

Committee:	Dated:
Community and Children's Services	22/05/2020
Subject: Internet access	Public
Report of: Andrew Carter, Director of Community and Children's Services	For Decision
Report author: Simon Cribbens, Assistant Director, Commissioning and Partnerships	

Summary

The City has provided targeted support to help some vulnerable or low income households access the internet to support learning. Members have asked for an expanded scheme to support those who are unable to afford the internet and unable to leave their homes to benefit from free access.

This report sets out an option for an expanded scheme limited to the duration of the current pandemic restrictions to targeted groups. It notes that a budget will need to be identified to deliver such a scheme.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- i. Note and endorse the current targeted approach to supporting internet access among City households and other mitigating support

Or

- ii. Agree:

an expanded offer to those meeting the criteria of being:

- Low income households in receipt of benefits, and
- Defined as:
 - clinically extremely vulnerable ("shielded")
 - clinically vulnerable (advised by government to "self isolate")

that such a scheme will provide a hotspot device as the primary offer

that additional budget will be identified to support the scheme.

Main Report

Background

1. During the lockdown period many have relied on access to the internet for securing services (food shopping for instance), education and social contact. While some choose not to use the internet there will be others who would use it but cannot for several reasons.
2. Internet access requires a digital device (laptop, tablet or smartphone), a modem, router or hotspot device (a preloaded dongle providing limited internet access), and an internet service provider (ISP).
3. Some people are also digitally excluded by not having the knowledge or skills to access the internet regardless of whether they have the means to access.
4. Support has been given to some households to access the internet. Members have proposed further targeted support for those without the financial means to secure internet access (limited to the duration of the pandemic restrictions).
5. Another proposal by Members is that the City of London Corporation make a commitment, in principle at least, to make the internet available to all residents.

Current Position

6. Those who would like to access to the internet, but are either unable or cannot get sufficient access to it, can be categorised as:
 - Isolating / Shielding residents – who have a digital device but rely on - and cannot access - free Wi-Fi
 - Isolating / Shielding residents – who have neither digital device nor Wi-Fi
 - Residents who cannot afford home broadband/data and/or a digital device and cannot access free provision
 - Residents who have limited data (which may prevent access to education for instance)
 - Residents with too few devices to support access for all who need the internet
7. There is limited quantitative evidence of need against these categories, but it is likely to be small in scale given the size of the City's population and recorded levels of deprivation.
8. The City has provided targeted support to some households to access the internet as set out below.

Current City Corporation approach

9. The department has supported families and young people with funding for, or direct provision of, digital devices and hotspot devices. This has ensured access to education. The beneficiaries were those identified by services from among:

- families of children with disabilities
- families with children subject to a child protection plans
- children in care and care leavers
- targeted families supported by social care or Early Help services
- children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

10. Other households identified as potentially vulnerable (those shielding, those who have contacted the city for support, and those known to adult social care, tenancy support or housing management), have been contacted by the department to offer support to mitigate the impact of lockdown on shopping, medicine supplies and social contact. Among these groups, internet access has not been raised as an issue of concern.

Response by other local authorities

11. The current city approach is in step with other local authorities.

12. Where we have identified local authority schemes promoting free devices and internet access, they have been advertising the offer of government (see below) which is being administered through local authorities and targets specific children and young people.

13. Westminster City Council (WCC) has a targeted scheme where they are providing a router and internet access through an ISP contract that the Council holds. This is given to a group of 27 families with children known to social services who are part of a long-term project tackling multiple disadvantage.

Government Support

14. The Department for Education (DfE) has committed to provide laptops and tablets for disadvantaged families, children and young people who do not currently have access to them through another source, such as their school. Digital devices can be requested for:

- care leavers
- children and young people aged 0 to 19 with a social worker
- disadvantaged year 10 pupils

15. Internet access will be provided through 4G hotspot devices. The City has been allocated 16 devices.

Industry response

16. BT provides a low-cost internet option available to those receiving:

- Income support
- Income based Jobseeker's allowance (JSA)
- Guaranteed pensions credit
- Income based Employment and Support Allowance
- Universal Credit, with zero earnings

17. For those eligible, the BT's Basic + Broadband service costs £9.95 a month for a phone line and broadband.

Options – expanded City Corporation approach (short term)

18. Should members wish to expand the current approach to all City residents who desire internet access it would require addressing the needs of those who cannot afford digital or hotspot devices - or a homebased internet connection from an ISP. It may also require support to those whose access is hampered by knowledge and skills gaps.

19. The circumstances of the lockdown – and resources – make it unlikely that all these barriers can be addressed for all potential groups.

Eligibility

20. It is likely that affordability is the primary barrier – whether to meet the cost of a digital device or the cost of internet access. Therefore, a targeted response could be based on an indicator of low income that meets the threshold for benefit payments.

