Committee:	Dated:
Community and Children's Services	11/12/2020
Subject: Supporting Digital Inclusion	**Public**
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	9,8,3
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N/A
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of: Andrew Carter, Director of Community and Children's Services	**For Decision**
Report author: Simon Cribbens, Assistant Director – Commissioning and Partnerships	

Summary

This report sets out the need and ambition to tackle digital exclusion among some who live in the Square Mile. It proposes that officers use the policy agreed by Members to apply the funds from the Combined Relief of Poverty Charity to more strategic projects, as an opportunity to work with a specialist partner (or partners) to develop and fund a digital inclusion project for City residents.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- note the current activity in place to support digital inclusion for City residents

- approve the approach proposed to deliver a targeted digital inclusion project.

Main Report

Background

1. The ability to get online is increasingly important to accessing employment, services, finding timely information, shopping and social interaction. This importance has been amplified by the restrictions of COVID-19 and the consequent transfer of many services and functions online. The experience of the COVID-19 response has demonstrated the impact of digital exclusion on households that may lack the skills, devices, motivation or data to get online. As highlighted by the Corporation's strategies on Digital Skills and Social Mobility, such exclusion can inhibit social mobility and social inclusion in our community.

2. The period ahead is likely to see a continued focus of digital delivery for many services. Some may face continued restrictions that will sustain social isolation. The economic consequences of COVID-19 are also likely to result in increased unemployment and/or reduced incomes among some in our community. For this group, digital access is critical to obtaining benefits, employment opportunities and financial inclusion.

3. There are various service and stakeholder perspectives on the scale of digital deficit within the City, but limited quantitative data is available to accurately access the scale and nature of the challenge.

4. National research (2019 Consumer Digital Index) suggests that 22 per cent of the population is digitally excluded because they lack internet access and/or have low levels of digital literacy. The Office for National Statistics reports that there is an increasing likelihood of digital exclusion among individuals who live alone, those who have mobility issues, and households on lower incomes. Digital exclusion increases to 36 per cent among those over 65 years of age.

5. The main determinant of digital exclusion is age, but other significant factors – often combined with low income – include disability, learning difficulties, ethnic origin, location, culture and language.

6. The impact of digital exclusion differs, but includes financial exclusion (those offline pay more for many services), service exclusion, social isolation and educational impacts.

Current Position

7. The importance of digital inclusion has been recognised by the Corporation and the Department of Community and Children's Services (the Department).

8. The *Shaping Tomorrows City Today* Digital Skills Strategy launched by the Lord Mayor in 2018 (2018–2023) has an ongoing action plan associated with increasing digital capital within the City. This includes support for residents.

9. The Department has been supporting a number of initiatives, including delivering digital skills training for the over 60s, a universal essential skills qualification for all ages, and Code Clubs for young people. Public access terminals are available in the libraries and staff are trained to provide assistance for those struggling to get online.

10. The onset of COVID-19 has seen a raft of additional initiatives and support. The Department has supported families and young people with direct provision or funding for digital and hotspot devices. This has ensured access to education. The beneficiaries were those identified by services from among:

    - families with children who have disabilities
    - families with children subject to a child protection plan
    - children in care and care leavers

- targeted families supported by social care or Early Help services
- children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

11. At the suggestion, and with the support of Members, a scheme was implemented to provide free Wi-Fi access to low-income, shielding households; and 23 individuals received a dongle device through the scheme.

12. Departmental services have adapted their assessment and delivery model to evaluate and provide digital support – for example, assessing digital capacity through Care Act Assessments. The library service continued to deliver digitally, and offered telephone support to assist some users to access that offer.

13. Corporately, the Gigabit City programme, led by the City Property Advisory Team (CPAT) has sought to improve wired and wireless coverage in the Square Mile for small businesses and residents. In February 2017, Members gave approval for the City's outlying housing estates to be included in the Gigabit City programme.

14. New providers are now in place across all our estates, apart from Middlesex and Avondale, which are on track to have the additional broadband services connected by April 2021. All buildings on each estate now receive faster broadband so that universal coverage and can be offered to all residents.

