

MONDAY, 24 APRIL 2023



DIGITAL INCLUSION

Purpose of report: To provide an overview of the Digital Inclusion journey that Surrey County Council has been on over the past few years and to update on new activity that will enable the development and alignment of a strategic approach to Digital Inclusion. In addition, to seek input and suggestions from the Committee on how best to shape this important work to ensure it meets the needs of Surrey residents.

Introduction:

1. In 2018, the Council commissioned Citizens Online (an organisation that works across the United Kingdom supporting people and organisations with digital inclusion and digital transformation) to produce baseline research into the extent of digital inclusion in Surrey. This was in the context of our wider digital transformation work, in order to underline the importance of support for inclusivity and accessibility. The work, commissioned through the Digital and Customer Transformation programmes, spanned the Council in order to get a whole organisation view.
2. Taking a broad definition, digital exclusion is where a section of the population has continuing unequal access and capacity to use essential information and communications technologies to fully participate in society. Digital inclusion is about working with people and communities to build opportunity, access, knowledge, and skills in relation to using technologies; in particular the internet, to overcome disadvantage and enhance people's lives.
3. Since the report, there has been many challenges that both the Council and those living in Surrey have faced; not least the Covid-19 pandemic followed by inflationary pressures and ongoing financial pressures for public services. The pandemic and its aftereffects have changed the digital landscape. Although it has accelerated uptake of digital tools for some, with 41 per cent of people expecting to use online services more; for those that are at risk of being left behind the digital divide has only increased, further deepening pre-existing inequalities and exclusion.

4. Surrey County Council's Organisation Strategy 2021-2026 places IT & Digital at the heart of how we will transform as a council, especially when interacting with our residents, partners, and staff. It is therefore vital that our digital inclusion approach and delivery plan supports both this ambition and our commitment to Equality, Diversity & Inclusion to ensure the best outcomes for the residents of Surrey.
5. The Council recognises that digital exclusion prevents residents from engaging digitally, and not just with the Council. This work is much wider than the delivery and uptake of online Council services; it is about making sure residents are supported and able to access the wider benefits of the digital world. These benefits include improved health and wellbeing, social inclusion, employment opportunities and saving money. These positive outcomes support Surrey County Council's 2030 ambition to, 'make Surrey a uniquely special place for people to live, work and learn, and where no one is left behind'.
6. We are committed to ensuring residents can easily access our services when they need them. While we aim to offer excellent digital services for those that can, and prefer, to interact with us in that way so we can make best use of our resources; we still maintain other contact channels (e.g., the telephone) for people who are not able to access our services digitally or need to contact us urgently.
7. This is an opportunity to present the early insight from this phase of work from Citizens Online and to seek input from Members on how we embed an inclusive approach to our digital transformation to respond to current challenges and to ensure that our residents are not left behind in this digital age.

Findings from the 2018 Digital Inclusion Report

8. The 'Digital Inclusion in Surrey' 2018 baseline report set out clear recommendations to embed digital inclusion to support both Surrey County Council's digital transformation and also residents with improving digital skills and access:

"Whether it's to cut costs, deliver better services or respond to customers' needs, organisations in every sector are doing more and more online. Digital inclusion must be the heart of any digital transformation programme, and central to any transformation conversation from the start. There is no point in having brilliant online services if your customers can't use them. Organisations need to embrace both the potential for financial cost and transactional time saving through digital and also acknowledge the significant benefits that can be achieved for residents, resulting in better customer satisfaction".

9. Key recommendations in the 2018 report included creating an inclusion network made up of Digital Champions and interested staff. This would create a forum, and eventually an organisational capability for skills development, information sharing, signposting and increased digital awareness. This was underpinned by recommendations to strengthen strategic leadership support for digital inclusion, ensuring it was embedded into policies, procurement frameworks and work programmes, including HR processes, to drive a culture shift across the organisation. The final recommendations focused on the opportunities that exist in wider communities and with partners which, as our digital maturity grew, we could use to increase the reach of digital support offers to deliver more positive outcomes for residents. This included the use of libraries as key sites for digital support, maximising contact through GP surgeries and working with district and borough councils at a local level on targeted geographic initiatives. For example, working with residents in areas identified by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), who needed to improve their digital skills to successfully access benefits.

10. Since this analysis took place in 2018, the Council has made progress in embedding digital accessibility and inclusion into service delivery. Some examples have included:
 - 10.1 A successful Cabinet Office audit of the Surrey County Council (SCC) website as part of our commitment to providing an accessible website that is easy to use by anyone, whatever their age, background, access device or level of ability. This included the development of an 'accessibility machine' - a tool to help check accessibility compliance for documents on the website.

 - 10.2 The creation of a digital skills strategy for staff, with trainers offering a range of digital skills courses that have now reached over 10,000 participants.

 - 10.3 Additional offers within Libraries to provide mediated support for residents needing to access digital services, this has included additional customer services training on key enquiry types and the appointment of Digital Welfare Officers to help address issues of disadvantage and digital literacy amongst Surrey residents, helping communities to become more digitally active and resilient.

 - 10.4 The introduction of new roles when designing digital solutions, including User Researchers and User Experience experts to capture the requirements of residents, staff, and partners to make sure their needs are at the heart of service design.

 - 10.5 Embedding support into our digital channels, such as live web chat so people can communicate directly with a contact centre agent should they experience difficulties using online services.

10.6 Trial of a Digital Champions Network with access to online skills and tools. This was to provide learning support for individuals looking to learn basic digital skills and involved volunteers receiving skills training. Joint work with Surrey Heartlands is currently re-energising this work and volunteer Digital Champions will be recruited to work in local community hubs, alongside the launch of a 'Digital Surrey' platform, specifically aimed at people working in health and social care, to bring information about digital support offers together in one place. This work with health colleagues will complement offers of digital support provided by the Council e.g. Digital Welfare Officers in libraries.

