

**Manchester City Council  
Report for Information**

**Report to:** Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 3 December 2020

**Subject:** Driving digital inclusion and bridging the digital divide in Manchester

**Report of:** Director of Inclusive Growth and Head of Libraries, Galleries and Culture

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**Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on the digital inclusion challenge within Manchester, the impact of covid on those who are excluded and the initiatives that are being developed in aim to scale up efforts to tackle the challenges.

**Recommendations**

Members are requested to consider and comment on the information within this report.

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**Wards Affected:** All

<b>Environmental Impact Assessment</b> - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city

<b>Manchester Strategy outcomes</b>	<b>Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS</b>
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	
A highly skilled city: world class and home grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	It highlights the importance of supporting residents to learn and continue to further develop the digital skills they need for both everyday life and work.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	It shares what action has been taken to ensure we are taking steps towards becoming a fair and more inclusive society.
A liveable and low carbon city: a	

destination of choice to live, visit, work	
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	It starts to explore the challenge of a lack of connectivity on our communities playing a full part in society.

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**Background documents (available for public inspection):**

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy please contact one of the contact officers above.

- Good Things Foundation – Digital Nation 2020
- Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020

## **1.0 Introduction**

In 2019 the 'Evidencing the Challenge of Digital Inclusion in the City of Manchester' report estimated 27,000 adults in Manchester as digitally excluded. In reality we know this number is in fact much higher and is continuing to increase at a fast pace due to the impact of lockdown and the sustained impacts of covid-19. In-fact GMCA have the headline figure for those digitally excluded post Covid-19 across GM as 1.2 million people.

Over the last 20 years Manchester City Council and our partners have done much to reduce this digital divide and support those that are digitally excluded. The City Council offer includes providing free Internet access, free Wi-Fi and IT support in all our libraries, a wide range of digital courses being delivered by Manchester Adult Education Service (MAES), as well as working closely with many of our third sector organisations to support them to continue to support more of our neighbourhoods to access and utilise the internet.

Work and Skills and Library team have over the past 18 months worked together with key stakeholders to develop a collaborative programme to assess the scale of the digital divide, improve the existing support infrastructure, develop joint projects and develop new initiatives to support digitally excluded residents. There has been a diverse range of key stakeholders involved so far including: adult learning providers, third sector community organisations, registered providers, healthcare partners and also private sector businesses.

## **2.0 What is digital exclusion and how does it affect our communities?**

Digital exclusion exists where a person lacks one or more of the following: access to the Internet, skills/confidence to use the Internet or motivation to go online. In 2019 we estimated around 27,000 digitally excluded Manchester residents.

In line with national trends, our report identified those who are over 65s, disabled, with low incomes, or whose first language is not English highly likely to be digitally excluded. The report also evidenced the correlation between those living in areas of deprivation and digital exclusion. The areas of the city where digital exclusion is most prevalent have been identified as North Manchester, East Manchester, Hulme and Moss Side and a number of neighbourhoods in Wythenshawe.

Being digitally excluded can result in residents having; to pay more for life essentials, difficulty accessing health and wellbeing services, increased feelings of loneliness or social exclusion, a lack of voice and visibility, less access to employment and learning opportunities as well as an increased risk of falling into poverty - resulting in further widening of the social inequality gap.

There has been an increase in the number of Government and private sector funded initiatives to support our children and young people through schools and colleges to access the internet but very few to support our adults. This is despite our education and skills providers identifying a huge demand for their current and future learners. MAES for example, have identified ESOL learners as most affected. Whilst only 3% do not have smartphones, 63% of their 4396 ESOL learners do not have a laptop or

tablet (2769 individuals), which is needed to access online or blended learning. MAES have now invested in 350 Google Chromebooks and 100 dongles for a loan scheme.

It is also crucial to recognise the huge impact the pandemic (specifically social distancing) is having on all providers supporting residents with Internet access, training and support. Changes to physical learning spaces means there will be an increase in the number of partners offering more flexible learning models, such as blended learning. This may result in a number of residents not being able to engage in learning based on having non or limited access to the internet. Digital devices and/or the skills to use them is now a necessity for the adult education and skills sector.

### **3.0 Digital inclusion and strategic alignment**

The Manchester Adult Education and Skills Plan, the Our Manchester Industrial strategy and the planning for recovery all highlight the importance of supporting residents to become digitally included, in order for us to reach the cities ambition of becoming a fairer and more inclusive society.

