

Manchester City Council Report for Information

Report to: Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 7 March 2023

Subject: Digital Inclusion Update – Bridging the digital divide in Manchester

Report of: Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods)

Summary

The purpose of the report is to provide the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee with an update on the Council's digital inclusion work over the last 2 years.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to note the contents of this Report, including the progress made over the last two years and the plans for the future.

Wards Affected: All

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

Libraries support the zero-carbon agenda. This includes high quality, low-carbon buildings that are community hubs to be used by multiple organisations, that libraries encourage books to be read by multiple people and the increase in ebooks – reducing the use of paper.

Increasing residents' ability to be regular, confident online users supports zero-carbon targets by reducing use of paper and reduced travelling.

Specific initiatives in this report support the zero-carbon targets, for example commissioning and supporting the refurbished device scheme that reduces waste, repurposing devices to be used by Manchester residents

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments

As this is an update report, an EQIA has not been carried out specifically on the report. Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion is at the heart of the digital inclusion agenda, with people with the protected characteristics being most likely to be digitally excluded, and being disproportionately affected by exclusion

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	The Council's digital inclusion work supports a thriving and sustainable city. The programme will increase the number of residents who are skilled online users. It will help people to improve their skills, become increasingly employable and apply for work on-line.
A highly skilled city: world class and home-grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	The Council's digital inclusion work supports Manchester to be a highly skilled city. The programme will increase the number of residents who are skilled online users. It will help people to improve their skills, become increasingly employable and apply for work on-line.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	Libraries are at the heart of our communities and offer a wide range of services and activities for free that help to build and maintain community cohesion and place pride.
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	Increasing residents' ability to be regular, confident online users supports zero-carbon targets by reducing use of paper and reduced travelling to face-to-face appointments.
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	Our digital inclusion programme is increasing connectivity in homes, and people's ability to be online.

Full details are in the body of the report, along with any implications for:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Risk Management
- Legal Considerations

Financial Consequences – Revenue

None

Financial Consequences – Capital

None

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Background documents (available for public inspection): None

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Digital Exclusion affects tens of thousands of Manchester's residents. Digital exclusion is where a person doesn't have one or more of the following access to the Internet, skills/confidence to use the Internet or motivation to use the Internet. People who are digitally excluded are also likely to suffer from other social exclusion and are disproportionately affected by not being online. There is a very close link between digital exclusion and levels of deprivation.
- 1.2 Digital exclusion often links to other forms of social exclusion: people who are not confident online users can have worse life chances than those that are. They are more likely to suffer social isolation and loneliness, have lower skills and job prospects, unable to access services online (for example applying for housing), reduced access to information, and in general have a lower quality of life. Reducing digital exclusion is intrinsically linked to reducing the widening of inequality.
- 1.3 Over the last 25 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 community organisations to support them to continue to reach more of our neighbourhoods to support them to access and utilise the internet.
- 1.4 This report shows the progress that has been made with supporting digital inclusion since the last report to Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee on 3rd December 2020. The Libraries Digital Inclusion Team have developed and implemented 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. The digital inclusion work is a key element of the Digital Strategy that is detailed in the main body of the report, and shown in full in Appendix 2.

2.0 Bridging the Digital Divide in Manchester

2.1 Manchester Digital Strategy 2021-2026: Doing Digital Together

Digital inclusion is an integral part of the Doing Digital Together strategy. The strategy puts people at centre and specifically sets out priorities to achieve digital inclusion across the city. The first theme of the digital strategy is 'Remarkable People, Extraordinary Opportunities'. Previously known as 'Smart People' this theme recognises that digital inclusion and digital skills make up the essential foundation for making Manchester one of the world's leading smart cities and digital economies.

2.2 Inclusion is about ensuring people have access to the connectivity, devices, and skills they need to make the most of the digital world, but it is more than that. It is also about ensuring that there is diversity within the tech sector and STEM careers, reflecting the diversity of the city itself – for instance, with more women, people experiencing racial inequalities and disabled people, being able to access opportunities and being supported within the right cultural environments to be a part of the workforce and progress in their digital careers.

