London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 07/10/2024

Subject: Digital Inclusion Strategy

Report of: Councillor Rowan Ree, Cabinet Member for Finance and Reform

Report author: Cinar Altun, Strategy Lead (Digital Services)

Responsible director: Sukvinder Kalsi, Executive Director,
                             Finance & Corporate Services

SUMMARY

The Digital Inclusion Strategy aims to address barriers arising from digital advancements impacting residents' lives and service delivery. It has been co-produced with residents, the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), and stakeholders to ensure that the needs of residents and the various service areas are effectively captured. The strategy aims to drive a coordinated approach to the existing programs and activities across the council and VCS in this area.

The Digital Inclusion Strategy sets out priority areas of activity, with key actions and objectives contained within the strategy. It is an enabling strategy, which unlocks transformative change both within the council and across the borough. The aim of the strategy is to address the causes of exclusion resulting from lack of access to digital connectivity, devices and skills.

RECOMMENDATION

1. To approve the contents and publication of Hammersmith & Fulham's Digital Inclusion Strategy, attached as **Appendix 1.**

2. To approve the resourcing request for a Programme manager to coordinate the delivery of the strategy, including the data to inform the delivery of the strategy.

Wards Affected: All

Our Values	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Values
Building shared prosperity	The Digital Inclusion Strategy recognises the significant impact that digital exclusion has on residents and aims to address causes of exclusion resulting from lack of access to digital connectivity, devices and skills. Through digital inclusion, there is an opportunity for the Council to help residents improve their life chances leading to fulfilled lives.
Creating a compassionate council	In its focus on inclusion, the strategy recognises the importance of creating a digital eco-system in which all services are digitally accessible by default and residents are supported to fulfil their aspirations individually and collectively. By being a digitally inclusive borough, the Council is supporting those in need to access and make use of the technologies that can enrich lives and lead to greater independence.
Doing things with local residents, not to them	Through co-production with the Digital Accessibility Group (DAG) we have ensured that the strategy is a product of the steer we have received from residents in the borough. Also working with DAG and VCS groups increases representation and involvement of hard-to-reach community groups in co-production.
Being ruthlessly financially efficient	The strategy recognises the need for digital inclusion to be delivered jointly and in partnership with stakeholders within and outside the borough. Increased adoption in digital services across by the council and its partners enables the Council to deliver value for money services in other areas too.

Our Values	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Values
Taking pride in H&F	Adopting an ecosystem approach to digital inclusion allows participants in the borough to feel invested in their community. Input from stakeholders within the council and residents reinforces the importance of digital inclusion in our continued pride in H&F services and vision.
Rising to the challenge of the climate and ecological emergency	Through the strategy there is a positive impact on the borough's footprint through the re-use and re-purposing of devices and participation in London wide activities which support our commitment to net zero.

Financial Impact

The funding options are given in the paper. Option 1, 'No Action', could achieve limited delivery and would require no additional funding with work covered from within existing staffing budgets.

Option 2, 'limited resource,' would require funding of £0.124m per annum, costing up to £0.644m over five years.

Options 2 would require growth to be approved as part of the 2025-26 MTFS and budget setting process. Should any external funding options such as grants become available these could reduce the cost to the general fund.

Implications by Alex Pygram, Head of Finance, Finance and Corporate Services, 15 July 2024
Verified by James Newman, AD Finance, 15 July 2024

Legal Implications

The strategy proposed in this report will better enable H&F to carry out a range of its functions. It is both incidental to these functions and conducive to their exercise as it will enable individuals to engage with the Council more effectively.

John Sharland, Senior solicitor (Contracts and procurement)- 17 June 2024

DETAILED ANALYSIS

1. The digital inclusion strategy was coproduced with residents from June 2022 – October 2023 through the Digital Accessibility Group (DAG). A digital inclusion open day was held for residents in September 2022, and input was also obtained from the voluntary and community sector (VCS), with organisations attending workshops with officers in both January and November 2023. The DAG reviewed and gave feedback on the final version of the strategy before it was finalised.

