

County Council – 22 March 2024

Item 16(b) – Notice of Motion from Cllr McGregor on Digital Exclusion

Briefing Note

Understanding the position

The County Council's Community Safety and Wellbeing Service, within the Communities Directorate, working with Citizens Online has developed an in depth understanding of digital inclusion, access and safety issues and barriers across West Sussex.

From research undertaken by Citizens Online in 2023 it is estimated that:

- 13% (82,953) of adults in West Sussex either do not use the internet or need support to do so.
- Of these, 6% (38,286) are not online. This is higher than the national average which is at around 4%.

From the research, 29% of West Sussex residents told us that local government should support people with digital skills (the second most popular response after friends and family).

In West Sussex digital exclusion disproportionately affects older people, those on low income and those who are disabled.

- Older people - West Sussex residents aged 75+ are much more likely to not use the internet than younger people. Research suggests a lack of digital skills and confidence is a significant barrier stopping many of today's over-75-year-olds going online, alongside the associated costs.
- Those on low income - Residents in West Sussex with lower incomes are more likely to not use the internet. Nationally, those with lower incomes have less skills in the Essential Digital Skills groups, compared to those on higher incomes.
- Those who are disabled - People with a long-term physical or mental health condition, or disability, are less likely to be frequent internet users. Local research for West Sussex mirrors national statistics.

Action within the Library Service

Libraries offer the space, equipment and trained staff and volunteers to support residents who are digitally excluded. All libraries offer free access to computers or Wi-Fi for those using their own device. Any resident in need can contact the Library Digital Support service for initial help with digital enquiries, this can be via the helpline 0330 222 3455, email library.digital.support@westsussex.gov.uk, or by directly visiting a library.

All library staff have been trained to provide in-person help and support, and most libraries also have Digital Volunteers who are able to provide more targeted one-to-one support for individuals in greatest need. The volunteers can offer free support in libraries by appointment, on a range of digital enquiries from setting up an email account, to help with online shopping, or being safe online. Libraries currently respond to over 2,000 enquiries each month for digital support.

Digital Safety and support

In 2023 the West Sussex Staying Safe Online E-newsletter was sent to over 7,000 residents monthly and reshared to an estimated 30,000+ residents via partners. Anyone can sign up to receive the newsletter by visiting westsussex.gov.uk/staying-safe-online. There were 3,481 people trained and supported by the Digital Safety Team, with 422 professionals trained on digital safeguarding. The Digital Safety Volunteers (formally Digital Ambassadors) delivered a range of digital safety awareness and engagement activity to residents. The volunteers regularly share information via their networks, deliver talks to local community groups and raise awareness by attending and supporting local events.

Alongside this, a Digital Inclusion, Access, and Safety focused website (westsussex.gov.uk/digitalinclusion) resource was developed with partners, including a directory of organisations that offer digital skills, data, or devices support. A partnership of key stakeholders was formed, including local government and the voluntary sector, with regular meetings taking place to share ideas, best practice and develop future approaches.

Digital Inclusion Awareness Training has started to be piloted within the county, a key focus of training involves considering alternatives to digital engagement for residents as part of programmes of delivery, projects, and services. A marketing campaign to raise awareness of the digital skills support available is taking place with adverts in local press and in over 80 buses throughout the county. A digital skills and confidence survey has been undertaken across all County Council staff, the findings of which will be used to highlight priorities for internal learning and development.

Approach to digital inclusion

As a result of all this work we are developing a draft Digital Inclusion, Access and Safety strategic approach that will inform the County Council's wider Digital Strategy. The vision for this strategic approach is that everyone in West Sussex can benefit from being online and is able to access and experience safely the wide-ranging opportunities that being online gives them. Everyone in West Sussex should be able to fully participate in our digital society. To achieve this, we will focus on four priorities and state our ambitions and commitments. The four priorities include:

- Making digital inclusion part of the culture.
- Supporting residents to safely access the benefits of the internet.
- Building digital skills, confidence, motivation, and trust.
- Connectivity and access to devices.

Digital connectivity

The delivery of technologies such as gigabit-capable broadband and advanced mobile infrastructure is predominantly a commercial activity. However, the County Council has long recognised the importance that fast and reliable digital infrastructure has on the daily lives of our communities and businesses. We continue to work with government and commercial telecoms suppliers to increase and accelerate the availability of this vital infrastructure. In particular, we continue to target our resources at supporting our hardest to reach and rural communities which are least likely to be the recipient of commercial investment.

Our Better Connected project played a key role in enabling 97% of all premises being able to receive a Superfast connection. Currently 69% of all premises can receive a gigabit-capable connection. The County Council has invested £5m via our West Sussex 'Top-Up' to the UK Gigabit Voucher Scheme resulting in 10,000 premises being able to receive a gigabit-capable connection by the end of 2024.

We have worked with the Government to ensure that West Sussex has been included in the early phases of Project Gigabit which will result in multi-million investment in our digital infrastructure. We will continue to identify new opportunities to improve digital connectivity throughout West Sussex and we have identified opportunities to improve mobile connectivity. For a comprehensive overview of our approach please refer to the Digital Infrastructure Strategy found on these pages: [Gigabit-capable broadband - West Sussex County Council](#).

Customer Engagement and Access to Services

Work is underway to develop a strategy that will set our ambitions for developing and increasing the channels in which we engage with all our customers and deliver services. This will include increasing the offer of accessing our services using digital tools where appropriate and will be underpinned by digital inclusion, access and safety – focusing on improving the customer experience. The draft strategy is expected to be presented to Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee in June.

Lee Harris

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