2.3 The strategy also plays a role in providing opportunity for improved diversity in those participating in co-designing and shaping the delivery of the strategy and the city's digital future.

2.4 The strategy therefore commits to several priorities to ensure inclusion, equalities, and diversity underpin the digital agenda:

- Deepening our understanding of digital inclusion by delivering the Digital Inclusion Action Plan and further developing the Digital Exclusion Index in collaboration with the VCSE sector and residents (priority 1.1);
- Developing specific interventions and programmes of activity to promote the opportunities of the sector to under-represented groups and create a more inclusive employer culture, particularly for people experiencing racial inequalities, women, disabled people and older people (priority 2.2);
- Work with the digital ecosystem to ensure that Manchester residents are given opportunities and support to be able to compete for and progress into high value employment (priority 1.7);
- Using evidence from the Digital Exclusion Index and asset mapping to identify and audit priority neighbourhood areas (priority 2.4).

2.5 Commitment made within the Manchester Digital Strategy towards this thematic area can be found in Appendix 2.

2.6 Helping the delivery of Corporate Priorities

2.7 The Digital Inclusion Action Plan, shown in Appendix 1, has been delivered over the last couple of years, to improve the lives of residents. It is central to the people-focussed Digital Strategy that is described in 2.2 and shown in full in Appendix 2. The work also feeds into The GMCA Digital Blueprint, with the Digital Inclusion Team and the Action Plan being a key delivery mechanism for the GMCA Digital Inclusion Action Network.

2.8 The digital inclusion work, designed to improve the lives of Manchester's residents aligns with the priorities of the region, the city and Manchester City Council. Our initiatives outlined throughout this report are integral to the city's recovery from Covid – which highlighted that digitally excluded people's lives were disproportionately affected by lockdown. The digital inclusion work is also key component of the Council's Cost of Living Crisis response, for

example preventing more people from becoming digitally excluded again as they are unable to afford Internet data costs.

2.9 Digital inclusion has been recognised as being central to the Building Back Fairer work (in response to the Marmot report into health inequalities) with digital inclusion being part of each pilot project. Digital Inclusion is also central to the emerging Family Hub work. There is a close correlation between low literacy levels and digital exclusion, so many of the Education priorities, including Read Manchester, rely on our programmes to reduce digital exclusion.

2.10 The Council is currently transforming the way it delivers services digitally to residents through the Resident and Business Digital Experience Programme (RBDxP), and the Digital Inclusion Action Plan helps residents to take benefit from this programme. In 2021 our digital inclusion work was essential in ensuring high returns to the 2021 Census, which was a 'digital-first' census.

2.11 Voter Id

2.12 For the first time, voters will be required to produce ID in the Local Elections of May 2023. Many of Manchester's residents do not currently have any of the prescribed ID to enable them to vote. People are able to apply online for a Voter Authority Certificate, which will enable them to vote. However, there is likely to be a correlation between people who do not have existing ID and digitally excluded people. Therefore Libraries, including the Digital Inclusion Team, are essential to encourage and enable people to be able to gain the Voter Authority Certificate. We support residents to apply online – both via the Team's telephone service outlined in 2.3.3.3, and through libraries. Each library has a session each week where residents will be supported to apply online, including taking and uploading a photograph. These sessions have been publicised and will be further throughout March and April, including through pop-ups, Council tax mailings and with the poll card themselves, until the deadline on 25th April. This is an example of how libraries and the digital inclusion work is essential to the priorities of the Council and to residents.

2.13 Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2021-23

2.14 This section shows the progress that has been made with supporting digital inclusion since the last report to Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee on 3rd December 2020. A hugely wide-ranging programme has delivered many outcomes that benefit our residents, helping them overcome the disadvantages of being socially excluded, helping recovery from the pandemic and to cope with the current cost of living situation.

2.15 The Digital Inclusion Team was formed within the library service in 2020 and grew to support residents during the Covid lockdown and to support residents recover from the pandemic. The Team complemented and further enhanced the library service's long-standing role as the key venues in the city to provide supported access to the Internet and Wi-Fi.

