DIGITAL INCLUSION STRATEGY – REPORT OF THE PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Cllr Ian Corkin, Chair of the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee
19 July 2022

RECOMMENDATION

1.   **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to —**

   a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report:

   Recommendation 1: That the Council approaches Oxfordshire Association for Local Councils to investigate the appetite amongst parish, town, district and city councils on digital inclusion, particularly in relation to access to broadband, online safety and app development.

   Recommendation 2: That the Council consults directly with businesses, particularly smaller ones, on the barriers they face to ensuring the benefits of the internet are available to them and develops actions to support any new issues identified within the Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

   b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2.   In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000 as amended by the Localism Act 2011, the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that the Cabinet respond to a report submitted to it by Scrutiny within two months of the date of being served this report. The Scrutiny Committee accepts service to mean the date of the Cabinet meeting, and not the publication of the agenda.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3.   At its meeting on 16 June 2022, the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the draft Digital Inclusion Strategy.

4.   The Committee would like to thank Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet portfolio holder for Corporate Services for presenting the report and answering questions, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director for Customers, Organisational Development and Resources for authoring the report and supporting the meeting.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.   Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services introduced the report. Digital inclusion was defined as 'ensuring the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to everyone' and covered both access to the internet and the ability of individuals to use it. The pandemic had reinforced how vital digital services were to everybody's lives, being fundamental to employment, financial management and social interaction, as well as being more and more relied on for health services also. However, not everybody can or wishes to access or use this technology, meaning an ongoing challenge exists for the Council in how it provides for such people in an increasingly digitally-focused environment. Key groups within this category included, amongst others, those living in rural areas, people living in social deprivation, carers and small businesses. Library and heritage services perform a key function in this regard, providing free access to wifi and computers for users, but also trained staff and volunteers to provide support. Over 8000 applications for services such as blue badges and bus passes had been enabled in this way. The Strategy covered three key areas: digitally inclusive communities, service delivery, and the workplace. Working alongside partners, a digital inclusion charter had been developed and was being consulted on. When agreed, as many organisations as possible would be encouraged to sign up to the principles as possible. Progress against the strategy, via an action plan to deliver the strategy, would be presented annually.

6.   In response, the Committee devoted significant discussion to the importance of libraries, particularly exploring alternative ways of further improving their accessibility; issues around rural broadband and the progress of installing full fibre broadband throughout the county; issues around online safety for those not digital natives; the potential impacts of the cost of living crisis on digital inclusion; and the Council's capacity and strategy to embed digital inclusion as a pan-organisational thread of delivery. Further to these, the Committee discussed and makes two recommendations concerning i) co-working with other councils on digital inclusion, and ii) engagement with businesses. On these issues it makes a total of three recommendations.

Co-working with other Councils

7.   As both the breadth of the draft strategy and the conversation held in relation to it illustrate, the causes of digital exclusion are complex, with access to infrastructure, previous opportunities to learn, hardware availability and finances all contributing factors. Another key factor is, however, simply ease of use. It is necessary that for people who may be disinclined to use digital services, that the process is as smooth as possible.

8.   The Council has not ignored this fact, and has established a task group to look at the Council's digital presence. This, however, is a vast topic and it has necessarily meant that the group has had to prioritise its focus; it is presently considering how to make the website more intuitive and user-friendly. The Committee appreciates the need for this, but at the same time it is aware that,

if continued, this prioritisation may mean a window for joint-working with other local councils closes.

9.   It was reported that other districts, notably West Oxfordshire, are currently looking at developing apps to access their services. The reason for this is that it is felt that specific apps can be easier to navigate than websites, which makes them more user-friendly and increases their usage. The Committee is of the view that many residents do not perceive a clear distinction between the different tiers of local authority and are far more concerned with getting their issue resolved than who has responsibility for it. This makes a strong case for joint-working on apps with other authorities to deliver an app (or apps) which combine relevant services into a single access point. The reason why apps, plural, is referenced is that it is understood by the Committee that across Oxfordshire, residents do interact with various local authorities for a huge diversity of reasons, and that a single, universal 'Oxfordshire' app would actually be extremely complex and unwieldy, precisely the opposite of its intention.

10.   The Council is in a strong position to undertake such cross-working, having signed up to the national Digital Declaration, in which it has undertaken, amongst other things, to 'Try new things, from new digital tools to experiments in collaboration with other organisations' and to 'share knowledge about digital projects where there is an opportunity for potential reuse or collaboration with others.' App development to facilitate easier navigation of the multiple tiers of local authority would fit well within that category. However, the opportunity to show leadership extends beyond this single issue and is relevant to multiple areas of digital inclusion.

11.   Reference has been made to the multiple tiers of local authority in Oxfordshire, but only the county, city and district councils have been spoken of. The Committee is aware that there are a large number of parishes, which in some of the market towns are sizeable and offer multiple services to their residents. They are, however, still less likely to have the resource and capability to develop their digital offering. This is an area where the Council could, and should, be taking a lead.

12.   On the basis of the above, the Committee does feel that there is mileage and opportunity for collaboration to develop something which would make digital access easier for residents in Oxfordshire. However, it would like a broader discussion with other local authorities on ways in which there could be collaboration to improve digital inclusion more generally. The Committee would like to see the Council investigate that opportunity and suggests as a way forward that parish councils are consulted with via the umbrella organisation, the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, and that the districts and other interested potential stakeholders, be canvassed also.

Recommendation 1: That the Council approaches Oxfordshire Association for Local Councils to investigate the appetite amongst parish, town, district and city councils on digital inclusion, particularly in relation to access to broadband, online safety and app development.

Digital Inclusion for Business

13.   Although the draft strategy specifically highlights small businesses as a group liable to face digital exclusion, little reference is made to them in the strategy. This compares, for example, with the Glasgow equivalent strategy, *Digital Glasgow*, in which there is a specific workstream dedicated to 'Digital Business', including a specific project to upskill and enable small and micro-businesses to develop their online presence and trade. The Committee's view is that it is extremely important that this is not overlooked. In particular, increasing the viability of small and micro-businesses may well help people who have fewer alternative opportunities to access the other parts of the labour market, for instance those in rural areas with few alternatives around, single parents who need flexibility in their working patterns, or disabled people who find it easier to work in an environment they have set up for their specific needs. Feedback at the meeting suggests that, to date, little consultation has been undertaken directly with small and micro-businesses, and instead has come via district councils. Without good data it is difficult to make an informed decision on the steps necessary to take this issue forward, so the Committee's recommendation is necessarily quite broad, simply highlighting the relative low priority accorded to supporting businesses within the strategy, and seeking that the Council find out directly what the issues are and take them forward accordingly.

Recommendation 2: That the Council consults directly with businesses, particularly smaller ones, on the barriers they face to ensuring the benefits of the internet are available to them and develops actions to support any new issues identified within the Digital Inclusion Action Plan.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

14.   The Committee was offered the opportunity and has agreed that it would like to consider an update on the progress against the Digital Inclusion Action Plan in 12 months time.

15.   Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.

16.   Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

17.   Technically, a response made by Cabinet at its September meeting would fall one day outside the legal timeframe for making a response. The Committee is happy to accommodate this if necessary.

Annex: Annex 1: Pro forma template for Cabinet response

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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