The digital inclusion agenda also plays a huge part in the delivery of the COVID-19 Recovery Coordination Groups plans. The purpose of the residents and communities workstream is to enable residents and communities affected by COVID-19 to live independent and fulfilling lives. Achieving this ambition is impossible, without more residents able to access the internet and supported to engage confidently with the internet. The Economic Recovery Plan offers local interventions to support the recovery and rebuilding of the economy. In order to deliver the plan affectively, more residents will need to have access to the internet and the skills to use it to be able to take the initial steps towards and to re-engage with learning and employment opportunities.

Tackling the digital divide will also enable us to make better use of the new technologies that we are embracing as a Council. For example, in the Customer Service, the ability to support and upskill residents digitally through the use of new technologies such as video conferencing is being explored as we speak.

Digital Inclusion is also key to maximising census returns in March 2021. The level of funding the City Council receives in the next 10 years is dependent of the population figures provided by the census. As this is a 'digital first' census, where submissions will be made online, the more adults that are confident online users, the higher the level of returns and the more Central Government funding the Council will receive.

It is essential we deliver a digital inclusion programme at scale, to develop a better understanding of the numbers of those digitally excluded and their motivations balanced with those who for a number of reasons will never engage with digital and may need to interact with services non digitally.

#### **3.1 The Council's role in tackling the digital divide so far**

The Council has supported digital inclusion for over 20 years. Libraries are the primary council venue that support digital inclusion. Each library offers free Internet

access, free Wi-fi, printing and IT training and support. IT training is provided by partner organisations such as MAES digital drop-ins and Citizens Advice's digital support. More than 600 PCs are in place in libraries and all are heavily used. Since July 2020 when libraries reopened, over 20% of visits have been for Internet access and in some cases this is between 30-40%. Many of these customers have said that they did not use the Internet at all since March when libraries closed. The guidance relating to the second lockdown beginning in November classed libraries as an essential service, because of their crucial role in providing Internet access, particularly to those without access at home. Whilst other cultural venues and similar organisations were closed, libraries stayed open to provide essential computer use. This further shows the recognition for the importance of digital inclusion and libraries role in it.

The Work and Team have also developed a number of initiatives in aim to tackle the digital divide, particularly activity that supports our third sector organisations to sustain the delivery of digital skills support in our communities. In 2019, Work and Skills established a cross-sectoral Digital Inclusion Working Group, which now has over 50 members who meet bimonthly to share resource, their learning, to identify resident's barriers to learning and to plan action.

The Work and Skills Team has also been working in partnership with Barclays and MMU on the Barclays Digital Eagles programme. This programme not only provides students with access to digital industry led training but they also gain the foundational skills needed for employment by 'buddying' with our third sector organisations to support residents with their digital skills, who therefore also benefit from the programme. So far (including during lockdown), the initiative has supported 29 students and 10 Community organisations including Shelter, North Manchester Community Partnership, North Manchester Black Health Forum, Barlow Moor Community Centre, Chrysalis Family Centre and Wythenshawe Good Neighbours. Work and Skills are working with MMU to further develop a more bespoke training model for the new year.

Despite there being a number of digital inclusion initiatives delivered by both internal departments and external partners across the city, there is a need for a more joined up approach, since the majority of those who are digitally excluded or have low digital skills are also socially excluded experiencing a number of interrelated barriers. Many of our third sector organisations who are at the heart of reaching and positively engaging residents to be online are hyper local and have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, many of them having to close their physical community venues and offer support digitally.

There is a stronger need for a multi-agency approach towards gathering more up-to-date and local intelligence that helps to identify the reasons behind low-uptake of current digital learning initiatives across the city and build a better understanding of the support needs of residents becoming and staying engaged with digital. Using these findings to better coordinate initiatives should enhance the current offer ensuring all residents are supported to have access, skills, motivation and trust to go online and stay online, bridging the digital divide.

### **3.2 Manchester Digital Inclusion working Group**

The creation of the working group came from listening to our front facing services and third sector organisations who shared with us their concerns about the growing digital divide and the need for better connected efforts to tackle the problem. The aims of the working group which have been informed and agreed by members include; Connecting services and provision across the city and strengthening partnership working and target provision for those groups that are hardest to reach.

Most recently a number of subgroups have been established to focus and better drive forward actions. Subgroups include; residents for whom English is not their first language and ethnic minorities residents led by libraries; and Health, Care and wellbeing - led by MHCC.

The working group very early on, identified motivation as being a key and challenging barrier to engaging residents with digital. To start to tackle this, the working group commissioned a piece of work that promoted a diverse range of positive stories of how becoming digital had enhanced the lives of local people.

