

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet - 18th September, 2023

Report Title

Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Judith Badger, Strategic Director of Finance and Customer Services

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

Digital inclusion remains a challenge for some people in Rotherham and a lack of digital access can have a detrimental impact on residents. The associated problems can be significant for citizens and families contributing to educational and economic disadvantage, health inequalities and increased social isolation.

The Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion programme was established in 2021 to gain a better understanding of the extent to which digital exclusion affects our local communities; and to identify the barriers that prevent people accessing and benefiting from online services and digital channels.

Through consultations held with a wide range of local people, the cross-organisational Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group has since co-created a Digital Inclusion strategy and action plan that has been designed to target those in the borough that are most at risk of digital exclusion.

The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with an update on the progress of the Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion programme and to seek their endorsement and support to the approach being taken.

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Notes the work undertaken to date as part of the Digital Inclusion programme.
2. Endorse the co-designed Digital Inclusion Strategy and support the approach being taken to help people and communities who are most at risk from digital exclusion.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion strategy
Appendix 2 Digital Inclusion Action Plan
Appendix 3 Equality Analysis – Part A
Appendix 4 Equality Analysis – Part B
Appendix 5 Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Papers

N/A

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None –

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan

1. Background

- 1.1 The Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion Programme was established in June 2021 to achieve the following outcomes:
- Tackle inequalities within our communities that digital exclusion contributes to.
 - Work with the third sector to develop and support community engagement and a sustainability model.
 - Maintain and build the Digital Inclusion Partnership.
 - Identify and capitalise on social accountability across health and social care.
 - Establish a temporary 'digital inclusion group' to support the above outcomes and ensure all interested parties and organisations are involved.
 - Work with partners to improve and expand their digital offers.
 - Identify and pool potential match funding to support the programme and future sustainability.
 - Increase the take up of online services across the borough and sustain and grow digital engagement to the benefit of all.
- 1.2 The programme funding was secured through the NHS Digital Aspirant Programme grant (£200,000), RMBC Capital Digital Strategy (£200,000) and 2021/22 Council revenue budget (£50,000).
- 1.3 A cross organisational stakeholder working group was established to jointly input into and shape the aims and outcome of the Digital Inclusion programme; ensuring the needs of all customers and communities within the Rotherham place are fully considered and represented in all digital inclusion activities and reflected within a future co-designed Digital Inclusion strategy.
- 1.4 The Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group currently consists of representation from different organisations within the Rotherham Place including AGE UK Rotherham, Rotherfed, Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR), Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance (REMA), NHS, RNN Colleges and Rotherham Council; although membership invitations are likely to be extended as the delivery of the programme progresses.
- 1.5 The Council's Year Ahead Delivery Plan, sets out the following Digital Inclusion outcomes and timescales:

Expanding economic opportunity					
Ref	Outcome	Activity	Lead officer	Lead directorate	Timescales for delivery (from and to)

4.12	Strengthening digital infrastructure and skills which enable access for all	Identify measures to improve digital inclusion through consultation with communities.	Luke Sayers <i>Assistant Director Customer, Information and Digital</i>	Finance and Customer Services	December 2022 - Complete
4.13		Develop a Digital Inclusion Strategy.	Luke Sayers <i>Assistant Director Customer, Information and Digital</i>	Finance and Customer Services	December 2022 - July 2023 Complete

1.6 The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet’s endorsement of the programme together with their continued support in delivering the actions identified to increase digital inclusion across the borough.

2. Key Issues

2.1 When the Digital Inclusion programme was first established, it became apparent that whilst both national and regional data provided an indication of digital activity/engagement across the Yorkshire/Humber region, the extent to which local people felt digitally excluded was unknown.

2.2 An independent Rotherham Digital Inclusion baseline review was therefore undertaken between January and March 2022. This involved over 700 residents who took part via face-to-face focus groups, postal questions and online surveys; each participant sharing their views and experiences of using technology, and their digital worries and concerns.

2.3 The baseline review identified:

- Groups that are at high-risk of digital inclusion:
 - Older People
 - Deprivation
 - Long Term Conditions / Learning Disability
 - Disadvantaged Young People
- Areas of the borough at particularly high-risk of digital exclusion as a result of the combination of deprivation and poor internet infrastructure:
 - East Herringthorpe
 - Rotherham Central
 - Thrybergh
 - Maltby East
- Common barriers to digital inclusion:
 - Internet availability in venues such as sheltered housing.

