



**Resources and Public Realm
Scrutiny Committee**
19 July 2022

**Report from the Strategic Director
of Customer and Digital Services**

A Review of the Digital Inclusion support provided to residents

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non-key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt:	Open
No. of Appendices:	Two
Background Papers:	Citizens Online Report
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1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To outline the Brent Digital Strategy 2022-2026, with a particular focus on the digital initiatives to support digital inclusion. To outline how the digital inclusion programme is being delivered as part of the strategy and how hard to reach groups are being supported and equalities issues addressed.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee note the report.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The Brent Digital Strategy 2022-2026 sets out how Brent's ambition to become a truly digital borough will be realised through achieving the dual and interdependent aims of becoming a digital place and a digital council. One of the key benefits set out in the strategy is that "currently digitally excluded residents will increase their digital confidence"; which will be achieved through the work accomplished within one of our themes, digital inclusion.
- 3.2 A good digital customer experience is reliant on residents being able to access a borough-wide digital infrastructure providing instantaneous connectivity, with a greater number of residents getting access to full fibre broadband. Complementing this is the aim to develop a training and education framework that nurtures digital skills and expertise, getting residents support to improve their digital skills and get online and working with the voluntary and community sector to improve their digital infrastructure and skills.
- 3.3 The Digital Strategy 2022-26 builds on the achievements of Brent's previous Digital Strategy (2019-23). Some of these achievements relating to digital inclusion are:
- Over 90% of the Council website now meets accessibility criteria, an increase of over 38% since early 2020
 - We provided fibre to over 8,000 premises within Brent's housing stock and increased fibre coverage across the borough from 4% to 57%
 - We provided over 1000 digital devices to digitally excluded residents
 - We offered over 20,000 hours of digital training for staff across the council through our partnership with Microsoft.
- 3.4 Brent Council has had a Digital Strategy in place since 2017 and has shown long term commitment to becoming a digital borough and enabling residents to access services online. By having completed this initial work, we were able to swiftly adapt when the Covid-19 pandemic commenced. Enabling us to adjust services and meet residents changing needs.
- 3.5 Brent is a founding member of LOTI (London Office of Technology and Innovation) and has been involved in work on digital inclusion and developing common Internet of Things standards. The council is also a signatory of the Local Digital Declaration.

4.0 Developing the Digital Inclusion programme

- 4.1 Recognising the importance of digital inclusion, the Digital Programme has worked with Citizens Online to review the digital skills offer across the borough and map that against need. The review was funded by Hyperoptic, as part of their social value commitment through our wayleave agreement, through which they are providing access to full fibre broadband services to residents living in Brent's housing stock.

4.2 In November 2020, the council held a workshop attended by over 80 representatives from the voluntary and community sector to feedback on the recommendations from Citizens Online report and gain views and buy-in for the way ahead.

4.3 On the back of this workshop the Digital Inclusion Action plan has been developed and it applies across Council teams; VCS organisations; Registered Providers and Health. Its themes are:

- Champions – recruitment; platform / consistency; support for champ; models for remote support; Sustainability/funding; support for voluntary sector orgs
- Bespoke offers – Disability; older people; neurodiversity; coaching
- Hosted network – good practice; opportunities
- Service mapping - creation; where it goes; how to maintain it
- A placed based pilot
- Access - devices / connections /skills
- Supporting SMEs

4.4 In light of the increased need to support Brent businesses, particularly Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), as part of the recovery process, the scope of the Citizens Online work was widened to include them.

4.5 We continue to engage with the voluntary and community sector and other council departments through our Digital Inclusion network. This network provides an opportunity to share progress with the digital inclusion programme, identify new areas that require support and to provide an update on the digital inclusion action plan. The network meets on a bi-monthly basis and is regularly attended by ten community organisations.

5.0 Aims of the Digital Inclusion Programme

5.1 The Digital Inclusion programme aims to enable all digitally excluded residents who want to become digitally included to have access to the skills, devices and connectivity. This will be achieved through existing and future projects, including the ambitions to provide 8,000 digitally excluded households with access to a digital device by 2025.

5.2 Progress towards this aim has already been accomplished with a significant decrease in the number of residents who have not used the internet in the last three months at 4%, down from 11% in 2018. The fastest reduction across London boroughs. This information is collated annually through the Office for National Statistics (ONS) digital attitudes survey.

