Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

10 February 2023

Digital Inclusion in County Durham

Report of Corporate Management Team

Paul Darby, Corporate Director of Resources

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

1   To present to Members the findings and recommendations of a recent high-level review of digital inclusion in County Durham.

Executive Summary

2   Digital inclusion has been a national and local priority for more than a decade.

3   The Covid-19 pandemic led to the accelerated adoption and application of digital technology, however, it also further exposed, and in some instances has deepened, the digital divide.

4   As a result, a review of the current landscape has been undertaken to better understand the digital inclusion landscape within County Durham and identify whether the current approach and wide range of initiatives is delivering the best level of support for our residents.

5   The review has identified clear priorities and opportunities under the three main elements of digital inclusion: connectivity, devices, and digital skills, and has validated that the development of a working group, programme of supporting work and business case for future funding applications would be of value.

Recommendation

6   Members are recommended to note the information in the report and supporting presentation.

Background

7   Digital inclusion is increasingly becoming an essential part of everyday life. Being digitally included can connect people to better jobs, training and education, social interaction, public services, as well as providing online access to cheaper and more wide-ranging products and services.

8   Digital exclusion occurs when people lack the necessary digital skills or access to connectivity and/or devices, potentially putting them at a significant disadvantage.

9   There is no single, agreed definition of digital exclusion, and individuals may experience various aspects and levels of exclusion. However, broadly, the main ways in which people experience digital exclusion are access to connectivity; access to devices; skills; confidence and motivation.

10   When considering each, we can see that digital exclusion involves significant and wide-ranging challenges. When someone has the access (to connectivity and a device), and the skills, confidence, and motivation to go online to do things that benefit them day to day, they are considered to be digitally capable.

11   There are many reasons why someone might be digitally excluded. Whilst many issues can be tackled using a holistic, county-wide, regional, or national approach, in some cases, tackling the barriers to digital inclusion at an individual level may require a deep understanding of the wider social factors that the person is dealing with.

12   The Covid-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented rate of digital adoption and has been transformative for many individuals and businesses. However, this rapid and radical change further exposed the digital divide and brought to light the importance of digital readiness.

13   With increasing aspects of life taking place online, it is essential to consider if a more strategic approach to digital exclusion is required in County Durham and if the absence of such an approach has the potential to leave behind the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- Digital strategy

- Inclusive Economic Strategy

- Poverty Action Plan

Author

Victoria Murray   Tel: 03000 267707

Alli Walker   Tel: 03000 260555

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Appropriate investment plan to be identified following further development and approval of any future action plan and associated business case.

Consultation

In January 2021, Digital Services conducted a survey with residents to measure their views on accessing the council's online services and to help shape future improvements. The results were intended to identify barriers, such as the need for more information, training, or equipment.

Responses were limited to 647 due to public buildings being closed during the pandemic, however, notably the results link closely with national and regional trends.

On 31 January 2023 Digital Services concluded a consultation with residents and businesses to capture views and feedback on online services, general internet use and difficulties accessing online services. The results from this will be analysed and taken into consideration in forward planning for digital inclusion.

Any additional consultation required will be planned and delivered as necessary to support the development of the future delivery plan.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Better connectivity underpins the Council's ambitions detailed in the County Durham Vision and Plan such as increased employment opportunities, better connected communities and helping residents to live long and independent lives. Increased broadband availability enables improved access to services that are provided digitally.

Climate Change

Robust connectivity, the increased use of video conferencing, email, and access to online collaboration tools, can support teleworking and therefore, a reduction in business travel or commuting, leading to a reduction in CO_2 emissions.

Human Rights

None

Crime and Disorder

None

Staffing

Resourcing requirements will be met from existing staff budgets for the next stage of project activity.

Accommodation

None

Risk

Without a coordinated approach and overarching strategy, initiatives will remain fragmented, and funding may not be used effectively.

Procurement

All procurement guidelines and policies will be followed to support the sourcing of any professional business services required.