2. The coproduced digital inclusion strategy will be the foundation for the council to:

   - Gain a strong understanding of the scale of digital exclusion in the borough and use this evidence to inform council decision making about future resources not just for digital inclusion but other service areas such as adult learning, social care, housing services and children's services.
   - Benefit, in the long term, from residents that are digitally enabled, meaning that they are less reliant on support from the council.
   - Deliver a bespoke digital inclusion programme for the borough and embed digital inclusion principles and activities across council services.
   - Establish new partnerships and strengthen existing partnerships with public, private and third sector organisations seeking to improve the level of digital inclusion in the borough, with the potential to apply for and obtain additional funding for digital inclusion activities.
   - Enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of services available to residents and help residents improve their life chances leading to fulfilled lives.
   - Support the ambitions of council services increasingly moving online, such as the housing improvement programme, family hubs, online directories and signposting and events booking systems.
   - Signpost residents via H&F Community Compass - a collaborative Cost of Living Alliance project to create an online digital platform empowering residents to find advice, information, and support to facilitate early intervention.

3. Our Resident Experience Access Programme (REAP) seeks to move digitally articulate residents to lower cost digital channels and to use freed up resource as well as innovative technology available to us to enhance the experience of those residents who are not able to use digital.

4. Improvements in digital inclusion across the borough will have far reaching benefits for residents and the council alike.

5. **Delivering on Corporate Strategy Priorities:**

   o Addressing digital exclusion aligns with local and national political priorities.
   o Investing in digital inclusion demonstrates forward-thinking leadership and compassion.
   o The strategy is a Corporate Strategy priority and was co-produced with the VCS sector and residents.

6. **Positive Outcomes for Residents and Economy:**

   o Resourcing the strategy empowers residents to participate fully in a digital society.
   o Economic benefits include savings to the public purse and improved well-being[1].
   o Digital skills enhance access to online services and information.

7. **Economic Prosperity for All:**

   o Digitally enabled residents contribute more to the local and regional economy.

8. **Reduced Reliance on Public Services:**

   o Improved digital capability reduces reliance on face-to-face public services.

9. **Understanding Digital Exclusion:**

   o Accurate understanding of the scale and impact of digital exclusion enables targeted and evidence-based decision-making and strategic investments.

10. **Risk to Service Delivery and new projects without the strategy:**

   o Many Council services are transitioning online and utilising new technologies, which risks leaving residents without the required digital skills and tools unable to access critical services. For example, family hubs will involve utilisation of kiosks; Housing online is a core service development priority; and numerous online service directories and resident booking systems are being developed (such as holiday bookings for families and events booking systems).
   o Coordinated digital inclusion efforts are crucial for at-risk groups, especially vulnerable residents.
   o Our ambition is to create digital content and services that are so easy to use that residents will prefer to use them over other channels. However, we will help all residents who need support both digitally and by telephone. We will also have alternative channels available to anyone who needs more help.

11. **Improved Resident Experience:**

   o Understanding resident needs and partnership working enhances the resident experience.

   o [1] The Good Things Foundation analysis provides evidence that digital inclusion is good value for money, noting a cost-benefit ratio of £9.48 return for every £1 invested in supporting 508,000 people annually to gain basic digital skills from 2023 to 2032.

o Without funding and a mandate, the council may struggle to meet residents' expectations for a digitally inclusive borough.

12. **Efficient allocation of resources and reduction in duplication:**
    o Targeted allocation of resources to address digital exclusion challenges, reduction of duplication through collaboration and a corporate approach.

13. **Leverage further funding and investment:**
    o Investment in a digital inclusion programme lead and officers will give the council the capacity to build partnerships and identify opportunities for leveraging external funding and resources to deliver the ambitions set out in the strategy.
    o There is an opportunity to attract matched funding and reduce the financial impact on the council.