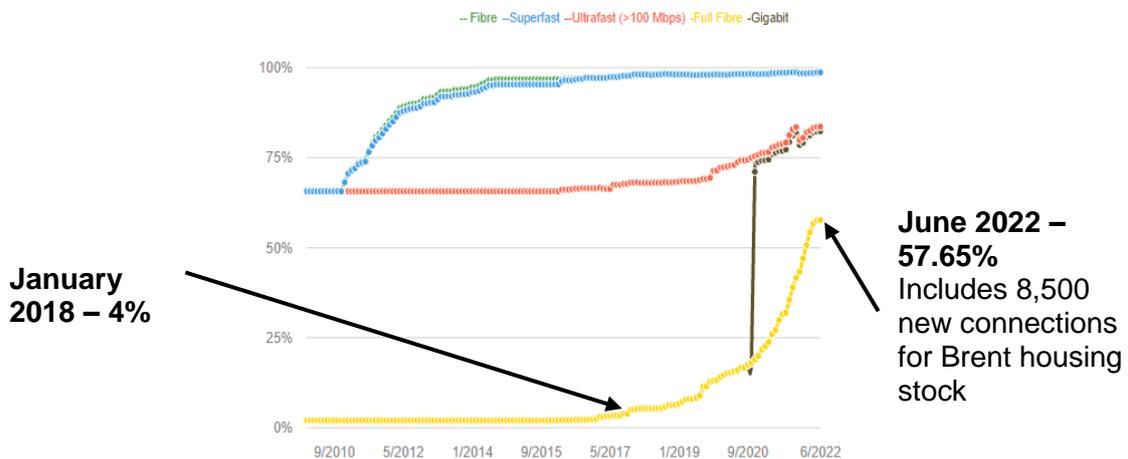
6.0 Delivery of the Digital inclusion programme

6.1 In response to the data and feedback from the Citizens Online report and SMEs, we launched the Digital Support Fund for businesses as a pilot in January 2022. Through this fund, SMEs were able to access digital skills

training, devices and connectivity to assist them with the challenges they face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also gave us an opportunity to better understand the digital needs of businesses and how best to support them on a wider scale. We have supported 76 businesses with digital skills training and devices. The fund has been promoted via town centre managers, the business newsletter and successful word of mouth from businesses who received support in the early stages of the fund.

- 6.2 Each business was asked to provide information on their digital skill level before the training and a follow up survey will take place to monitor the impact of the support provided. Successful outcomes of the pilot will include improved self-identified levels of confidence, reduced barriers to starting an online presence and an increase in use of digital platforms e.g. websites and social media.
- 6.3 As well as this, we launched the Digital Support fund for children and young people in February 2022 to support digitally excluded pupils who had not received a device through earlier national programmes. Schools' were asked to put forward young people who they identified as digitally excluded. Initially the fund hoped to support 297 pupils, however due to a reduced price in devices we were able to support 478 pupils across 14 schools, both primary and secondary. 97 pupils also received a 12 month internet connection, through either a fibre connection or a Mi-Fi device. The next round of this fund will launch in September 2022 with a crowdfunding platform that will be match funded by the council. Through this funding, we hope to be able to provide a further 400 devices and internet connections.
- 6.4 The Resident Support Fund commenced in August 2020. There is a digital support fund as part of this and it is our longest running digital inclusion fund. Through this fund, any resident can apply for a digital device and 12 months of connectivity if they identify as digitally excluded and have savings of less than £6000. Through this fund over 500 residents have received a digital devices and 133 internet connections have been provided. The fund has also been adjusted following feedback from resident groups, and tablets are also offered through the fund as they are more accessible for some individuals.

6.5 The Digital Programme has enabled the fibre to the premises (FTTP) coverage in Brent to increase to 57% from 4% in 2017. This was enabled through wayleaves with several providers to connect Brent owned premises thus creating a network that could be expanded to privately owned premises. Through this programme, Brent now has the 2nd highest fibre coverage in West London and 7th across Greater London.



6.6 We continue to engage with new providers to develop and increase the accessibility of the fibre network in Brent and in 2021 signed a new wayleave with Openreach. This will expand the number of providers operating in the borough. We are also engaging with BT, via the West London Alliance (WLA) to connect 27 public buildings using Strategic Investment Pot (SIP) funding for connectivity. This will further widen the network in Brent, as these buildings are in currently hard to reach areas.

6.7 The Citizens Online report also highlighted the need to have digital champions, both within council services and the community. The council has committed to having 500 digital champions by 2025 to ensure the support is available to all digitally excluded residents. As of July 2022, Brent has 108 Digital Champions and are on track to meet our target. This includes having trained digital champions within Brent Hubs, libraries, customer services, and the voluntary sector and within housing partners. All Digital Champions are given access to the Digital Unite platform where they must complete essential training as well as explore more specific training that relates to the services they provide. The champions are also supported through the Digital Champions Network, which provides space to share experiences and feedback on the training programme.

6.8 For many digitally excluded residents, face-to-face support is beneficial to developing their digital skills. In response to this, new Digital Cafes were launched in October 2021 at Brent Hubs in partnership with AgeUK. These Digital Cafes are run as a drop-in service and are promoted via council teams. They take place on a fortnightly basis at the Kilburn, Harlesden and Wembley hubs and are available to all residents. The purpose of the digital cafes is to support people to get online to access council and universal services. Examples of support residents have received include setting up email

addresses, learning how to use different devices and signing up for on Brent's 'MyAccount' system. Overall, 65 drop-ins have visited the digital cafes and received support.

