

Divisions Affected – ALL

CABINET – 19 July 2022

Digital Inclusion Strategy and Charter

**Report by Corporate Director Customers, Organisational
Development & Resources**

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) **Approve the OCC Digital Inclusion Strategy.**
 - b) **Approve the annual review by Cabinet and People Overview & Scrutiny Committee of our progress against the commitments set out in the strategy.**
 - c) **Approve the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Charter.**

Executive Summary

1. The importance of digital inclusion has been increased following the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Digital inclusion is a multi-faceted issue and includes:
 - Access to good quality and affordable broadband, wi-fi and mobile data.
 - Opportunities for digital skills training and support.
 - Devices that can access the internet, are affordable and good quality, and meet their users' needs.
 - The ability, motivation, confidence, and physical space to safely access the internet.
 - Accessible services that are designed inclusively to meet the needs of service users.

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3. The “digital divide” refers to the gap between those who have the elements outlined above, and those who do not. People who are disadvantaged or vulnerable in other ways are more likely to be digitally excluded, with this issue being closely linked to other inequalities.
4. The benefits of digital inclusion include access to essential services, education, information, social connection, employment opportunities, and reducing our impact on the environment by reducing travel. Poorer health, educational, and employment outcomes, and an increased risk of poverty can all be a result of digital exclusion.

Background

5. As a Council, we recognise and value the range of work that is already ongoing to tackle digital exclusion in Oxfordshire, with the local Voluntary Sector (such as [Getting Oxfordshire Online](#) and the [Connect! Project](#)), city and district councils, and health sectors already carrying out a range of initiatives. We also value the work already ongoing within our Council to reduce the digital divide, such as within our Digital Infrastructure Team, Libraries and Heritage Service, and Education Directorate.
6. We also recognise that the digital inclusion landscape within Oxfordshire is fragmented, and that through the Council’s strategy we can provide coordination and signposting around the range of important initiatives already ongoing.
7. The Digital Inclusion Strategy addresses the strategic priority of [Tackling Inequalities in Oxfordshire](#). It also relates to the goals of Oxfordshire County Council strategies including the COVID-19 Recovery and Renewal Strategy, [Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\) Framework](#), Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, [Climate Action Framework](#), Domestic Violence Strategy, the Oxfordshire Way, Director of Public Health’s Annual Report, Social Value Policy, Consultation and Engagement Strategy, SEND Strategy, Agile Working Strategy, [Digital](#) and [ICT Strategy](#), and our Delivering the Future Together values and behaviours.

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

8. People Overview Scrutiny recommended that further wording be included in the long-term ambitions and commitments around digital inclusion for businesses, particularly small businesses, and working with Town and Parish Councils, this has been added in.
9. There was also a further recommendation that more consideration be applied to online safety. This will be considered and included in the action plan that will underpin the strategy.

Consultation and Engagement

10. The strategy has been developed by the policy team from the goals, commitments and actions identified by stakeholders during a process of engagement.
11. An internal working group was set up to coordinate the vision for the strategy, align digital inclusion projects across the Council, and signpost to initiatives across Oxfordshire. This group is led by the Policy and Strategy Team and is comprised of representatives from Education, Public Health, Digital Infrastructure, Cultural Services, and Adult Social Care.
12. In October 2021, we held a virtual roundtable discussion with around 35 partners from across the Oxfordshire public, health, education, and voluntary sectors. In this session, we defined what digital inclusion means to us in Oxfordshire and set out the problem that needs to be addressed.
13. We also discussed our vision for a digitally inclusive county, which included joined-up initiatives, digital inclusion by design, and ensuring that no one is left behind. The barriers that were identified included support for those who will never want to be online, funding, duplication of resources due to a fragmented landscape, rurality, online safety, and the cost-of-living crisis.

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14. The principles that were identified during the roundtable discussion as needing to underpin collaborative work included signposting access to support, sharing best practice, promoting the benefits of digital, embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion, and recognising that digital inclusion is about people, not just technology.

Developing the Strategy

15. The strategy is set out to be focussed around three strands: Digitally Inclusive Communities, Digitally Inclusive Service Delivery, and Digitally Inclusive Workplace. In April 2022, we carried out a programme of engagement on these three strands with external and internal stakeholders.

