From: **Roger Gough, Leader of the Council**
            Zena Cooke, Corporate Director for Finance

To: **Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee,**
            9th November 2021

Subject: **Digital Inclusion and Capability Strategy**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary: This report seeks endorsement and/or comments on the concept of a new **Kent Digital Inclusion & Capability Strategy**. It outlines the rationale for a new strategy and a proposed outlined work plan to deliver a draft by March 2022 and invites Members to provide initial considerations to inform the scope.

Recommendation(s):

The Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the development of a corporate strategy for digital inclusion and capability that is:
        led by KCC's Digital Lead (Digital Inclusion & Capability)
        • corporately owned by Strategic & Corporate Services as outlined in Section 2 of this report.
        • designed based on the principles as outlined in Section 3 of this report.

1.   Introduction

1.1   In February 2021, the Leader of the Council took the key decision (21/00024); allocating £2.5m to tackle digital poverty out of the £10m allocation from the available COVID-19 Emergency Grant Funding creating the Helping Hands Support Scheme.

1.2   National research has shown that a significant proportion of the population is digitally excluded because they don't have the digital devices to use online services, access to the internet to use online services or the digital skills to access online services. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the population abandon digital content or services, because it is not accessible.

1.3   Building on the significant activity already undertaken by the Council in this area, and working with partner organisations, including schools and colleges, district and borough councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, the decision to allocate £2.5m was taken to tackle digital poverty.

1.4   In June 2021, the Contain Outbreak Management Fund allocated a further £2.5m to address digital poverty.

1.5   In July 2021, the Strategic Reset Programme (SRP) Board supported the direction of travel for the digital inclusion and capability workstream (which is part of the Financial Hardship Programme / Helping Hands Scheme) and in September 2021 agreed to align this workstream with SRP's work on Resident and User Experience.

1.6   Further local research has shown that digital exclusion has a negative impact locally in Kent, socially and economically, and the digital divide has grown which has been starkly highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.7   The majority of COVID-19 restrictions have now been eased and most 'normal' activity has resumed. While the consequences of the pandemic will continue to impact and need to be responded to for some time, there is a need to consider the longer-term priorities and actions in levelling-up and tackling the digital divide across the county.

1.8   There are many reasons for progressing a new strategy focussed on digital inclusion and capability, some of which are:

- There are changes in public service delivery. Notably the digital transformation and innovation within the sector, not only for the County Council but also for district and borough councils, parish and town councils and partner organisations, such as the NHS, DWP and police. A key benefit of service transformation and innovation for not only public sector organisations, but also taxpayers, are the efficiency and financial savings that can be realised. A clear strategy ought to provide a platform from which Kent can maximise the benefit realisation through digitally inclusive delivery and development.

- There are changes in the economic landscape, including the way in which the workforce will be economically active and engaged and the way in which economic productivity will change as a result of the post-pandemic digital era. Notwithstanding the importance of digital inclusion for the economy to recover sustainably, with a shift in more digital payment methods. A clear strategy ought to provide the opportunity to integrate the realisation of digital inclusivity within emerging economic strategies.

- For children and young people their educational performance can be significantly improved by home access to digital services and the internet and research has shown that it can boost their lifetime earnings. People with good ICT skills earn between 3 and 10 percent more than people without such skills (PwC, 2009).

- Digital inclusion is crucial to achieving priorities for health and social care organisations and teams, as well as, having a strong benefits case. The benefits for patients and carers can include improved self-care for minor ailments, improved self-management of long-term conditions, time and cost saved through accessing services digitally, reduced loneliness and isolation. For the health and care system, the benefits include more appropriate use of services, including primary and urgent care, better patience adherence to medicines and treatment and lower cost of delivering services.

- There are benefits for society and a return on investment in increasing digital inclusion and capability. A 2014 report from BT on valuing digital inclusion, calculated the social return on investment (SROI) of digital inclusion for individuals and for workers. For individuals, getting online is worth around £1,000 a year due to increase confidence, less social isolation, financial savings and opportunities in employment and leisure. For workers, getting online is worth around £3,500 a year due to opportunities for remote working and increased earnings opportunities.