6.9 We continue to work with other partners to promote digital inclusion in Brent. This includes our local NHS Integrated Care Partnership (ICS). Through our work with the ICS we are supporting their rollout of pre-op online self-assessments by sharing guidance with our digital champions and digital inclusion network so they are able to support residents. As well as this, we continue to develop our relationship to identify further opportunities to collaborate on increased digital inclusion in Brent.

6.10 We also maintain active membership of the LOTI network and participate in their digital inclusion projects. This includes the development of the first Digital Inclusion map with four other London Boroughs. We are also engaging with their newly launched Digital inclusion service which will support a pan-London approach to tackling digital exclusion.

Digital Inclusion Case study:

Mrs Kohen was referred to the digital Inclusion programme with AgeUK through Elders Voice. Mrs Kohen was hoping to acquire a place on the Board of Trustees for Elders Voice and the support provided would allow her to develop her skills, which would be useful for her position as a Trustee. Mrs Kohen was contacted by one of the AgeUK volunteers to discuss her objectives and gain more insight into what she hoped to achieve from the programme. She stated that she wanted to be able to use means of communications to attend remote meetings and that she was interested in searching the National Archives as a hobby. Mrs Kohen already had an email address, which meant that she was able to start developing her skills straight away. She had used a laptop in the past, however, she stated that she had not used one for some time and was not confident to operate one independently. She lives alone; however, her daughter visits often and would be able to assist her if needed. The volunteer met with Mrs Kohen to develop the digital skills she needed to achieve the objectives she had shared. After successfully attending the sessions and increasing her digital confidence from working with the volunteer Mrs Kohen felt confident enough to no longer require the drop-in service.

6.11 As part of The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018, the Brent website was officially audited by GDS in August 2021. At the time, the report identified eight issues where the council website did not fully meet the regulations. Following a discussion with GDS, it was agreed that rather than focusing on fixing the old site, it made more sense to prioritise the new website with a view to resolving the issues they identified. This would ensure the new site was compliant from launch. Subsequently, the new website was launched in February 2022 and met the 2.1 AA standard required. To further support the need to make information more accessible, a significant effort was also made to reduce, rewrite and simplify the number of web pages across core service areas. The team rewrote 850 pages of content, and reduced the number of pages and the number of PDFs by 40%.

7.0 Challenges and Risks

- 7.1 As we established a broad digital inclusion programme within Brent, there is a risk that some digitally excluded residents do not access existing support due to a lack of motivation or awareness of how digital inclusion can benefit them. To mitigate this risk, as part of the programme we will be developing tailored digital inclusions to support for hard to reach groups including homeless families and residents with learning difficulties.
- 7.2 Over 1,000 devices have been provided to residents through various digital inclusion funds and projects. There is a risk that these devices are not being used frequently or at all. To understand the levels of use, we will be contacting recipients to collect information on how devices are being used via an anonymous survey. Alongside this, we will also be exploring the opportunities available to recycle devices to reduce the environmental impact of digital inclusion support being provided.

8.0 Monitoring

- 8.1 Delivery of the digital strategy, and the digital inclusion theme as part of this, is overseen by the Customer and Digital Board, chaired by the Strategic Director of Customer & Digital Services and championed by the Deputy Leader of the Council. Programme benefits are also reported to the Capital Programme Board.
- 8.2 Progress of the Digital Inclusion programme and underlying projects are provided to the Programme Delivery Board on a monthly basis. This includes any risks and issues that may be impact the delivery and expected outcomes of the programme. The Programme Delivery Board is chaired by the Operational Director for Transformation.

9.0 Financial Implications

- 9.1 To support the ambitions to become a Digital Place and a Digital Council investment is required. In December 2021, Cabinet approved Brent's Digital Strategy 2022 - 2026 and the outline business case to support it. The overall investment required (for the whole digital programme, not just digital inclusion) was estimated at £9.3m over the programme period (capital programme). Cumulative savings of £14.8m are forecast after year 4, with an estimated recurring annual saving of £3.9m after 3 years. As well as financial savings, the outline business case sets out the wider benefits of each initiative within the programme, to both residents and the council.
- 9.2 Spend is currently on track and savings are reported to Capital Programme Board quarterly.

10.0 Legal Implications

- 10.1 Legal implications will be considered for new individual projects that make up the Digital Inclusion Programme at the appropriate time.

11.0 Equality Implications

- 11.1 An equality impact assessment (EIA) was complete alongside the Brent Digital Strategy 2022-26 and both went to Cabinet. Individual projects within the programme have also undertaken EIAs and accessibility audits have been completed.
- 11.2 It is important to remember that the digital inclusion support is there for any resident who wishes to develop their skills and awareness. However, for those that do not wish to be online, they will still be able to access council services via face to face or over the phone services. By enabling residents to become digital included citizens they are able to self-serve 24/7 and access other universal services that have moved online. It also increases officer capacity to support those most in need.

12.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders

- 12.1 Consultation on specific projects will be carried out when and where appropriate. The Lead Member with responsibility for the work of this service area will be kept informed about the programme and its delivery.

REPORT SIGN-OFF

Peter Gadsdon

Strategic Director of Customer and Digital Services