Manchester artist and storyteller Len Grant, who has for over a number of years worked in partnership with the Council - listening to and documenting local people's experiences of regeneration, has created a small booklet showcasing sketches of eight residents that have over time engaged with members of the working group to digitally upskill. The sketches tell their stories and share their experiences through their own words. Themes such as money saving, accessing healthcare, socialising and employment are featured. Booklets have now been cascaded across community spaces including, pharmacists and local shops. An example can be found in Appendix ...and the booklet is also accessible online - <https://www.lengrant.co.uk/work/digital-inclusion-booklet-2020/>

The Manchester Digital Inclusion Working Group has been crucial in supporting the council to know how best to support the digital inclusion agenda, identifying the areas of the city in most need and the groups that support digitally excluded residents in those areas.

### **3.3 Get GM Digital Programme**

The Work and Skills Team received £50k funding from GMCA's get 'Get GM Digital' programme. They used the funds to work more closely with libraries and to recruit to the role of a Digital Inclusion Officer, in aim to increase both teams resource and capacity to scale up and better focus the activity reducing the digital divide.

Together the Work and skills and Libraries teams set a number of objectives; have more conversations with those residents who have been identified as the most digitally excluded, to gain a better understanding of their challenges and motivations and to work closely with community organisations to find better ways of reaching those communities that remain digitally excluded. Evidence the challenge of digital inclusion faced by residents across the city. Support VCSE sector organisations to upskill their workforce. Enhance existing digital provision and embedding new digital

provision across their offers. Create a communications campaign that promotes the benefits of engaging with digital and remaining online.

Due to the impact of Covid-19 many of these objectives have been put into action much quicker than expected and a further developed Digital Inclusion Action Plan has also been developed in aim to better coordinate efforts and drive further change.

Appendix

#### **4.0 Manchester Digital Inclusion Action Plan - supporting the Council's COVID response and recovery**

Efforts to help stop the spread of the coronavirus are disrupting every aspect of our lives and technology is being used as a solution to supporting people through this new way of living. This means that those of our residents who are already digitally excluded or have low levels of digital skills are at risk of becoming even more vulnerable as they find themselves unable to; access vital services, stay informed and keep in contact with friends or family - becoming completely socially isolated.

Now more than ever it is essential that we ensure all residents, particularly some of our more vulnerable and socially excluded residents, can engage with an offer that enables them to become equipped with or further develop the skills needed to access and benefit from being online.

The Manchester Digital Inclusion Action Plan is going to enable more residents to not only cope through the uncertainty of the pandemic but also to become more independent and self-serving. More independent and self-serving communities will provide the opportunity for public sector resources to be focussed on those most in need and will help to deliver recovery plans by proactively enabling more residents to later recover from the impact of this global emergency. Encouraging people to upskill and retrain now could play a huge part in reducing the digital divide for the future.

#### **4.1 Support for residents with home Internet access, but without the skills and/ or the confidence to use it effectively**

As lockdown approached it soon became clear that there were many residents who had home Internet access but didn't have the skills and/ or the confidence to use it effectively. The Council's COVID Response hub promoted digital support as one of its services, so Work and Skills and Libraries launched an initiative to provide that support to those which made contact. Managed by libraries, members of the Digital Inclusion Working Group, have come together to resource a digital support service.

The service involves residents receiving digital support over the phone from a digital champion on things such as how to turn on a device, setting up an email account, making video calls, doing online supermarket shopping and accessing health information. The list of digital champions includes members of staff from the Libraries Team, the Work and Skills Team MAES, Citizens Advice and YES Manchester. We have also recruited approximately 50 volunteers so far, from a combination of MCRVIP and Macc.

Residents accessed the service through the Community Hub, set up during COVID and through being referred by other Council services and external partner organisations. Residents can now also access the service through the Council's contact centre and by self-referring themselves or friends and family through the digital inclusion inbox or for those completely offline by texting 07860064128.

Diversity is at the heart of this service and an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) was conducted when establishing this service. We have been mindful to ensure that our volunteers come from a range of backgrounds and we can so far offer support in up to 16 languages.

Nearly 500 residents have been supported through this initiative since May and will continue to be supported post COVID. The model that has been developed is sustainable, as libraries (for whom digital inclusion is a key priority), continue to manage the service and provide staff to support it. Members of the working group also continue to staff the service and additional volunteers are continuing to be recruited.