- Language.
- Residents wanting more 'one to one' support to help them use their own devices and be more aware of internet safety.
- Age – increasing age increases the need for digital support, but there are also pockets of younger people who are at risk of being digitally excluded.
- Based on the survey responses around 54% of residents need some form of digital support.

2.4 The review provided the Council and other Stakeholder group members with a better understanding of:

- The level and quality of the 'digital offer' of services within the Rotherham Place.
- Local appetite for digital inclusion.
- Barriers that prevent the people of Rotherham accessing and benefiting from online services and digital channels.
- Groups and areas of the borough that are most at risk of digital exclusion.
- Existing digital inclusion activity (and gaps) across the Rotherham Place.
- The digital maturity of Rotherham provider organisations based on the 'What Good Looks Like' (WGLL) framework which is used to accelerate digital and data transformation.

3. **Options considered and recommended proposal**

3.1 **Option 1 – Do nothing (not recommended)**

One of the primary aims of the Digital Inclusion programme was to identify the extent to which local people are digitally excluded.

The Rotherham Place baseline review provided this evidence; identifying both the challenges individual people/groups are facing, and the extent to which digital inequality is affecting some parts of the borough.

These findings confirm that digital exclusion remains a challenge in Rotherham, contributing to educational and economic disadvantage, health inequalities and increased social isolation.

If action is not taken, some communities will continue to face digital inequality and be unable to overcome the barriers that prevent them from being able to access/do things online that others take for granted.

3.2 **Option 2 – Recommended**

Endorse the co-designed Digital Inclusion Strategy and support the approach being taken to help people and communities who are most at risk from digital exclusion.

3.2.1 Digital Inclusion Strategy

Based on the findings of the Rotherham Place Baseline review, members of the Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group worked collaboratively to create the Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion strategy. (**Appendix 1**).

The strategy is person centred and is aligned with the Rotherham Together Partnership and Place Board priorities. It has been deliberately designed to:

- Focus on the things that matter to people who live, work and do business in Rotherham.
- Ensure that anyone who reads it can identify with something in the strategy.
- Be accessible and understandable – using simple, plain and meaningful language with no ‘jargon’.

3.2.2 Digital Inclusion Action Plan

A workshop was held in November 2022 with both residents and organisational representatives. This session was used to agree how best to support Rotherham’s most digitally excluded people and communities, and to identify the actions that would be needed to deliver the outcomes set out in the strategy.

The resultant co-designed Digital Inclusion Action Plan (**Appendix 2**) sets out a range of targeted activities and initiatives to be delivered over the next 12-18 months.

There is no single solution to improving digital inclusion as technology is constantly evolving at speed. The programme’s fundamental approach will therefore be based on test and learn methodology; making best use of resident stories and case studies to highlight successes and identify future opportunities. This will be achieved by:

- Maintaining constant dialogue with all delivery partners, and more importantly through conversations with those who are directly receiving help.
- Consistent and frequent user consultation.
- Capturing evidence of how initiatives and activities are helping residents and enabling them to become more digitally included and active.
- Being confident and decisive as a group.

- Listening to feedback so that we can quickly change or amend anything that isn't working and refocus our energies.
- Keeping residents updated about the programme.
- Re-visiting the groups that took part in the initial baseline report research to share progress and find out from them how the programme is making a difference.

3.2.3 **Activities already underway:**

i) RNN Digital Champions

A volunteer programme has been jointly developed with the RNN group. Students attending Rotherham college who are undertaking a digital qualification are encouraged to volunteer as 'digital champions' to gain experience of working with local people and help them make better use of technology.

- 10 community groups have signed up to be involved in the initial pilot.
- There are 18 student volunteers, who have each been matched to a group that is local to where they live to help limit travelling distances.
- Sessions held to date include:
 - Bramley Coffee Morning, Bill Chafer Centre
 - Catchup Café, Rotherham Minster
 - Mindfulness & Wellbeing, Kimberworth Park
 - The Salvation Army, Maltby

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

- Students say they have felt accepted and welcomed, increasing their communication skills and confidence.
- Community groups have said how extremely useful they found it
- Students have told us that since volunteering, they now feel less nervous going out on placements outside of college.
- RNN feel this work has helped them further strengthen their link with the community which has also led to requests for assistance with other activities unrelated to digital inclusion.

