

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 14 January 2021

**Portfolio: Customer and Corporate Support Services
Councillor S Kane**

Subject: Digital Inclusion Update

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To note the work taking place around Digital Inclusion and the future direction of further projects.

Report

1 Covid-19 has provided a real challenge to reduce digital exclusion, particularly with the difficulty of face to face services. Whilst there has still been activity there are plans to re-energise aspects of the work which is expanding to incorporate different strands incorporating the wider community and partners. The details below highlight the work undertaken and planned by the Council and other partners within our Digital Inclusion Network.

2 Internal Digital Buddies

We have re-energised our digital buddy network and have twenty-nine buddies who are willing to give their time to support our residents. Working in collaboration with other service areas and external partners some initial activities which have started to progress are as follows;

- Digital buddy support to residents who via the Community, Culture & Wellbeing doorstep visits fed back they would like some digital support and coaching. This will be either via phone or face to face following social distancing measures and will commence in the New Year.
- Support line for residents in sheltered accommodation – residents will receive a flyer with a number to call to request support from our digital buddies, this line also provides access to a befriending scheme.
- In conjunction with Voluntary Action Epping Forest drop-in sessions are being arranged to help residents complete the Digital Census 2021 – locations to be arranged by end of January 2021.
- Citizens Online are launching a national freephone number which anyone can call for digital support, residents within our district calling this number will be referred to EFDC, our work supporting care home residents will be a good pilot to identify how this can work.

3 Community Based Digital Inclusion Programme

Digital Inclusion has been identified as a key action by the Epping Forest Health and Wellbeing Board to reduce health inequalities and aid social recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. An ongoing programme of projects are being developed and delivered by the

Community, Culture and Wellbeing team and partners. Currently the following projects have been initiated;

- The installation of Alcove phones to Epping Forest Residents identified as isolated or vulnerable in four phases;
 - Phase One – Epping Forest District Council Sheltered Housing Residents
 - Phase Two – Residents in the community with a sheltered housing officer
 - Phase Three – All Epping Forest Residents who meet the criteria
- Rainbow Services (Harlow) have been allocated funding from the NHS Charities Fund. The funding is to develop a West Essex wide digital inclusion project for residents that have become vulnerable as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In West Essex it has been identified that the majority of these residents are either from BAME communities or those experiencing mental ill health. This project will work with partners to provide both access to technology and data, as well as directed support to BAME and MH communities to enable them to benefit from virtual interventions and services.

Within this project we will carry out several diverse work-streams to enable success:

- Identify the individuals or families that might be in need (working cross-sector);
- Establish a process and facility for organisations to donate unwanted reusable equipment;
- Develop a data-matching process to match those in need to the equipment available;
- Develop a ground-breaking 'Databank' concept that would allow local residents to either donate funds towards the purchase of data packages or to donate unused data allowances from their monthly packages alongside agreeing with telecoms providers a range of subsidised connectivity packages that can be purchased for identified individuals and families and / or a mechanism through which people can donate their unused data allowances
- Work in conjunction with the Digital Buddies to support upskilling residents on using the technology
- Develop a single online platform through which all of the above can be processed.
- Employ a specialist Mental Health Engagement Worker who will promote, explain, and support people with mental health needs to engage with the project and benefit from digital interventions;
- Organise focused communications, events, and activities for BAME communities with key partners supporting these demographics, to highlight the services virtually available and support them to access them effectively.

4 Digital Inclusion Zone

4.1 Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN)

This DCMS funded project will see nineteen GP sites across Epping Forest district connected up to a new fibre broadband network being built across the DIZ geography, encompassing 77 sites in total. The project, which has recently seen the first site survey undertaken is due to see delivery completed by the end of March 2021, after which the focus will then shift to realising the potential benefits this investment could bring for residents and the delivery of digital healthcare across the area. The build represents an infrastructure investment in the district of over £330k, out of a total project investment of £1.7m and will see over 11,000 residential and business premises come within reach of future fibre broadband on demand.

4.2 Digital Inclusion Project

The DIZ has led the development of a project to create a comprehensive web platform for digital inclusion. This project aims to address issues of device access, digital skills and data

connectivity and will initially be focused around a two-year pilot project in West Essex, including Epping Forest district. The project was recently successful in securing approx. £178k of funding from the NHS Charities Fund which will now see day to day responsibility for delivering the platform taken on by DIZ Community and Voluntary Sector partners, potentially through WECAN, which includes Voluntary Action Epping Forest.

4.3 Digital Support for the High Street

The DIZ has begun developing a number of initiatives to support the recovery of high street businesses and shops. As well as leading conversations with organisations such as Maybe* (Social Media) and Enterprise Nation (Digital Skills for SMEs), the DIZ has begun work on a pilot project for Epping High Street which will look to utilise the existing CCTV system and repurpose it to provide footfall analysis of the high street. This analysis would then enable information to be shared with residents and businesses to allow informed decisions to be made about a safe return to shopping on the high street. The project is being delivered in conjunction with Newcastle City Council and the Urban Observatory and funded by MHCLG.

4.4 Ultrafast Broadband

The DIZ Programme Manager leads for Epping Forest DC on the delivery of ultrafast broadband in the district and work continues to support the latest phase of the Superfast Essex ultrafast broadband delivery. Works are being delivered which will provide gigabit capable broadband to around 1800 premises throughout Epping Forest District that currently do not have access to superfast connectivity. This is due to complete by December 2021 and is co-funded by the Council with BDUK, Essex CC and Gigaclear, a total infrastructure investment in the current phase of over £15m.

4.5 DIZ Event Programme

The DIZ is working up a skeleton programme of online events for 2021. The programme is being developed by the EFDC Higher Level Apprentice working out of Economic Development and directly supporting the DIZ. Potential themes for the event programme currently include digital careers and skills retraining; digital healthcare; digital inclusion; digital and the high street; digital tourism; early years and digital; funding innovation and 5G / IoT / future connectivity.

4.6 MDU Fibre Broadband Project

The DIZ Programme Manager is liaising with a national infrastructure provider and coordinating with Housing, Estates and Legal Service colleagues from Epping Forest DC to explore the potential to support a commercial broadband project to deliver fibre broadband to all of the EFDC-owned blocks of flats.

5 Conclusion

The report shows the work being undertaken. EFDC on its own cannot resolve issues around digital inclusion and hence the development of our Digital Inclusion Network with partners last year. Digital inclusion is one of the key themes of our Customer Service Strategy and future updates around this theme will be provided within the wider Strategy update.

Reason for decision: none

Options considered and rejected: none

Consultation undertaken: none

Resource implications: none

Legal and Governance Implications: none

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications: none

Consultation Undertaken: none

Background Papers: none

Impact Assessments: none

Risk Management: none