- 2.16 Libraries' role was recognised by the Government during the pandemic, when libraries were classified as essential services, largely around their provision of free Internet access. During the pandemic over 25% of visits to the library were to access the Internet. Moreover, a disproportionate amount of the Internet access is from residents who live in areas with higher levels of deprivation – this is shown in Appendix 4. Since Covid restrictions were lifted, IT drop-in sessions have been re-introduced into every library in the city, meaning that residents can access the Internet for free, via PCs and Wi-Fi, and also receive support and training. This is complemented by organisations such as Manchester Adult Education Service who deliver digital drop-ins in several libraries, as well as in MAES centres. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan involves work inside libraries, but mostly activity outside of libraries.
- 2.17 Our Digital Inclusion programme of work has increasingly been driven by data, regarding the different levels of risk of digital exclusion that residents face in different parts of the city. We will continue to develop the Digital Exclusion Index with the Council's Performance, Research and Intelligence team in order to target our initiatives in the areas of the city deemed most at risk of digital exclusion. Appendix 3 shows the areas of the city with the highest risk of digital exclusion. Seven of the ten highest wards are in North Manchester, with Miles Platting and Newton Heath being the most affected. Therefore, much of our digital inclusion programme has been focused in these areas.
- 2.18 To complement this quantitative data, we have commissioned a 3-part piece of work with Open Data Manchester to examine the lived experiences of those people defined as digitally excluded. Phase 1 (on the motivations and support needs of digital champions) completed last autumn and [a report](#) was published. Phases 2 and 3 (on community research into digital exclusion) are in progress.
- 2.19 The digital inclusion programme is a combination of building the capacity of VCSE organisations to support residents with digital exclusion and delivery of services directly to residents inside and outside of libraries. The direct delivery schemes are described below.

2.20 Device schemes

- 2.21 Lack of a devices that connect to the Internet is a common barrier to being digitally included. We have initiated several device donation schemes to increase the number of Manchester residents with Internet access. Our first device donation scheme in 2020 delivered 400 Chromebooks with free data. The second scheme in 2021-22 delivered a further 400 Chromebooks, 150 Tablets and 50 Smartphones with free data. These were funded through a variety of internal Covid recovery funding, and external funding.
- 2.22 To make device schemes more sustainable we commissioned an organisation to refurbish old devices and sell them at low-cost to Manchester residents.
- 2.23 Community Computers were commissioned and have so far sold 250 devices to Manchester residents. Each library acts as a donation point, thus enabling

residents to recycle their old devices for the benefit of other residents, instead of throwing them away.

2.24 At the start of 2023, we have been given 200 laptops as part of a social value contract with XMA. Of these, 100 will be donated to VCSE organisations to help with digital skills sessions for their clients, and 100 will be donated to priority residents, for example Cost of Living Adviceline callers, members of The Bread-and-Butter Thing and care leavers. We are part of the GM-wide care leavers digital support programme where any care leaver can get a free device, free data and free digital skills training so some of the devices will be for this project. In total over the last 2 years approximately 1000 residents have received no-cost or low-cost Internet devices.

2.25 Data

2.26 Lack of connectivity is another barrier to residents, particularly during this cost-of-living crisis as many people cancel their broadband and mobile data packages. We have signed up 17 Manchester libraries to the National Databank so residents can request a free SIM with 6 months' calls, texts and data (donated by Vodafone, O2 and Three). We have given over 1000 Manchester residents free data using these SIMs. We have also given free MiFi dongles to residents, so they can access the internet for free at home using these donated SIM cards. In the past 2 years we have provided over 1400 Manchester residents with free data to access the Internet

2.27 Skills

2.28 The lack of skills and confidence to use technology safely and effectively is another reason for being digitally excluded. There are thousands of residents who have Internet access but don't have the skills or confidence to use it. During the pandemic we established a digital champions scheme where volunteers, libraries staff and staff from partner organisations offered remote support over the phone to digitally excluded residents. Residents contacted us by texting, or by being referred to us by email. Since this time our digital champions have supported over 1000 residents. Since the start of 2021 we have supported 400 residents. Support provided including online food shopping, booking GP appointments, setting up and email, contacting friends, families and employers by Zoom, and completing the 2021 Census. This bank of volunteers can offer support to residents over the phone or in person at libraries. In the last 2 years we have recruited and trained 42 volunteers. Our text line and email service are still operational and are being offered as a support service for the Voter Authority Certificate scheme.