Through early analysis of the data coming through this service, we have been able to identify a number of trends. For example - the largest number of referrals have come from those contacting the Council for food support, as well as from residents who the Council was moving from food support to online supermarket shopping. In addition, referrals are most common from areas of the city where digital exclusion is most prevalent - the more deprived areas of the city. The majority of residents now access the service directly through the text number.

#### **4.2 Support for residents with no home Internet access**

Many residents across the city have been disadvantaged through lockdown without having any home access to the Internet. Making significant change and reductions to the numbers of people affected is a long-term task. In the short term, we have looked to increase the number of residents with home access to the Internet through donating Internet devices to priority residents.

In April we donated tablets, with Internet to residents as part of the national DevicesDotNow scheme. 20 tablets were donated, and were used by people facing the early phases of lockdown, and we partnered with Citizens Advice Manchester to distribute 10 more. These people were able to connect to friends and family and access information, improving their quality of life.

Building on our learning from that scheme, we secured 110k investment to purchase 400, Wi-Fi enabled Chromebooks for donation to residents without Internet access. The Council has provided 100k of Hardship Fund and One Manchester has provided 10k.

Starting from Mid-October, during national 'Get Online Week' all 400 chromebooks have been delivered to residents. The recipients were identified as having no access by the Council's COVID hub and through referrals by partner organisations. The Chromebooks were given to people who most closely match the criteria that was been developed by a small steering group.



To be eligible for a device, residents had to be 19+, a resident of Manchester and have no fit for purpose Internet access at home. They also had to meet one or more of the following: be disabled, have a long-term health condition, be over 65 or have low income. Each resident has been given support by one of our digital champions, who are acting as a one to one buddy to the resident.

A large majority of residents that were referred for a device were Black and Asian residents. Over half of the residents receiving a device have reported they have a disability or long-term health condition.

Early feedback has been hugely positive with residents already being able to contact family and friends, access courses and access information online. This has been particularly timely with the second lockdown. Early feedback that has been provided to the buddies already shows the impact upon residents. Several have reported that residents who have never used the Internet now use it multiple times a day. The range of uses of the Chromebooks demonstrates the importance of this projects. These include booking online shopping, contacting friends, accessing courses, maintaining universal credit, applying for jobs and booking GP appointments. Several residents who were reporting they were 'not at all confident' at using the Internet are already 'fairly confident' after only a couple of weeks use, and 2 phone calls from their buddy.

Approximately 80 of the residents who received chromebooks already have Wi-Fi installed in their home, but no device to access the Internet. This has released 80 Sims with Internet access until March 2021 which are being distributed to additional residents via the community groups represented at the Digital Inclusion Working Group.

This is a pilot project, which will demonstrate significant outcomes, possibly leading to further funding. Healthcare partners are already applying for internal funding opportunities in aim to collaborate on tackling the access challenge with us. To assess the digital capabilities of recipients and the success of the initiative the Work and Skills Team has commissioned Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) to conduct an evaluation which will analyse the progress made by the recipients of the devices, and the difference made to their lives.

In addition to the schemes mentioned above. The Work and Skills Team has also supported the community initiative My Outsourced IT. The device gifting initiative is delivered by IT entrepreneur Andy Young. During lockdown he wanted to use his skills and fortune to refurbish and donate devices to families and young people wanted to access the internet to engage with learning. This initiative very quickly went viral via communities and neighbourhoods from both those wanting to donate old devices or benefit from a refurbished one.

Through developing a relationship with the Council, this GM eco-friendly initiative had a huge increase in both donations and referrals for Manchester residents. To support this initiative and enable more Manchester residents to get access to a device, the Work and Skills Team liaised with the Sharp Project who offered to host Andy in their new Arbata building on a 3-month lease.

Work and Skills have recently facilitated the 'Access to the internet for our children and young people' webinar through the Manchester Digital Skills Network. There were 60 attendees including representatives from third sector, schools, colleges, skills providers, DWP and healthcare. As a result of this conversation a number of sub groups have been arranged for members of the network and attendees of the wider webinar can collaborative on action reducing the digital divide.

## **5.0 Adult education Providers role with tackling the digital divide**

Our Adult Education providers have rapidly and successfully adapted to the needs of their current learners but for those residents who are potential learners and already digitally excluded, or have recently become so as a result of the crisis, use of the internet is not an option, leaving many unable to engage with learning opportunities.

Adult education providers are well placed to enable residents to develop their digital skills. This has now been recognised at a national policy level and a new Essential Digital Skills qualification has been launched for the 20/21 academic year. The new qualification is regarded as a 'legal entitlement' which means it is fully funded for 19+ learners and that digital skills are now given the same status as English and maths.