- Each contact made by the public with a service deliverer, and each transaction they conduct online which was previously not done online could save the service provider between £3 and £12 per transaction (*Delivering digital inclusion,* 2010: 4-5, citing PwC 2009).

2.   Approach

2.1   To successfully develop, introduce and embed digital inclusion and capabilities; it is proposed that this new strategy will be a corporate strategy, linking closely to existing and emerging strategies, including equality and diversity.

2.2   There are a number of services across the council that have a part to play in delivering digital inclusion and capability, therefore the strategy will be developed in collaboration with those services as a cross council strategy.

2.3   KCC cannot tackle digital inclusion and capability on its own and will need to work with partners and stakeholders, such as district and borough councils, other public service organisations, voluntary and community sector organisations, schools and colleges; the strategy will be developed in collaboration with our partners and stakeholders.

3.   Initial Design Principles

It is envisaged that a new strategy should be prepared over the next six months. Some key principles to underpin its development include:

3.1   **Based on evidence:** The credibility of the strategy will depend on the line of sight between the evidence of need across the county and the policies and actions it sets out.

3.2   **Looking five years out:** It would make sense to put a time horizon of around five years on the strategy. This can allow it to be sufficiently focussed on the 'big picture', rather than just the immediate actions (for which it will provide a framework) and to set out the longer-term ambition. It is not proposed to plan ahead for longer than that, given that technological advances are likely to continue to be rapid and ever-changing.

3.3   **Ownership:** Despite the strategy being owned by KCC, we will be developing the strategy in conjunction with our key partners and stakeholders, with the view that the strategy can be adopted by these partners.

3.4 **Impact**: The strategy can provide a framework through which a range of actions can come forward. It will also have a clear route to deliverability: it should be ambitious and aspirational, but (linked with the 'evidence' point above) should avoid making 'asks' and proposals that are unlikely to have a credible business case.

4. Scope of the Strategy

Digital Inclusion and Capabilities is a broad and extensive area, particularly post-pandemic. Therefore, we have identified these key themes as part of the scope of the strategy:

4.1 **Digital Accessibility:** A key element of digital inclusion and capability is accessibility. It is important that digital services are designed to meet the needs of the users, which can be wide-ranging and varying. The public sector already has guidance to ensure that we meet the requirements of digital accessibility for digital websites and apps (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/accessibility-requirements-for-public-sector-websites-and-apps). Further obligations are set out within the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty to ensure adjustments are in place and alternative formats are available.

We will work with KCC's digital accessibility team to support existing working, ensuring that we have a coordinated approach to digital inclusion. In addition, we will work with the Digital Accessibility Group facilitated by the county wide Kent Connects Group.

4.2 **Digital Connectivity:** Digital connectivity is also an important element of digital inclusion, to ensure that Kent's communities have access to good and reliable connections.

We will work with KCC's broadband team to support existing work[i], policies and agreements, liaising with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and Building Digital UK (BDUK), to ensure that the strategy is coordinated, both on a local level and a national level.

4.3 **Digital Skills**: Skills and training to access and fully participate digitally is important both internally for our workforce, but also for our communities, to enhance the opportunities and realise the benefits of a digitally included and connected society.

We will work with KCC's Digital Champions Lead within the People & Communications directorate to ensure that the strategy aligns with the current work programme and capabilities of the Digital Champion's scheme. We will work both internally and with external stakeholders to enhance the existing digital champions/ambassador schemes, maximising the cohesion of approach and delivery.

4.4 **Digital Transformation**: Following the pandemic, there has been a shift for many organisations across the UK in the way in which they deliver their services and realising benefits and reduced costs from doing so. There is a risk that services are then harder to access for those that are digitally excluded.