2.29 To increase awareness of digital support across the city, we have created a directory of digital drop-ins across the city, including library and VCSE sector drop-in sessions - <https://hsm.manchester.gov.uk/kb5/manchester/directory/results.page?directorychannel=9-1>. We are sharing this directory widely with organisations across the city, so they know where in their local community to signpost residents for

digital support. We also work closely with Manchester Adult Education to ensure that residents are aware of the free digital skills courses on offer.

2.30 Community Engagement – roadshows

- 2.31 In 2022, we engaged directly with residents at approximately 20 roadshows/engagement events. The events were targeted to areas with high risk of digital exclusion, based on the Digital Exclusion Index. A key purpose of the roadshows was to increase our understanding of those communities we are supporting to become more digitally included, to trial different ‘hooks’ and further understand the motivations of residents to engage with support offers. We talked to over 600 people during these events, and increased our partnership with community organisations who attended the sessions with us.
- 2.32 The engagement was informative with access, skills and motivation all playing a part in why residents were not confident online users. With disengagement being a key factor of social and digital exclusion, it became clear that trialling new innovative approaches & being more embedded within the communities was key rather than just promotion of existing support sessions in communities.

2.33 VCSE Sector support

- 2.34 A key element of our digital inclusion work is supporting existing groups in the VCSE sector and building capacity to enable organisations to continue offering support in communities. It is imperative that the Council is not seen as the main delivery solution to combat digital exclusion, but that we support existing provision in communities. We have established the Digital Inclusion Working group which meets six times a year and progresses work in between meetings. All members have one common goal – to reduce the amount of digitally excluded people in Manchester. Membership includes the digital inclusion team, other Council staff, digital skills providers, community groups, MACC. Group members value the support provided and the forum to share best practice on issues such as supporting older people, supporting visually impaired people and funding opportunities.
- 2.35 Where possible, we also provide physical support to community organisations who support residents with digital inclusion, for example we are providing 100 devices to local community organizations in the next two months, using devices supplied as part of the XMA social value agreement as outlined in 2.3.3.1. Promoting the grassroots digital inclusion offer is key, including the creation and maintenance of the directory in 2.3.3.3.

2.36 Let’s Get Digital campaign and communications

- 2.37 In 2021, following consultation with residents, the Let's Get Digital Manchester campaign was produced. This branding can be used by all organisations in Manchester, not just the Council, to raise awareness of digital inclusion support.

2.38 The <https://www.letsgetdigitalmanchester.com/> website was created to reach both residents directly and key stakeholders supporting people online such as community organisations. The website includes a digital skills sessions directory, links to direct to the Community Computers shop and a 'how to' for the Digital Exclusion Index.

2.39 We began sending a Let's Get Digital monthly newsletter in October 2022, which is used to promote digital inclusion and digital support initiatives. And created a Twitter account [@LetsGetDigiMcr](https://twitter.com/LetsGetDigiMcr) to share support offers with partners across the city and the UK.

2.40 UK Communities Renewal Fund Report

2.41 In 2022 we successfully bid to the Good Things Foundation, receiving £10k funding as part of their UKCRF project to increase the links from grassroots organisations to formal Adult Education Budget/Further Education, increasing the amount of people making that transition. Our funding was to undertake research into the situation in Manchester and produce a report. This report is included as appendix 4, and includes insight from our device donation schemes – outlined in 2.3.3.1 and roadshows outlined in 2.3.3.4.