16. We held three virtual workshops focussed on the digitally inclusive communities strand, with around 40 external attendees. These workshops were on a range of themes relating to digital inclusion, such as education, isolation, local businesses, and organisations. There was a specific focus on groups who are more likely to be thought of as digitally excluded.

17. On the digitally inclusive service delivery strand, we have carried out interviews with service users. This has included older people who access our social care services, and younger people, who may have lived experience of digital exclusion to understand barriers in our service delivery.

18. We also held two virtual workshops with around 30 Oxfordshire County Council staff about how we can make our workplace more digitally inclusive. In our action plan, we are committing to engage with non-desk-based and frontline staff about their levels of digital inclusion.

19. On the 8th June we held a Digital Inclusion Summit at the Oxford Town Hall. This brought together key stakeholders involved in the digital inclusion landscape in Oxfordshire, and involved speakers giving presentations on the work that they have been undertaking. At the summit, we had a facilitated discussion to develop a digital inclusion charter with partners. This sets out

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principles around how we will work together to tackle digital exclusion in Oxfordshire.

Digital Inclusion Charter

20. The charter was developed in facilitated sessions at the end of the summit with partners. It sets out principles and ways of working around digital inclusion, acknowledging that each partner across Oxfordshire has different needs and resources relating to digital inclusion. Partners have fed back and inputted into the drafted charter. OCC will share the charter with partners and develop guidance for signing up to it, as well as a process for agreement.

Next Steps

21. The draft strategy sets out OCC's high-level ambition, while an action plan is in development with input from all services that will set out the operational detail on how we will achieve this.

22. It is recommended that our progress against the commitments set out in the strategy is reviewed annually by the Cabinet and People Scrutiny Committee.

23. The action plan will be updated annually and is recommended to be monitored internally by ELT, due to its operational nature.

Financial Implications

24. This strategy is a long-term approach to reaching digital inclusion to be delivered in line with established strategies and existing budgets, there are no immediate implications and identifying funding options will be an important part of the action plan. Any future project or programme proposals to support digital inclusion that requires budget or grant funding will be developed by the lead service and taken through the relevant sign off process, as part of the action plan. Digital Inclusion actions will be included in Service Planning later in the year.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

25. The strategy has no significant legal implications. Any resulting proposals for changes to existing services, due to the underpinning action plan, will be the subject of formal equality impact assessments.

Comments checked by:

Jonathan Pool, Solicitor, Contracts (Legal Services),
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Staff Implications

26. The strategy includes a strand focussed on enabling a digitally inclusive workforce. The impact will be positive on staff and has been developed with colleagues across the council and will seek to enhance digital inclusivity and skills within the organisation.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

27. The Digital Inclusion Strategy has the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion embedded within it. The structure of digitally inclusive communities, service delivery, and workplace mirrors the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Framework, and several actions will cross across both areas of work. Improving digital inclusion will improve access to essential services, education, information, social connection, and employment opportunities.

28. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed.

Sustainability Implications

29. Increasing digital inclusion will help to reduce our impact on the environment by reducing travel, through enabling digital means of working or accessing services for our residents and staff.

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30. In terms of our own workplace, we will establish clear links with the agile working strategy and the long-term ambition that “technology that supports agile ways of working will facilitate communication and the ability to work well anywhere, any place, and at any time.”

31. A Climate Impact Assessment has been completed.

Risk Management

32. Digital exclusion can impact anyone and any limitations in being able to access digital platforms, whether through lack of devices or confidence, can negatively impact a person’s health, wellbeing, education, or development. This strategy seeks to address these issues and mitigate the long-term risks and disbenefits of digital inclusion.

Communications

33. Communications are planned to communicate the ambitions and commitments of the strategy, both internally and externally.

34. The charter will be communicated with all partners across the county, having already been shared with those who attended for their feedback, in order to encourage sign-up to this commitment.

Claire Taylor
Corporate Director, Customers, Organisational Development and Resources

Annexes: Annex 1: Digital Inclusion Strategy Draft
 Annex 2: Digital Inclusion Charter Draft
 Annex 3: Equality Impact Assessment
 Annex 4: Climate Impact Assessment

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