The initiative is set to continue when the college reopens in September.

ii) Good Things Databank Pilot with the libraries

Good Things Foundation offer free sim cards to organisations through their Databank programme.

This is a national programme designed to support people on low income who have limited/no access to online services.

Rotherham Council are piloting the scheme which was launched in May from Riverside House library; enabling local people who might otherwise be unable to afford to communicate/engage digitally to benefit from a free mobile data, calls and texts.

A phased roll out of the free sim card initiative to other Library & Neighbourhood sites will commence in September (Maltby, Rawmarsh, Dinnington and Swinton).

Subject to the success of the initial pilot, it is anticipated that other Stakeholder organisations will sign up to the scheme. In addition, the Digital Support Officers, once in post, will have the ability to offer sim cards directly through their work in the community.

iii) ICT Classes and Employability classes for residents

Free training courses on specific subjects (e.g. Excel and Word) are available across Rotherham, allowing individuals to upskill themselves ready for employment.

Work will continue with the deliverers of these training modules to ensure what they offer is fit for purpose and is promoted in the right way to target those people/communities most likely to benefit.

3.2.4 Future Activities and Initiatives

The Digital Inclusion Action Plan provides a detailed list of all activities and initiatives expected to be delivered over the next 12-18 month period.

Examples include:

- Appointment of 2 FTE Digital Support Officers – to undertake the activities identified in the action plan and deliver interventions across Rotherham Place. These post holders will spend most of their time working within the communities of Rotherham.
- Creation of ‘digital surgeries’ in libraries and community centres; initially as a pilot in one of the areas most at risk of digital exclusion (East Herringthorpe, Rotherham Central, Thrybergh, Maltby East). Surgeries will be organised as ‘drop in’ sessions for anyone wanting to learn more about ‘how to do’ things digitally. For example, attach a photo to an email, call someone using WhatsApp etc.
- Devices – the baseline report indicates that device ownership is a real barrier to being digitally included. There are various best practice examples in other authorities that provide evidence of success with schemes such as device lending services and ‘gifting’ using previously

owned donated devices. This is something that the Stakeholder group are keen to explore and introduce as a proof of concept.

- Community engagement across Rotherham - A key part of the success of this programme is reaching as many people as possible from different demographics within Rotherham; particularly those groups that are harder to reach. A Communication Plan has therefore been created specifically to target people who:
 - Don't use technology and don't plan on using it in the future.
 - Don't have any experience with technology, or don't have the means to get technology - but would really like to have it and learn how to use it.
 - Use some technology but would like help to use it more and improve their digital skills.
 - Are financially excluded from digital.
 - Are digitally confident and want to help others, or signpost them to us (*friends and family digital helpers*).

3.2.5 Evaluation and programme sustainability

A robust and transparent measurement framework has been implemented and adopted, providing the evidence source for continuous evaluation of the Rotherham Digital Inclusion Programme and the impact it is having on the lives of local people.

The Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group will also continue to explore options for additional funding and/or opportunities to benefit from social value and local/national initiatives that contribute to the delivery of the identified actions.

Evaluating the effectiveness of digital inclusion interventions will demonstrate how the programme has added value; the evidence from which can be used to inform "what future delivery would look like.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 The specification document outlining the objectives and intended outcomes of the Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion Baseline review was created and signed off by all members of the Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group.
- 4.2 Over 500 local people shared their thoughts and comments as part of the independent research undertaken to produce the Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion Baseline review:
 - 454 online surveys received.
 - 67 postal surveys returned (500 sent out).

- 9 focus group sessions held across the borough in areas with high levels of deprivation and groups where English isn't the first language.

4.3 Rotherham provider organisations completed a self-assessment across seven key areas using the 'What Good Looks Like' (WGLL) framework which organisations can choose to use to accelerate digital and data transformation. Providers who contributed included VAR, Rotherfed, Clifton Learning Partnership, RMBC, AGE UK Rotherham, and three NHS trusts.