2.42 Sustainability of the digital inclusion programme

2.43 The digital inclusion programme is crucial to supporting residents across the city, particularly in those areas with the highest levels of deprivation. The work is key to multiple high-profile corporate priorities. The work to date has been funded from a variety of areas. This includes Covid recovery funding, Contain Outbreak Management Fund, £50k per year from GMCA, Digital Strategy funding, external funding (e.g. from successful Good Things Foundation bids) and social value contracts. All options are being explored to ensure sustainability of the programme. This includes the £50k per annum that each authority in GM has received in recent years specifically to support digital inclusion. It is essential for the portfolio of work to remain agile and strategically aligned.

2.44 Future priorities and projects

2.45 The Digital Inclusion programme has done a huge amount to tackle digital exclusion in Manchester, but there continues to be much more to do. Digital exclusion is still affecting the lives of thousands of Manchester's residents, especially with the current cost of living situation. Our most vulnerable residents continue to be disproportionately affected by being digitally excluded. The work is now being guided by the Digital Inclusion Steering Group chaired by Councillor Adele Douglas, Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure. The group which meets every two months consists of strategic representatives from organisation across sectors. The Digital Inclusion Action Plan outlined in Appendix 1 summarises our priorities agreed by the Steering Group. The following specific projects will be key in enabling us to achieve our priorities:

- 2.46 We will continue to deliver device, data and skills initiatives. We will donate devices to priority residents (care leavers, cost of living helpline callers, food bank users). We will continue to support people through the cost of living crisis by provide data via the National databank sims schemes. We will continue to grow and promote the directory of digital drop-ins and accredited courses, the monthly newsletter and the Twitter account. We will continue to offer telephone support to residents who have Internet access but don't have the skills or confidence to use it effectively – supporting specific initiatives such as Voter Authority Certificate applications.
- 2.47 We have been awarded £2k funding from the Good Things Foundation to build awareness of the Learn My Way platform. We will pilot the promotion of Learn My Way in Central Library. Following this pilot, we aim to promote Learn My Way as digital skills support in all libraries.
- 2.48 We will increase links with health organisations to increase digital inclusion. We are currently developing digital health hubs around GP practices to promote the use of digital health tools, improve residents access to health services and reduce pressure on NHS services. Pilots are planned for Wythenshawe and Gorton.
- 2.49 We will pilot a device lending library with The Bread and Butter Thing in Wythenshawe. This trial will potentially prove a sustainable solution that can be copied to other areas of the city, helping overcome the lack of Internet access for digitally excluded residents.
- 2.50 Following a small pilot scheme last year with Be Well social prescribers, we will deliver another device + skills scheme with people identified by their Be Well coach as being in need of a device and skills support. The focus will be on improving health and wellbeing using technology.
- 2.51 We will work with Mcr Active to offer skills support within libraries to residents who struggle to book leisure sessions online, due to lack of Internet access and skills.
- 2.52 In partnership with the University of Manchester and the Age Friendly team, we will support older people with the Keep On Keep Up app project by donating tablets. The KOKU App helps older people take control of their health and reduce the risk of falls.
- 2.53 As the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) switch off is happening across the country (with final switch off by 2025), we will advise teams across MCC (notably the Community Alarms team) on how to support residents with the switch off and assess what support is needed for vulnerable residents, particularly older people.
- 2.54 Following a successful commission in 2022, we will continue to work with Community Computers, particularly in securing regular, large donations of old devices from Manchester-based organisations. This will reduce waste and

increase the amount of low-cost Internet devices available to be purchased by Manchester's residents

- 2.55 We will continue to support the VCSE sector by providing expertise, a support network, promotion opportunities, and where possible access to funding / devices. If more devices become available via social value, some of these will be made available to grassroots organisations that support digital inclusion in local neighbourhoods.

3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 The Committee is asked to note the contents of this Report, including the progress made over the last two years and the plans for the future.

4.0 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2023

Appendix 2 – Manchester Digital Strategy 2021-2026: Remarkable People, Extraordinary Opportunities – Description and Delivery Plan year 2022-23 key priorities

Appendix 3 – Wards in Manchester where digital exclusion is highest

Appendix 4 - Library computer users compared to Index of Multiple Deprivation

Appendix 5 – Our Report to Good Things Foundation, as part of their UK Communities Renewal Fund project