10.7 Ongoing discovery work with partners, such as Surrey Heartlands, to better understand what digital exclusion means for our residents, particularly in relation to health and wellbeing outcomes.

10.8 A comprehensive digital skills course offer for all abilities delivered through Surrey Adult Learning.

Digital Inclusion: The Next Phase

11. As referenced in paragraph 10, there are good examples of digital inclusion happening across the Council and within our communities. However, there are also gaps in our knowledge and opportunities to better connect work to create more positive outcomes, as well as to provide more strategic oversight and direction.
12. Updated and new research, such as the Covid-19 Community impact Assessment and targeted research into the experiences of seldom heard / under-represented groups, has also provided deeper community insights and understanding of the specific challenges faced by particular resident groups in relation to digital accessibility.
13. For example, research has identified that in Surrey, an estimated 200,000 people currently experience digital exclusion (source: Surrey-i) and that this is inextricably linked to wider inequalities in society and is more likely to be faced by people over 65, those on low incomes, and disabled people. The digital exclusion index, which provides a way of understanding digital exclusion in Surrey based on the whole range of social and technical outcomes has also identified a number of areas in the county with relatively low scores, indicating residents living there are at an increased risk of digital exclusion. Examples of such areas include parts of Tattenham, Staines, Stanwell, Sheerwater, Merstham, Godstone and Sunbury Common.
14. Digital skills are classed by the UK Government as 'essential' to live in today's society. We know that being online and having good digital skills has a wide range of benefits. It helps people to feel less isolated, save money, access

better paid work, help their children, and can improve wider health and wellbeing.

15. In addition to residents there are huge benefits for the Council in supporting this work as it will drive more successful digital transformation, modernisation, and channel shift. Improving digital maturity, culture and working practices will future proof the Council to deliver outstanding public services in a more efficient way.
16. However, we know that there are people who will never be able to use digital services and it is our intention to ensure that they are catered for. It is important that the Council has a clearly agreed cross organisation digital inclusion approach so that residents are not left behind.
17. The Council also needs to be mindful of the changing nature of digital. As technology changes it brings new challenges that can further exclude people e.g. 2Factor Authentication (an extra layer of security protection for online accounts), switch off of analogue channels (e.g. televisions and telephones going digital), cashless society etc. The Council must be thoughtful about this changing landscape and what this means for the way in which our services are delivered and the impact on residents.
18. The challenge of ensuring digital inclusion is important for all organisations. Stronger links are needed across the wider statutory, private, and voluntary sector because people feeling more confident and safer to do more online has benefits for many organisations. The work commissioned from Citizens Online will update and refresh what the digital inclusion landscape in Surrey looks like and will help to shape key areas where we need to focus or develop activities and efforts both as an organisation and with partners.

Proposed Approach

19. Citizens Online will be engaging with a wide range of key stakeholders in Surrey County Council, across different Directorates, all of which are key touchpoints for Digital Inclusion and skills, to support both transformation of services and residents with improving their digital skills.
20. An online survey is also in circulation to gather views from District & Borough, Town and Parish Councils, voluntary and community organisations, housing associations, Citizens Advice, Age UK, Job Centres etc. This will be followed up with an online workshop on 25 April 2023.
21. Alongside the work of Citizens Online, which will tap into and compare what we are doing in Surrey with best practice across the country, officers will look to learn from other Local Authorities and wider customer facing organisations who

are working through their approaches to digital inclusion. This will include contacting the Local Government Association (LGA) Digital Inclusion Network.

22. Elected Members play a vital role in representing the needs of their residents. Ongoing involvement from Members as part of the stakeholder engagement would be welcomed, particularly from those who have a specific interest in, or knowledge of, digital inclusion and/or wider accessibility issues.
23. Driving digital inclusion requires a whole organisation effort. As part of the work, consideration will be given to ensuring that the right leadership and network is in place across the organisation to oversee delivery of future work on digital inclusion.

Conclusions:

24. Recent challenges including the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living have changed the digital landscape. Although this has accelerated uptake of digital tools for some, it has increased the digital divide for others.
25. Digital exclusion prevents residents from engaging digitally, not only with Council services, but also from experiencing the wider benefits of the digital world in supporting health and wellbeing, social inclusion, employment, and financial stability.
26. To support the delivery of the 2030 Vision, Surrey County Council's Digital Strategy, our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and ensuring that no one is left behind, there is a need to develop our strategic approach to Digital Inclusion. Citizen's Online have been commissioned to deliver a key piece of work to help shape thinking and future action.

Recommendations:

27. It is recommended that the Committee:
 - a) Note the report.
 - b) Provide feedback on the proposed approach and early findings of the Citizen's Online work to help shape the next phase of the work and our strategic approach to Digital Inclusion.
 - c) Nominate representatives from the Committee to participate as key stakeholders in the work being undertaken by Citizen's Online and to engage with this work on an ongoing basis as it develops.

Next Steps:

28. To take feedback from the Committee to help shape the work and ensure we have Member engagement.
29. To report back to the Committee once the final report from Citizens Online is complete and ready to share.

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Sources/background papers

- [Impact of Covid-19 on our Communities | Surrey-i \(surreyi.gov.uk\)](#)
- [Surrey County Council’s Digital Strategy](#)
- [Community Vision for Surrey in 2030](#)
- [Understanding Digital Exclusion in Surrey](#)
- Digital Inclusion Update to ICS Board
- [Surrey Digital Exclusion Map](#)

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