

Committee(s): Community and Children's Services – For information	Dated: 05/03/2021
Subject: Digital Inclusion Project	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	3, 4, 8, 9
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
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
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Summary

The City Corporation has an ambition to strengthen digital literacy and close the digital divide among its residents as we recover from the COVID 19 pandemic. To address this, the City Corporation has instigated several initiatives and proposals to improve residents' confidence and knowledge in accessing digital services, as well as helping to alleviate social isolation.

This report sets out the actions of the City Corporation so far, initiatives planned once national restrictions allow and our long-term ambitions for the project. Details on how to access our current offer are set out in Appendix 1.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- note the current activity in place to support digital inclusion for City residents and the approach set out to develop and deliver a programme of support.

Main Report

Background

1. Despite the small population compared to other London local authorities, the City of London has pockets of deprivation and disadvantage, and issues such as digital exclusion from services and social isolation cut across all income groups.
2. Many of these issues have been amplified by the COVID 19 pandemic, and people are at risk of further disadvantage as actions are put in place to support people to recover from the lasting impacts (economic and social) and adapt to new models of service delivery. We are also aware that some residents have poor digital skills and suffer from data and digital equipment poverty.
3. The below details the actions of the City Corporation to date, what we could do once restrictions are lifted, and longer-term ambitions for the project.

Current Position and Actions

Adult Skills and Education Service

4. The City of London's Adult Skills Service (ASES) are currently delivering a range of Digital Skills/IT courses through the Community based Skills and Learning Programme. The details of these courses and how they are accessed are set out in Appendix 1.
5. Since the end of March 2020, the service has delivered 95% of all Adult Learning courses online. To support this transition for learners and tutors, the service implemented the following:
 - Rapidly commissioned virtual learning software packages to enable online lectures, classes, and work and feedback exchanges
 - Assessed every course for its suitability for virtual teaching and learning, making alterations to course content where needed
 - Assessed every learner's access to technology and digital skills levels to access online content
 - Provided one-to-one support to learners to access digital content and participate fully in virtual learning
 - Sent hardcopy resources and gestures of goodwill to learners who would struggle to continue their learning online
 - Trained tutors in using virtual learning software and adapting their teaching to the virtual environment

Mer-IT

6. Mer-IT have recently received a £10,000 Community Grant from the City Corporation to tackle digital inclusion within the City. With this grant, they are distributing refurbished laptops and computers to those who do not currently have access to a device.

7. City Corporation Children's and Adult's Social Care services can refer their clients to Mer-IT if they need a device.

Internet Access Project

8. The City Corporation are providing low-income residents who receive Council Tax reduction with a one off pre-loaded data allowance via a portable device, that will allow residents to connect to the internet if they have their own device. The City Corporation is currently providing 15GB of 4G data which will allow residents who are home schooling greater access to online learning. The Corporation is also using this opportunity to determine low-income residents who do not have access to a device for potential referral.
9. As of 11 February 2021, there have been 21 applications which have been supported through this project.

Library IT Training

10. The City Corporation's library service has been advertising and delivering remote IT training since the first lockdown. It covers everything from Microsoft products, to how to use Zoom and assisting with mobile phones.
11. Referral instructions to this service are listed in Appendix 1

AbilityNet

12. The City Corporation City Bridge Trust has funded a project by AbilityNet that mobilises and manages volunteers to help elderly residents with free support on how to use their new or existing digital devices during the COVID 19 pandemic.
13. The details for accessing this service are listed in Appendix 1.

Potential Next Steps

14. The text below notes what the City Corporation is planning and could implement once national restrictions allow them to be carried out safely.

Adult Skills and Education Service

15. ASES are preparing for a phased return to hybrid and face-to-face teaching over the 2020/21 Academic Year which will be in line with the opening of the main learning centres: Guildhall, Golden Lane, Avondale, Portsoken and the Aldgate School. ASES will prioritise face-to-face learning for those learners who are digitally excluded.
16. To retain some of the benefits of online learning, ASES is reviewing the curriculum to understand which courses may continue to be delivered online long-term and where flipped models of learning would be beneficial.

17. ASES has an ambition to address issues raised by learners who are unable to participate in online learning if they do not have access to devices or the internet. They are attempting to do this by:

- refurbishing several laptops currently used to deliver courses on the Portsoken Estate
- investigating the possibility of purchasing a small batch of new laptops for community use
- providing a range of First Step computer training options for beginners
- providing additional tutor support to learners who may have difficulties joining online course
- discussing with community members the types of course/learning that they would benefit from
- working with our community-based learning ambassador on our housing estates to support learning
- providing ESOL support classes
- designing and circulating questionnaires to residents living on different City Corporation social housing estates, requesting information about their ability to connect online and the barriers they face.