4.4 The strategy and Action Plan workshop that took place in November 2022 was attended by residents and organisational representatives from AGE UK Rotherham, RotherFed, Rotherham Older Peoples Forum, RNN Group, RDASH, NHS, and Rotherham Council.

5. **Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

5.1 The co-designed Digital Inclusion Action Plan sets out a range of targeted activities and initiatives to be delivered over the next 12-18 month period.

5.2 The Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group are responsible for reviewing the progress of the Action Plan; and for ensuring resources and activities focus on the priority groups and communities identified in the baseline review.

5.3 The Digital Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan have been endorsed by the Rotherham Place Board (May 23) and approved by the Rotherham Together Partnership Chief Executive Officers Group (July 23). Further updates will be provided periodically to both the Rotherham Place Board and Rotherham Together Partnership Board.

5.4 Timescale for key actions:

Action	Timescales
Cabinet endorsement of the Digital Inclusion programme, strategy and related actions	September 2023
Launch of Digital Inclusion website	September 2023
Phased roll out of free sim cards to other Library & Neighbourhood Hubs	September 2023
Pilot of digital drop-in centre model	October 2023
12 Month programme review	June 2024

5.1 **Next steps and future actions**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Notes the work undertaken to date as part of the Digital Inclusion programme.
2. Endorse the co-designed Digital Inclusion Strategy and support the approach being taken to help people and communities who are most at risk from digital exclusion.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 Of the original funding, referenced in paragraph 1.2, £334k was available at the start of this financial year (2023/24). Staffing and resource costs required to deliver the action plan are fully funded within the original budget. This includes three staff posts and the cost of website development and digital infrastructure.
- 6.2 There are no direct procurement implications associated with the recommendations detailed in this report. If there is an identified need during the delivery of the action plan to engage third party suppliers for goods, works or services this must be procured in compliance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended) and the Council's own Financial and Procurement Procedure Rules.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 Although this is a non-statutory function, leadership by the Council of the Digital Inclusion agenda across the Borough will assist the Council in the delivery of its other core functions as set out in body of the report, along with the associated benefits described above.
- 7.2 The activities as described in this report are not reserved to Council in legislation or regulations and therefore are executive functions, exercisable by the Cabinet.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 Due consideration would need to be given to any staff employed on a temporary basis, a redundancy payment would potentially be made to those employees who work under a contract of employment with the Council, regardless of the number of hours worked per week, and have at least 2 years' continuous service.
- 8.2 Due HR processes would be followed to mitigate any risk of redundancy and support the employees to finding suitable alternative employment where possible.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 The Digital Inclusion Action Plan sets out a series of activities and initiatives that focus on the groups considered to be most at risk of digital exclusion (as identified in the baseline review); which includes disadvantaged young

people and people of all ages who may be vulnerable through deprivation, long term care or learning disability.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 An Equality Analysis has been undertaken (Appendices 4,5. The Digital Inclusion strategy forms the framework from which the Digital Inclusion programme will tackle the digital divide for all communities and groups.
- 10.2 Both the strategy and action plan have been designed to focus on improving access to technology and increasing digital confidence and skills for all residents and communities; with particular regard to groups with protected characteristics who may be more likely to experience digital exclusion.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 A Carbon Impact assessment has been undertaken (Appendix 5)
- 11.2 The Digital Inclusion programme aims to encourage individuals to reduce their digital carbon footprint by managing electronic devices properly and more efficiently.

It will also encourage targeted groups to have greater dependency on digital technologies which can hopefully alter their day to day activities – for example an increase in online banking, online shopping, e-books, streaming etc will mean fewer journeys and healthier environments.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1. The Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group includes representation from the Council, Age UK, Rotherfed, VAR, REMA, NHS, and RNN Colleges. Programme decisions are made in collaboration with all group members.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 There are robust governance arrangements in place whereby updates regarding the achievement of the programme actions and outcomes are regularly shared with the Rotherham Place Board and Rotherham Together Partnership Board.
- 13.2 A regular review of the risk register is undertaken by the Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group who will jointly identify and agree appropriate mitigative action.

14. Accountable Officers

Luke Sayers, Assistant Director Customer Information & Digital Services,
Finance & Customer Services

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	04/09/23
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	30/08/23
Assistant Director, Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	30/08/23

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