Corporate Review Committee - Thursday 21 January 2021

Digital Inclusion

Recommendation

I recommend that the Committee:

a. Considers and comments on the content of the report and Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020/21.

Report of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

Summary

What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

1. The Select Committee is asked to consider and comment on the work being undertaken to tackle digital exclusion in Staffordshire. Reviewing the approaches in the context of Economy, Infrastructure and Skills, Social Care and Health, Families and Communities and the overall impact on service delivery.

Report

Background

2. Digital is fundamental to the way Staffordshire County Council works as an organisation, as well as how we interact with our partners, citizens and communities. As such, digital is one of the four key principles set out in our Strategic Plan 2018-22.

3. A key part of our approach to digital is ensuring that as many of our residents as possible are digitally included. This includes being able to access and use the wealth of digital information and support available.

4. Digital inclusion (and in turn reducing digital exclusion) concerns making sure that people have the capability to use the internet to do things that benefit them day to day[1]. Digital exclusion can be broken down into three key barriers:

   a. **Connectivity** (infrastructure / access to the internet)
   b. **Accessibility** (for all including low income homes, people with disabilities etc)
   c. **Digital skills** (being able to use computers and the internet)

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-inclusion-strategy/government-digital-inclusion-strategy

Digital Inclusion in Staffordshire

5. Digital inclusion was improving prior to Covid-19 but still very much an issue. Following work in recent years to improve digital connectivity in the county, only 4% of premises in Staffordshire do not have access to superfast broadband.

6. A study by Lloyds Bank in 2018 identified five cohorts of people nationally as most likely to be excluded; older people, disabled people, people in low-income households, women, and people who leave education early.

7. Following Covid-19, trends showed an increased use of digital across all sectors. Digital exclusion has reduced in some cases following the efforts to support people at risk during lockdown. However, as many public services shift to a more digitally focused way of working, the impacts could potentially grow more severe for those who remain digitally excluded.

8. Feedback following Covid-19 has shown that a lack of access to affordable devices and internet packages has been a key issue, particularly for older people and low-income households.

9. A huge amount of activity took place across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent to provide digital support and information for communities during lockdown. This included supplying digital equipment to vulnerable residents and families, flexible Community Learning offers and VCSE digital support.

Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020/21

10. As part of the Council's approach to the digital principle, a report will be taken to Cabinet for discussion and approval in February 2021. This report will include the Digital First Delivery Plan. This delivery plan contains 32 key projects for digital, one of which is an action plan for digital inclusion.

11. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020/21 has been developed as a working document informed by our work to respond to Covid-19. The plan aims to address barriers to digital inclusion in Staffordshire. To do this, the plan has four main elements, each with practical actions that can be delivered in the next 12-18 months. These elements are:

   a. **Connectivity (and access to the internet) –** Ensuring as many people as possible can connect to the internet where they live and work, especially in rural areas.

   b. **Accessibility** – Enabling access to the internet, digital devices and / or digital support for everyone, in particular older people, people with disabilities and Special Educational Needs, low income families and people in rural areas.

   c. **Digital skills** – Helping residents to have the right skills and the confidence to use the internet and digital devices to access the support they need, especially during the social distancing restrictions in place due to Covid-19.

d. **Communication, engagement and data** – Communicating as effectively as possible the benefits of using digital and the support available to those who may be excluded. In addition, engaging with residents and reviewing data to ensure we continue to understand the issues during Covid-19 and develop our approach accordingly.

12. Further detail on the specific actions in the plan, the delivery leads and the associated timescales for delivery can be found at appendix 1 to this report.

13. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan 20/21 will contribute to several of the Council's strategic priority workstreams moving forward, including:

a. **Digital First Delivery Plan 2020/21 –** Using technology and data to connect, inform and support our citizens. This includes ensuring that residents and staff have the access to the right digital information, skills and equipment to remain connected and supported.

b. **Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework (DISF) –** The DISF and its supporting implementation plan will outline the digital infrastructure vision for Staffordshire over the next 10 years. It will address short, medium, and long-term demand for digital connectivity, including (but not limited to) full fibre, fixed Wi-Fi, 4G and 5G. The development of this framework over the next year with key stakeholders will be critical to digital exclusion.

c. **Communities Delivery Plan 2020/21** – Empowering communities to help themselves and each other. This includes making the most of our community assets such as libraries and children's centres, as well as working with our VCSE Strategic Capacity Building Partner to support both residents and the voluntary sector.

d. **Supportive Communities/Community Help Points –** Improved adult social care and health IAG Offer. The Staffordshire.gov.uk web-site content has been significantly refreshed to reflect health and care priorities with specific focus on mental wellbeing, staying active, and staying connected. Links have been made throughout the site to Staffordshire Connects, our community assets directory to support residents to find local support and services.

e. **Library Services –** Reading friends service provided by the libraries team is a good example of an alternative that has been provided to people who might be experiencing loneliness/digital exclusion as this is telephony based.

14. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2020/21 has been developed through a range of joint working and engagement activity with Members, commissioners and partners, including:

a. **Digital inclusion workshop –** An online workshop session was held with commissioning leads specialising in the use of digital in public health, adult social care, children and families, libraries, connectivity, corporate services, Member engagement, local businesses, community learning and the local VCSE sector.

b. **Engagement with the Digital Leadership Group –** A discussion took place with the Staffordshire County Council Digital Leadership Group and the Staffordshire County Council Cabinet Lead for digital. This session considered the draft action plan and practical steps the County Council and partners can take to tackle digital exclusion, including connectivity and infrastructure.

c. **Engagement with the Communities Leadership Group –** A session with the Staffordshire County Council Communities Leadership Group also took place. This session considered the draft action plan and how Staffordshire can best use its community assets and relationships with partners locally.

d. **Engagement with All-Party Working Group –** An update and presentation shared with Members, followed by a discussion and feedback.

e. **Covid-19 residents survey** – Staffordshire County Council published a survey for residents on the impact of Covid-19. 3921 residents replied, and although the survey was not specifically about digital exclusion, it has provided useful context on related issues facing residents across the county.

f. **Promotional awareness of action plan** – Digital Inclusion objectives and actions have been shared with Cabinet Community Support Members, and colleagues in our District and Borough Councils.

SEND and Digital Inclusion

15. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan will also co-ordinate with the work of Staffordshire SENDIASS, an 'arms-length' service that provides support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

16. As part of the SENDIASS continuing commitment to providing SEND children and young people with impartial and confidential information advice and support, they are exploring communication methods which will best meet the needs of these young people. This currently includes telephone, face to face and email support. SENDIASS have consulted with young people on their preferred digital engagement choices.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

17. The action plan was recently discussed at the November meeting of the Healthy Staffordshire Select Committee, who provided feedback to shape and inform delivery.

Community Impact

18. An overarching CIA is being developed as part of the report being taken to Cabinet on the digital principle in February 2021. This CIA will recommend that further assessment be undertaken on key areas of the plan that may potentially impact on communities. If this CIA identifies the Digital Inclusion Action Plan as an area that requires further assessment, then a full CIA will be conducted in 2021.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Digital Inclusion Action Plan

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