21. Beyond affordability, it is proposed that those eligible for a scheme are those people who are most restricted by Covid-19, defined as;

- clinically extremely vulnerable (“shielded”)
- clinically vulnerable (advised by government to “self isolate”)

22. See appendix for definitions.

23. It would not be proposed to support those people self isolating for short term periods, or others able to leave their homes to access free Wi-Fi within open spaces in the Square Mile.

Duration

24. The scheme would be offered to those eligible while restrictions on their movement remain in place.

Hotspot device or ISP contract

25. The WCC scheme provides beneficiaries with a router – purchased outright (£85) and gifted to the household, and an internet service through a contract the council holds with the ISP (at £15 per month). The ISP “Three” provides this rate for this scheme because the contract is held by a local authority or a charity – it is not available to the individual. Such a contractual arrangement (where the City holds the contract on the beneficiary’s behalf) may be appropriate where the beneficiary has a link to the authority through a longer term targeted project or there is some type of guardianship arrangement.

26. The department and government responses to date have used hotspot devices that can be purchased for a one-off cost preloaded with a data allowance. The

cost starts from as little as £30 per unit – but at lower cost offer very little data. A 20GB wireless router offering 4G Wi-Fi connectivity costs in the region of £90. There is no contract or obligation beyond the purchase.

27. Such a device would require the user to be able to install and set it up. They also require a digital device to connect to – either through a USB port (for a laptop) or Wi-Fi connection. This option can be delivered to the beneficiary's home.
28. Either option is only effective if a digital device is owned or provided.
29. It is recommended that provision of a hotspot device is the main response to need.

Digital device

30. Laptops have been provided to support some specific children and young people.
31. Within the adult population there will be a group whose access to the internet relied on use of digital devices such as public terminals in the City's libraries. Their closure creates a barrier to access that could only be resolved if the department loaned or gifted a digital device – or provided funding for the purchase.
32. The gifting of a device to an adult could echo the approach of children's social care by targeting those known to services and assessed by social workers as in need. Beneficiaries would also have to meet any other eligibility criteria.
33. Given short term situation, administration and additional cost, it is recommended that the scheme does not provide digital devices.

Knowledge and skills

34. The circumstances of the lockdown hamper skills and knowledge support that is not delivered online. Therefore, it is recommended that applications are only encouraged from those with pre-existing knowledge and skills to access the internet.

Cost

35. A scheme based on the provision of a hotspot device to low income households identified through basic criteria will be determined by the device cost and take up.
36. Assuming a maximum of 250 households who receive a 20GB device, the cost net of administration would be a maximum of £22,500. A more limited data offer, and lower take up would significantly reduce the cost.
37. A further £5,000 should be set aside for administration.

Options - medium term

38. The department has initiated contact with a social change charity, the Good Things Foundation that supports socially excluded people to improve their lives through digital access and inclusion. The aim will be to explore the development of a longer term proposal linked to financial and social inclusion.

Further considerations

39. Digital inclusion is a major policy objective of government. However, it is not separately or specifically funded through the welfare system.

40. Local authorities have been given detail of those who have been told to shield but are not given details of those who are advised to self isolate.

Implications

41. Legal advice was not available at the time of drafting.

42. There is no identified budget for such a scheme.

Conclusion

43. Targeted support has ensured some children and young people can access education during this period. A 'targeted' expanded scheme may assist other households.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Definitions

Simon Cribbens

Assistant Director, Commissioning and Partnerships
Department of Community and Children's Services

E: simon.cribbens@cityoflondon.gov.uk

Appendix 1 - definitions

Clinically extremely vulnerable:

People who fall in this group should have been contacted to tell them they are clinically extremely vulnerable. They include:

- Solid organ transplant recipients.
- People with specific cancers:
 - people with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy
 - people with lung cancer who are undergoing radical radiotherapy
 - people with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment
 - people having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments for cancer
 - people having other targeted cancer treatments which can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors
 - people who have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last 6 months, or who are still taking immunosuppression drugs
- People with severe respiratory conditions including all cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and severe chronic obstructive pulmonary (COPD).
- People with rare diseases that significantly increase the risk of infections (such as SCID, homozygous sickle cell).
- People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase risk of infection.
- Women who are pregnant with significant heart disease, congenital or acquired.

Clinically vulnerable:

People who are:

- aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
- under 70 with an underlying health condition listed below (that is, anyone instructed to get a flu jab each year on medical grounds):
 - chronic (long-term) mild to moderate respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or bronchitis
 - chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
 - chronic kidney disease
 - chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
 - chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis (MS), or cerebral palsy
 - diabetes
 - a weakened immune system as the result of certain conditions, treatments like chemotherapy, or medicines such as steroid tablets
 - being seriously overweight (a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above)
 - pregnant women