The new qualifications are underpinned by a framework which contains four elements, problem solving; communicating, transacting and handling information and content. They are much broader than previous equivalent qualifications and help to define what is meant by a digital skills course as opposed to an IT course.

MAES has updated its Digital Skills offer for this academic year to include three types of course; the new Essential Digital Skills course; a non-accredited beginners' course and Skills Up (an informal workshop which is specifically planned around the motivations and interests of participants).

In response to the pandemic, adult learning providers developed different models of blended and distance learning. This has enabled them to reduce the group sizes that meet in physical classrooms and therefore maintain social distancing whilst also being financially viable. However, in the case of digital inclusion provision, it can be difficult to deliver courses using these approaches because learners do not yet have the skills to work independently in this way. This necessitates class groups being kept small and makes it more challenging to meet demand. However, providers have been very resourceful since the start of the pandemic and utilised a wide range of approaches to keep digitally excluded learners learning.

## **6.0 Adult education Budget (AEB) Grant Funded Programme**

GMCA are awarding each of the 10 Authorities £150k through the Local Authority Grant Programme. Funded through AEB the programme aims to give Local Authorities (LA's) in GM the opportunity to carry out projects and/or initiatives that support adult skills within their locality, to further support the placed based approach set out by GMCA.

For both strands Work and Skills have in partnership with the City's key adult learning providers decided to recruit in additional resource through two roles – Digital

Inclusion officer and a Manchester Adult Education and Skills Plan Coordinator. Over the next 12 months this extra resource will enable us to at pace, effectively deliver more of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan as well as the Manchester Adult Education and Skills Plan.

The Digital Inclusion Officer will sit under the Libraries Team structure and will focus on strengthening links and communications between third sector organisations and adult education providers delivering the digital entitlement offer in Manchester, to improve referrals between grassroots organisations and AEB providers, help us to better understand the digital inclusion challenge and bridge the digital divide. The Coordinator will sit under the Work and Skills Team structure and will work collaboratively to break down barriers to learning including; communication between providers, promotion of provision, accessibility outreach to residents, digital skills pathways between informal community provision and the digital entitlement offer, Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and labour market intelligence.

GMCA have also awarded each of the 10 Authorities £50k funding to purchase digital kit/ connectivity to help challenge the huge access barrier. The Work and Skills Team have proposed this funding specifically supports our residents who have been identified as likely to be digitally excluded and most impacted from COVID (through both the 'Evidencing the challenge of digital exclusion in the city of Manchester' report and the Economy Recovery 'THINK' report) - over 65, disabled or belonging to an ethnic minority groups, who may no longer be able to interact with a service offer due to the increase of digital transformation.

Through conversations with some of our key community organisations offering learning and employment training, we have identified that although organisations have great links into our communities, many are having to offer their service in a very different and very digital way. For those residents who would usually interact through face to face this is no longer the norm. Many of the residents who were doing so for a number of reasons including affordability - are digitally excluded and so kit being provided for those linked to an organisation will mean they can still engage with a service and continue any learning, wellbeing or employment opportunities they were being supported to complete.

For this project to be successful it needs to be well informed by our community partners and so some consultation needs to be facilitated before delivery. We are having conversations with other authorities who have successfully delivered very similar schemes within their own localities.

We are also currently consulting in detail with partners and groups who support residents with disabilities to ensure that our full range of initiatives can be accessed by people with different types of disability. Similarly, we have also consulted with the Age Friendly Manchester's Older Peoples Board, who are helping to promote the initiatives to support more of our older residents with their digital capabilities.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

To summarise - the impact of COVID has meant that the scale of the digital divide and the importance of tackling the challenge to grow a fair and more inclusive

society has had national recognition. In Manchester we have in a very small space of time made great steps towards making a real difference and reducing the numbers of those who are unable to access the internet at such a crucial time.

It is clear that we still have a long way to go and to make real change the City needs to commit to listening more to its communities, to understand the complexity of the challenge, gather more intelligence on where engagement is needed and on what's working well, to upscale projects around connectivity and access and, to share positive stories and experience of residents digital learning journey's and the impact being digital enabled has made for them and their life's.

Tapping into resident's motivations through a range of skills provision, as well as ensuring pathways into learning opportunities are strengthened for those most in need is also what we as a City need to focus on.

New services and strong delivery models have been developed in an 'Our Manchester' approach. These services, collaborative models and ways of working will continue for the foreseeable future, both during and moving on from the pandemic and its impact, to make a real difference to people's life's and communities.