vehicles, highways, etc.), waste and recycling concerns (missed bins, broken bins, etc.), noise nuisance, trading standards, etc. On average, 3000 reports are made per month.
 2. Library Account allows residents to join their library, renew online as well as a vast array of library services.
 3. Sports and Parks – residents can book a sports pitch / park online and manage their booking.
 4. School Admissions – online school applications for Primary and Secondary schools in the borough.
 5. Planning Application – planning searches, building control search, licensing search, as well as applying for these services.
 6. Visitors Parking Permit sessions (via Ringo).
 7. Registrars – book online to register a birth, death, marriage.
 8. Pay for certain services
29. There are also over 100 other online forms, which allow residents to access a range of services, e.g. licensing, anti-social behaviour, pest control, etc. but all of these services are also available through other means with assisted service from officers.
30. While there are opportunities for residents to engage with us digitally across our organisation, we are not yet sufficiently capturing data to measure this activity in a centrally coordinated manner across all services. One of the aims in the digital inclusion strategy should be to ensure we understand and measure progress.

31. As part of REAP we are looking at the breakdown of contacts across different channels and also beginning to collect data on why our residents that contact us by phone are not able to access our services digitally. This data will be valuable in informing our strategy going forward and the barriers that residents face.

Digital Inclusion and the Cost of Living Crisis

32. As the pandemic highlighted the digital divide and had a more significant impact on those which are digitally excluded, the current cost of living crisis has the potential to further increase that divide. In developing the council's response to this crisis, it is important that the council considers this in the actions it takes. As this response develops, this is a key consideration by the Cost of Living Board to ensure that we are supporting those that are digitally excluded throughout this crisis.