REPORT OF: Executive Member of Digital & Customer Services

TO: Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny
                     Committee

ON: 11th March 2024

SUBJECT: Digital Inclusion and IT update

<u>**Digital Inclusion**</u>

Background
Although there is no universally accepted definition of digital exclusion it refers to sections of the population not being able to use the internet in ways that are needed to participate fully in modern society.

Ofcom's Digital Exclusion Review sets out key issues and barriers relating to:

- Affordability - those who struggle to afford access to internet packages or devices and go without or experience other financial strains to retain access. Citizens Advice suggest circa 1m people nationally have cancelled their internet in last 18 months.
- Access - those who do not have adequate internet at home or elsewhere (not just affordability). Around 1.7 million households had no broadband or mobile internet access at home in 2021.
- Ability - those who lack the digital skills and/or confidence to navigate the online environment safely and knowledgeably, or face barriers related to disability.

Research suggests that digital exclusion affects millions of UK citizens. Every day, people are unable to access the internet because they do not have the connection, device or skills to get online. This digital divide is undermining efforts to improve UK productivity, economic growth and socio-economic inclusion. In recent years cost of living challenges are exacerbating the problem for the most financially vulnerable.

A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge negative impact on a person's life, leading to poorer health outcomes and a lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, less access to jobs and education.

It can mean paying more for essentials, financial exclusion, an increased risk of experiencing poverty. People who are digitally excluded also lack a voice and visibility in the modern world, as government services and democracy increasingly move online. What's more, it's those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – who are most likely to be missing out, further widening the social inequality gap.

Local Context
There is a range of national and regional research available to help better understand the challenges of digital exclusion. At a local level there are pockets of research which highlight how different groups, in different locations are at risk of being excluded.

Research from the Greater Manchester Office of Data Analytics has provided a suite of maps showing those at risk of digital exclusion based on a range of factors. This highlights groups of residents and locations which are at risk based on factors such as, age, disability, employment status, geography and deprivation.

Whilst this research highlights those 'at risk' of exclusion, further research is taking place to better understand those who are genuinely excluded. This is via 'user research', work with partners and through service feedback. This data will help inform any future targeted approaches to vulnerable groups.

Recent research has established that there is a range of activity being undertaken across the borough to support residents who are digitally excluded. This includes drop-in centres, public access equipment and digital skills courses. Whilst this is positive there are opportunities to better promote this activity, alongside reminders to residents of social tariffs and grants which they may be entitled to.

The Council is now actively engaging with the National Digital Inclusion Network and the Digital Poverty Alliance Network. These are proving to be useful forums to share learning and best practice. The Council has also begun working with the Good Things Foundation, who are a leading national voice in this field. This has identified opportunities to bring their 'device bank' arrangements to the borough, which would see public buildings having access to free mobile data sims which can be provided to residents who cannot afford.

Other Local Authorities have taken steps to create, or co-ordinate 'device banks' in their boroughs. These sees older IT equipment (laptop, tablets, mobile phones) donated by businesses and residents. These are passed on to a contracted third party who securely wipes and prepares them for reissue to the public. Some LAs do this via the 3rd sector, via a partnership or through charities such as the Good Things Foundation. The Council is considering how a device bank arrangement could be established within the borough.

Digital by Choice
The Council has taken a number of proactive steps to support customers in accessing services. Through the Digital by Choice approach the Council aims to design services which residents choose to access via self service / online methods, due to these being the quickest and easiest routes. However for those that cannot access the internet, or choose not to, the Council has a range of alternative options.

Outside of working hours, telephone lines are now being enabled with 24/7 voice forms which allow residents to leave messages. The voice forms act like a website form, asking specific questions to ensure all relevant information is collected from the caller; reducing the need for callbacks. Whilst residents may not be able to speak to an advisor out of hours, they can at least leave all their necessary details, which Council staff will act on during the next working day.

A range of Council buildings provide public access computers for residents to use. This enables them to access Council or other public service websites to undertake advice searches, benefit claims and locate other support. Staff in these locations are on hand to support residents with using this equipment and will help signpost to other

support. In the coming year more work will take place to review the public access offer and upgrade any required equipment.

For those residents who do have internet access but are less proficient at navigating websites and completing forms, the Council is taking steps to simplify website content and service request processes. The Council uses a range of tools to ensure the corporate website is accessible to all users, as well as language simplification tools such as the Hemmingway website. This tool helps to simplify content to ensure it is impactful and understandable for most readers.

Future Actions

In the coming months the Council is taking forward a range of activity to support those residents who are digitally excluded. This will include:

- A PR campaign to highlight the support already available to residents – with hard copy material.
- Better promotion of Social Tariffs and available public grants
- Discussion as to how a 'device bank' could work within the borough
- Working with the Good Things Foundation to develop 'data banks' at key locations
- Development of a strategic approach to signposting / data banks / device banks / digital skills across relevant partners

IT Systems & Technical Availability

A full review and audit has taken place over the last 12 months in respect of the current IT infrastructure, systems, security and areas for improvement.

Over the last 3 years we have used lessons learned during our IT procurement exercises to make amendments to how we procure IT systems. Due to the prevalence of Cloud computing we have revised the nature of our questioning and introduced a cloud risk assessment to ensure that evaluation can take place on the safety of data, user security and governance of systems.

We have changed our focus to ensure security, usability and authentication take centre stage during any procurement process. We have also included a wider range of IT technical expertise during the procurement stages to ensure that systems are thoroughly evaluated. We ensure that secure by design is forefront and that the supplier chain is scrutinised.

A new governance board is also in place which is chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive, and procurement of new systems is not permitted unless there is a clear business case / rationale which meets the defined specification, as described.

A full programme of technical work was agreed with PDS last year, and agreement on timescales against each area that needed to be prioritised with key dates and milestones.

The following progress has been made in the below key areas:

1. The new Backup and Recovery system is now fully operational and is protecting critical assets.
2. The tender for the Unified Communications Environment is out for competition as planned.
3. A large programme of security penetration testing has been completed and we are using the result to harden our security posture.
4. All Council staff have received new Microsoft working environments through the deployment of Microsoft 365.
5. The new core network infrastructure has now been implemented. This has enhanced performance, security and recoverability.
6. There has been a rise in cyber-attacks of varying sophistication. None have penetrated our defences in any meaningful way. However, increased sophistication of attack requires to respond with increased vigilance and capability during 2024.

A full plan remains in place and work will continue until 2025.