Age UK

18. The City Corporation's Corporate Strategy team has commissioned Age UK to provide face to face digital skills classes beginning in May/June 2021 if restrictions allow. Funding has been previously agreed and is primarily taking place on the Barbican Estate. Classes will take place for at least two months, and any further commission is dependent on funding.

Device Loan Scheme

19. The City Corporation are currently in conversation with Leeds City Council Library Service and Greenwich Libraries to learn about their device loan scheme, where residents who identify as being digitally excluded can borrow a tablet device (iPad) just as they would a book from their local library free of charge. The City Corporation Library Service could implement something similar for residents to access, and we are currently assessing how this could work for us.

Tech Take Back Event

20. A date for this event is pending the decision of local and/or national restrictions where businesses can, in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), professionally refurbish old devices and give them to charities to provide devices to those in need.

Community Fibre & Hyperoptic

21. The City Corporation is exploring how we might make available discounted broadband access through Community Fibre & Hyperoptic – the providers delivering network to the City's social housing estates and the Mansell Street Estate.

Future Ambitions

22. The paragraphs below are proposals that the City Corporation could explore and implement in the long term to alleviate digital and financial exclusion, promote greater access to services and reduce social isolation as we recover from the pandemic.

Ensuring a joined-up approach

23. The City Corporation could develop a webpage or leaflet detailing our complete digital skills, device and data access schemes so residents and Members can easily discover our offer in one place, and find out how to access these schemes.

24. By ensuring that our offer is fully advertised and understood, residents can be referred to the most appropriate scheme to meet their needs and ensure that the work of different services and departments does not replicate current schemes.

Mer-IT

25. Mer-IT has already started distributing laptops to those in need within the City and to the City family of schools. The City corporation could also work with them in the following ways if Members agree:

26. Mer-IT have already started distributing laptops to those in need within the City and to the City family of schools. The City corporation could also work with Mer-IT in the following ways if Members agree:

- The City Corporation can donate spare devices to Mer-IT for recycling and distribution to those in need
- As well as offering a place where residents can bring devices for repair, Mer-IT could provide digital skills community workshops for residents, covering topics such as internet security, basic digital skills and how to fix devices.

Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR)

27. The City Corporation has several contracts with a CSR element built in that could be explored and identified.

28. One such example is with Civica, the Corporation's new Housing Management System. Under the terms of the contract, Civica are able to provide digital skills workshops on our social housing estates to improve digital literacy.

City Corporation IT Team

29. The City Corporation IT Team are about to undertake a programme of refreshing staff laptops within three to six months. Should Members wish to explore the possibility, there is also potential for excess Corporation laptops to be repurposed for organisations that distribute devices to those in need.

Eligibility

30. It is likely that affordability is the primary barrier to digital access - whether to meet the cost of a digital device or the cost of internet access. Therefore, support with accessing a digital device or internet access could be based on an indicator of low income that meets the threshold for benefit payments.

Proposals

31. 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, device and data access, motivation and confidence.

32. The Department will further digital inclusion by building upon the interventions initiated during the COVID 19 pandemic, tailored to meet the needs of different groups and target those most impacted by digital exclusion. These proposals align to our wider work to mitigate the lasting economic and social impacts of COVID 19.

33. To achieve this, we propose to utilise and build on our existing assets and work with community organisations, including partners that have received a Stronger Communities Grant to tackle digital exclusion. Any bid for further grant funding would be subject to assessment by the Central Grants Unit, and approval in line with current procedures.

Key Data

34. ASES have undertaken a learner's survey which was distributed via the City Corporation's @Home newsletter, housing events newsletter and social media. The survey asked some of the following questions:

- Do you have access to a computer?
- Do you have access to the internet?
- Do you require further digital training?

35. The survey ended in January 2021 and received 0 responses.

36. The City Corporation first initiated its Internet Access Project in May and June 2020 to provide a one-off allowance of 4G data to residents who received Council Tax Reduction and were told to shield due to a pre-existing medical condition. With this programme, the City Corporation distributed 23 devices to residents in need.

37. In July, August and September 2020, the City Corporation Library Service provided 29 sessions of digital support to City residents, with some residents accessing the service more than once.

38. The Department for Education (DfE) has provided the City Corporation with 30 laptops distributed to disadvantaged families, children and young people who do not currently have access to them through another source, such as their school.
39. Mer-IT recently allocated 30 devices to City of London Academies Trust schools, with plans to allocate 30 more for the City's benefit in the coming weeks.
40. Data was not available for how many City residents have been supported by Age UK or supported with digital learning by ASES.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

41. 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).

42. The approach will also help respond to financial and social inclusion objectives and assist with resilience and recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic.

Equalities implications

43. Digital exclusion disproportionately impacts some target equality groups, including those in the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community, and those with disabilities. Objectives that tackle such inclusion will have a positive impact on these groups.

Conclusion

44. 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.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – How to access our current offer

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