14. **Improved outcomes from wider partnership projects:**
    o Hammersmith and Fulham are the digital lead for the West London Alliance (WLA) and lead in developing pan borough and regional projects aimed at improving digital connectivity infrastructure for residents and businesses.
    o Digital inclusion is closely aligned to the aspirations of these partnerships such as the WLA, LOTI. As such a corresponding programme to increase digital inclusion is needed.

Options for resourcing digital inclusion

15. Over the course of the past year different approaches to resourcing the strategy have been discussed. A decision needs to be made about how to proceed going forward, with the options being:

- **Do Nothing:** Digital Inclusion Strategy to be delivered across the council using existing council resourcing only.

- **Programme Manager Resource (recommended):** Recruitment of a programme manager equipped with an appropriate spending budget to enable the development and delivery of a programme of activity appropriate to the objectives of the Digital Inclusion Strategy and in alignment with the council's overall corporate objectives.

Outcomes	Do Nothing	Programme Manager Resource
Political Priority: Manifesto and corporate plan commitment to Digital Inclusion is fulfilled.	Potential	Deliverable
Evidence base: Accurate and up to date understanding of the scale and impact of digital exclusion in the borough.	Not Deliverable	Potential

Digitally empowered residents: Residents are supported to participate fully in digital society, and are able to access online services and information.	Potential	Potential
Reduced reliance on public services: Improved digital capability & reduced reliance on face-to-face public services.	Not Deliverable	Potential
Digital inclusion eco-system: Targeted allocation of resources to address digital exclusion challenges, reduction of duplication through collaboration and a corporate approach.	Not Deliverable	Potential
Leverage further funding & Investment: Capacity to build partnerships and identify opportunities for leveraging external funding and resources to deliver the ambitions set out in the strategy.	Not Deliverable	Potential

Reason for Decision

To agree a digital inclusion strategy for the Borough and delivery of a digital inclusion programme to address barriers arising from digital advancements impacting residents' lives and council service delivery.

Equality Implications

There are no direct negative equality implications for groups with protected characteristics, under the Equality Act 2010, by the approval of this strategy. The focus on inclusion is intended to support positive equality impact. Individual actions contained within the relevant action plan will be evaluated appropriately prior to delivery.

Risk Management Implications

There is an environmental risk that without the Digital Inclusion Strategy there could arise a have / have-not division between residents that have access to digital technology and those who do not either through lack of funds, fear of technology, language and cultural barriers, or understanding. This will result in a deepening of an underclass of residents unable or unwilling to access the digital technologies. To mitigate this the strategy must reach out and allay such residents' issues and provide education and physical access.

There is a programme risk that the complexities of this project are not adequately managed. It is therefore suggested that a fully defined programme management

structure is established that pays particular attention to benefits, outcomes, risks and deliverable success.

Jules Binney, Risk and Assurance Manager, 17 June 2024

Climate and Ecological Emergency Implications

There are no immediate anticipated climate and ecological emergency implications as a result of publication of the strategy, but actions and recommendations will be informed by the Council's net-zero target. Some of the actions outlined within the strategy can provide a positive impact on the borough's footprint through the re-use and re-purposing of devices and participation in London wide activities which support our commitment to net zero.

Approved by Jim Cunningham, Strategic Lead for Net Zero Housing, 18 June 2024

IT Implications

Digital Services have been involved in the development of the digital inclusion strategy and options presented in this report, and the Chief Digital Officer is supportive of the publication and resourcing of the strategy. Digital Services should continue to be involved in progressing the strategy to publication.

IM Implications: Whilst there are no immediate information management implications, possible data protection and GDPR issues should be considered as part of the development of the actions contained within the action plan and IM should be consulted where appropriate to ensure that all potential data protection risks are properly assessed with mitigating actions agreed and implemented.

Implications completed by: Cinar Altun, Digital Strategy Lead, Digital Services, 14 June 2024

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – New Draft Digital Inclusion Strategy

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