

Thursday 18 July 2024



Digital Inclusion

Purpose of report: To share the outcomes of research into digital exclusion in Surrey with Members and our proposed response to the findings of the research. The report seeks the Committee's endorsement of the proposed way forward.

Introduction:

1. A report was brought to the Select Committee in April 2023 detailing the need to improve digital inclusion in Surrey to reduce inequality of access to essential services. The report also noted research being undertaken by Citizens Online into the extent of digital exclusion in Surrey, and a commitment was given to bring back the results of this research and our proposed responses to its recommendations.
2. Since then, we have launched our ambitious customer transformation programme, a key SCC priority which will set out how we engage with all our customers to ensure no one is left behind. We recognise that Digital Inclusion is a key component to delivering on our customer transformation ambitions, and our response to the Citizen's Online research will be incorporated into the Customer Transformation programme. This report sets out for Members how the research has helped shape a draft Digital Inclusion strategy for the county, which will help inform the future of our customer services offer going forwards.

Digital Inclusion in Surrey

3. We recognise that access to digital services and opportunities are ever more crucial in people's personal and work lives. The opportunity to access services online can be transformative for many people and can help support SCC's ambition of having 'no one left behind'. We know there are people in Surrey who are currently digitally excluded, for example through lack of digital skills, lack of access to technology or internet connectivity. We also recognise that there will be some people in Surrey who for various reasons will never want or be able to access services online. It is essential that we continue to provide alternative contact options for this cohort, which we will be better placed to do by enabling more people to access services online who want to do so.

4. Citizens Online, a national organisation that works to promote digital inclusion, carried out research in Surrey in 2023 to establish the extent of digital exclusion in the county. They also provided recommendations for how we can enable as many people as possible who wish to become digitally enabled to do so. The full report from Citizens Online is attached in appendix B and some key findings include:
 - Up to 50,000 people in Surrey are currently digitally excluded.
 - 5.7% of adults in Surrey are offline.
 - 7.5% of homes in Surrey do not have internet access.
 - 18% of adults in Surrey lack the skills that the Government defines as essential skills for life and 19% lack the skills considered essential for work.
 - 19% do not have a laptop or PC and 14% do not have a smartphone.
5. The research shows that reasons for people being digitally excluded are multi-faceted. The most obvious are an inability to afford either the technology (phones, tablets, or computers) or the connectivity these need (broadband and mobile data). A further key barrier is not having the required skills and training to use key digital services. Many digital services are also not designed with accessibility in mind, meaning that they may not be accessible to people who need to use assistive technology to access them, for example screen readers for people with visual impairments.

SCC response to Digital Inclusion report

6. Since the Citizens Online report was received, work has been undertaken in a number of areas to address digital inclusion in Surrey, including activity in our Libraries to provide advice, support and access to technology and work to improve our own staff digital skills. There is more information on the digital inclusion support provided by our Libraries service in Appendix C.
7. However, we recognise that digital exclusion is a complex and wide-reaching issue and that we need to do more to address it in a holistic way. This is also an issue that is not SCC's alone to address and the response to it will require us to work in partnership with key stakeholders, including the voluntary, community and faith sector in Surrey. We are working with the group set up to address this partnership working, the Surrey Digital Inclusion Steering Group, which brings together key players including District and Boroughs, the Coalition of Disabled People in Surrey and Sight for Surrey.
8. The first step for us as an organisation is to set out what our priorities are in this area. We have done this via an overarching Digital Inclusion Strategy which

sets out our ambitions and priorities to address the barriers. This strategy is set out in appendix A and is built around 5 priority areas:

- Enabling access to digital resources and data for residents facing financial challenges
- Ensuring all digital content is optimised and designed for digital inclusion
- Enhancing digital skills and confidence among residents and increasing awareness of available support services
- Working in partnership to ensure maximum impact
- Using social value from our procurement contracts to create opportunities to reduce digital exclusion

9. As noted above, there are a number of partners we will need to work with in order to tackle digital exclusion in Surrey. We also know that there is already activity underway both at SCC and elsewhere, including in the voluntary, community and faith sector and District and Borough Councils, working directly with residents and communities.

10. In order to ensure that work progresses at pace to tackle this important issue, we have set out key actions that can be taken in the next 3-6 months to build on work already underway. This is set out in the Digital Inclusion Strategy in appendix A. We will then work with partners to assess progress against the following to enable us to set future direction for digital inclusion:

- The range of work already underway, its effectiveness and reach
- Where the gaps are in existing work and who is not being reached in our communities
- Which additional partners need to be engaged with this work, and what any support offers are that they currently provide
- What resources we can engage with this work, including via our Team Around the Community approach
- How to embed the governance of this work so that it becomes a part of business as usual at SCC

This will ensure that we do not 'reinvent the wheel' and that we are able to maximise the opportunities for partnership working, while not duplicating or displacing work that other groups or organisations are better placed to undertake in our communities.

Digital Inclusion and the Customer Transformation programme

11. As noted above, this work will form a vital part of our Customer Transformation programme. This programme will create a culture shift in how we engage with our residents to improve their experiences and outcomes through a new

customer operating model proposed for the Council. Embedding Digital Inclusion into this transformation programme will have benefits for both areas of work. Firstly, it will ensure that the principles of digital inclusion are built into the new customer operating model. This will include issues such as ensuring that any digital offer is designed with accessibility as a primary function, and that as we move to a more digitally enabled customer offer, we build in the support that people may need to help them access this.

12. By aligning with the Customer Transformation Programme, the Digital Inclusion lead will have access to resources allocated via the transformation programme and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and improve the reach of the programme without duplication.

Member development and digital inclusion

13. The Committee also requested in April 2023 that digital skills training be provided to Members. The Members Digital Skills Development Approach is currently being drafted by IT & Digital, due to be presented to the Member Development Steering Group at their September meeting.
14. It will cover the end of the current council term, where we will be testing whether personal development plans for individual Members, based on their training needs feedback, provides an additional benefit. Overall, the Members Digital Skills Development Approach will be weighted to deliver for the next Council term (2025-29).
15. In the 2025-29 term, the initial focus will be on promoting training on the day-to-day tools used by Members. Subsequently, it will look for opportunities to develop advanced skills and Members' understanding of Digital, utilising the in-person member development days. A joint IT & Digital and Democratic Services Working Group will review progress and iterate the approach, reporting to the Member Development Steering Group.

Conclusions:

16. Work to improve Digital Inclusion in Surrey will be a key enabler of the Council's Customer Transformation Programme. The research carried out by Citizens Online has enabled us to better understand the extent of the digital inclusion gap in Surrey and what actions will help us to bridge this gap. By embedding this work into a major transformation programme that is at the heart of everything we do for our customers, we can ensure that this approach is mainstreamed and has the resource and influence it requires to be successful.

17. By enabling more people to access services digitally who have the potential and the desire to do so, we will be able to use our face to face and telephone resources in a more targeted way for those who cannot use digital. This will help to deliver on the Council's overall ambition of having no one left behind.

Recommendations:

18. The committee is recommended to endorse:
- a) The draft Digital Inclusion Strategy
 - b) The approach of embedding digital inclusion within the Customer Transformation Programme to ensure its reach and sustainability

Next steps:

Progress on Digital Inclusion will be reported alongside the wider work on Customer Transformation.

We will establish clear links to existing governance arrangements and key stakeholder groups to drive forward the partnership elements of this work.

We will continue to engage via the Surrey Digital Inclusion Steering Group and identify other key community groups who will work with us on delivering the strategy.

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Sources/background papers

Draft Digital Inclusion Strategy

Citizens Online research

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