15. This delivery provides the opportunity to provide low-cost access to those on low incomes. The agreement to provide this coverage compelled the operators to meet key service obligations including:

   a. That services are provided over fibre-optic cables at various speeds up to 1 gigabit per second at affordable price points, with a low-priced (under £10 per month) no-contract option for tenants on benefits or low incomes.

   b. One communal area on each estate (community halls/estate office, and so on) will be provided with a 1 gigabit per second Wi-Fi hotspot, which will be free to use for all residents.

16. A network of 156 access points across the Square Mile is available for all residents to access Wi-Fi at street level. The City of London Wi-Fi network offers speeds of up to 200 megabits per second across the Square Mile, and is free to all users an on unlimited basis – something never seen before in London.

Opportunities

17. Tackling digital exclusion provides an opportunity to deliver a range of departmental and corporate objectives. These include tackling inequality, securing better financial inclusion, mitigating COVID-19 impacts, supporting social mobility, reducing social isolation, increasing employment and using digital technology to improve health.

18. In addition to the benefits to individuals and families, a digitally-included community will secure benefits and efficiencies for the Department, enabling better use of resources and protecting frontline delivery.

19. The Department has initiated discussions with organisations that are specialists in this area. They offer a range of targeted and innovative approaches. Examples can be seen in the work of organisations such as WeAreDigital, Good Things Foundation, Clean Slate Training & Employment, and SocialBox.Biz.

20. In the short term, we are seeking a partner to deliver recycled equipment for those unable to afford devices. Beyond that, we wish to build on the current opportunities – including the potential to offer low-cost Wi-Fi access – to build a community-focused digital and financial inclusion programme.

21. In September, this Committee considered the administration and management of the Combined Relief of Poverty Fund. Members decided that the funds provided by the accumulated income of the Fund should be applied more strategically under the Stronger Community Programme. Such an approach would enable the Department to co-produce the project with a specialist partner.

Proposals

22. The Department wishes to promote and support digital inclusion across its communities. To do so requires a programme of work to tackle the features of exclusion: skills, access, motivation and confidence.

23. The Department will work with the City Surveyors Department to mobilise and promote the low-cost internet access offer for low-income households, secured through the Gigabit City programme.

24. The Department will further digital inclusion by building on the interventions deployed prior to, and in response to, COVID-19. Future approaches must be tailored to meet the needs of different groups and target those most impacted by exclusion. The approaches will align to our wider work to mitigate the lasting economic and social impacts of COVID-19.

25. To achieve this, it is proposed that the Department selects a partner to develop a project that meets its objectives to increase digital inclusion. It will utilise existing assets (training offers, community facilities, commissioned services) and opportunities to design an offer. The partner – with the Department's endorsement – will seek funding from the Combined Relief of Poverty element of the Stronger Communities Grant programme to deliver the project. Any bid for such funds would be subject to assessment by the Central Grants Unit, and approval in line with current procedures.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

26. **Strategic implications:** This approach is well aligned to the Corporation's Digital Skills Strategy and Social Mobility Strategy and supports our broader Corporate Plan objectives:

   - We are digitally and physically well-connected and responsive (9).
   - We have access to the skills and talent we need (8).

- People have equal opportunities to enrich their lives and reach their full potential (3).

27. **Financial and Resource implications:** With Members' agreement, it is anticipated that delivery would be supported by grant funding. Other funding and resource required will come from within departmental budgets.

28. **Legal Implications**: none.

29. **Risk implications**: none identified at this stage.

30. **Equalities implications**: Digital exclusion disproportionately impacts some target equality groups, including those in the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community, and those with disabilities. A project to tackle such inclusion will have a positive impact on these groups.

31. **Climate implications**: none.

32. **Security implications:** none.

Conclusion

33. Supporting digital inclusion provides an opportunity to improve the lives of many in our community, and to deliver the Department's and Corporation's strategic objectives.

Simon Cribbens
Assistant Director – Commissioning and Partnerships
Department of Community and Children's Services

T: Microsoft Teams/Skype
E: simon.cribbens@cityoflondon.gov.uk