We will work with KCC's Strategic Reset Programme and the directorate innovation teams to ensure that this new strategy, realises the transactional benefits of being digital for the service provider, but also empowers service users to access these services digitally. This new strategy will provide framework to support inclusion and capability to be embedded into the design and delivery of digital solutions and services across KCC, empowering users to access these services in a which meets their needs.

4.5 **Leading Digital Inclusion & Capabilities**: The strategy could aim to position the local authority as a leader in this space, championing inclusion and linking the strategy to corporate policies, including strategic plans, asset management, budgeting and financial plans, delivery plans, equality and diversity and so on.

We will work with KCC commissioners and procurement to explore how we can enhance and influence our supply chain to improve digital inclusion and capability across the Kent communities.

Working with borough, city and district councils will be key to tackling digital exclusion across the county and the strategy could be a blue-print or used to support their own digital direction and transformation.

The strategy could include wider impacts and benefits:

- Environmental – this strategy can support the environmental recovery of Kent, through digital transformation (reducing travel between sites by the workforce and our service users) and how we dispose of digital hardware, which can be done in an environmentally and sustainably appropriate way.
- Economic – this strategy can support the economic recovery for Kent and the government's levelling up agenda., realising the reduction in the cost per transaction for service providers, but also enable Kent residents to realise the benefits of being digitally included, which could result in a wider-range of job opportunities, as we move into a more connected and flexible economic environment, where the geographical barriers are being redesigned.
- Social – this strategy can support the social recovery of Kent keeping people connected.

This will solidify KCC's priorities and aspirations around digital inclusion and capability, further strengthening the alignment between existing and future activity in this space, both within the organisation and with partners. An underpinning single conversation with key stakeholders including local partners, government departments and the private sector, which could in time attract additional resource and/or investment.

4.6 **Other Areas within Scope**: As part of the scoping and evidence base exercises, further areas may be identified in relation to the strategy. These will be considered and brought to the relevant Cabinet Committee for a decision.

5. **Proposed Timetable and Work Plan**

The indicative timetable and work plan is anticipated as follows:

5.1 **Scoping** (November); including initial comments from Members.

5.2 **Evidence base** (November – December): Development of a consolidated evidence base, drawing on standard data sources, published materials and papers taking a deeper view of some topics that are likely to be relevant to the strategy.

5.3 **Storyboard** (December): Initial synthesis of evidence and emerging themes and the development of a framework for consideration.

5.4 **Engagement** (January – February): Consultation with key stakeholders on the emerging draft framework.

5.5 **Draft Strategy** (March – April), for consideration by Members and key partners and stakeholders.

5.6 There may be a case for a formal consultation before the Strategy is finalised. This will be considered in the scoping phase, and the timetable maybe updated as part of this.

---

6. Recommendation(s):

6.1 The Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the development of a corporate strategy for digital inclusion and capability that is:
- led by KCC's Digital Lead (Digital Inclusion & Capability)
- corporately owned by Strategic & Corporate Services as outlined in Section 2 of this report.
- designed based on the principles as outlined in Section 3 of this report.

---

6. Contact Details

Report Author:

Relevant Director:

Sam Lain-Rose, Digital Lead (Digital Inclusion & Capabilities)
03000 419 286
Sam.Lain-Rose@kent.gov.uk

Zena Cooke, Corporate Director for Finance
03000 419 205
Zena.Cooke@kent.gov.uk

---

[i] KCC's broadband team is working with Building Digital UK (BDUK) to support the local delivery of a number of government-led initiatives to improve broadband connectivity. These programmes, which include the BDUK Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme and the Superfast Broadband Programme, have focussed on areas which remain outside the scope of market-

led investment (i.e. work will not benefit from an upgrade funded by telecom operators). To date, this work has been delivered faster broadband connections to over 143,000 homes and businesses across Kent that would otherwise have been left with a poor broadband connection.

The new Project Gigabit Programme, for which the government has already allocated between £119m - £203m for improving broadband connectivity across Kent and Medway.