Divisions Affected - ALL

People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

16th June 2022

Digital Inclusion Strategy

Purpose

1. **People Overview & Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider and input into the draft Digital Inclusion Strategy.**

Executive Summary

2. The importance of digital inclusion has been increased following the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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

6. The Policy Team have been asked to develop a Digital Inclusion Strategy for Oxfordshire County Council.

7. 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.

8. 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.

Key Issues

9. 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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

20. A final draft of the strategy will go to Cabinet for approval in July with a recommendation that this is reviewed annually by the Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee on our progress against the commitments set out in the strategy.

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

Budgetary implications

22. This strategy is a long-term approach to reaching digital inclusion to be delivered in line with established strategies and existing budgets. 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.

Equalities implications

23. 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 EDI 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.

Sustainability implications

24. 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.

25. 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."

Risk Management

26. 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

27. On the 8th June we are holding a Digital Inclusion Summit at the Oxford Town Hall. This will bring together key stakeholders involved in the digital inclusion landscape in Oxfordshire, with speakers giving presentations on the work that they have been undertaking. At the summit, we will seek to develop a digital inclusion charter with partners, that sets out principles around how we will work together to tackle digital exclusion in Oxfordshire.

28. Any required changes to the wording in the strategy following People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, will be incorporated into the final draft, which will then be designed into a vibrant and accessible document by the council's Marketing and Engagement Team. This will include an infographic as an annex which will cover key

statistics relating to digital inclusion in Oxfordshire and can be updated annually if required.