| | Cambridge City Council | Item |
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| To: | Executive Councillor for Housing: Councillor Kevin Price | |
| Report by: | LIZ BISSET | |
| Relevant scrutiny committee: | Housing Scrutiny Committee | 24/9/2015 |
| Wards affected: | All Wards | |

## UPDATE ON THE 'GET ONLINE' DIGITAL INCLUSION PROJECT
## Not a Key Decision

## 1. Executive summary

Households on low incomes are becoming digitally excluded, particularly those in Social Housing - where half of the 11% of UK households without internet access now live. Digital Inclusion offers routes out of poverty - helping residents to save money, sustain their tenancies and engage with the Council more easily and more often.

With more pressure on Social Housing to do more with less, Digital Engagement will be key in effectively using customer data and involvement to design better services.

This report recommends three practical steps the Council can take to deliver effective Digital Inclusion and Engagement in council housing communities.

## 2. Recommendations

The Executive Councillor is recommended:

**2.1** To approve the roll-out of a city-wide Get Online training course aimed at Council Tenants/Leaseholders and delivered from Council Community Centres

**2.2** To approve a Digital Champion training scheme to enable peer-to-peer skill sharing within the tenant/leaseholder community

**2.3** To approve a scoping project to assess whether a communal tenant/leaseholder WiFi provision is feasible (with a report to be brought to a future committee for funding approval if required).

## 3. Background

**3.1** Of the 11% of UK households without internet access, half live in social housing. As the UK becomes a more switched-on society, those unable to get online will be increasingly left behind. This is a particular risk for households on low incomes, as many of the best savings, tariffs and job opportunities are increasingly only available to those online.

**3.2** Locally, 40% of tenants are not online in Cambridge and 46% of those said the primary reason was cost (Cambridge Tenant Survey 2014)

**3.3** With more pressure on Social Housing providers to do more with less, a 'switched on' tenant community can not only save money and sustain their tenancy - but can also engage with their landlord more easily and cheaply.

**3.4** Officers from a variety of City Council teams, and from the County Council, are already meeting to ensure a coherent, joined-up approach to digital inclusion - informed by both the Anti-Poverty Strategy and the emerging Digital Strategy. This group has recognised that those living in Social Housing are among the most digitally excluded and that the project work in this report is a key part in delivering a wider Digital Strategy.

**3.5 Get Online Training Course:** Housing's refurbished laptop loan scheme was successful in helping over 40 residents to get online, with a waiting list of as many people. The loan scheme has since evolved into a 12-week training course for 10 learners. The pilot was run from Brown's Field community centre in East Chesterton and delivered for the Council by Silver Training, using a course designed for those in Social Housing.

**3.6** The course teaches IT basics, finances, benefits, job-hunting, CV writing, and more. At the end of the course, learners receive a refurbished laptop and 3G dongle if needed. Learners are encouraged to save towards the purchase via a credit union account (which the tutor helps them to set up at the beginning of the course). Applicants must be in receipt of benefits (for this pilot they were referred by the local Housing Officer). At the end of the course, learners receive a City & Guilds IT qualification. Learners are also required them to "sign-up" as an involved resident with the Council.

**3.7** Following the success of the scheme, the Council would like to run these across the city. The aim is to run 6 per year (60 learners) from Community Centres

**3.8 Digital Champions:** These are people willing to help others learn how to use computers and the internet. They are not expected to be experts - enthusiasm and patience are the most valued skills. A number of external

providers offering training that can be tailored to the specific needs of the volunteers.

**3.9** The recruitment, training and support of tenants and leaseholders to act as Digital Champions on estates is vital in realising the benefits of digital inclusion within Council Housing.

**3.10** Limited staff resources would be greatly enhanced by these volunteers acting as advocates amongst their neighbours and peers.

**3.11** Following the recent installation of WiFi in Sheltered Scheme communal areas, the resident involvement team have begun working with a small group of tenants. The intention is to meet on a regular basis during September/October, leading to formal Digital Champion training later in the year. Independent Living Facilitators will be encouraged to attend this training.

**3.12** A recruitment campaign via Open Door magazine, the City Council website and area housing offices will aim to attract Digital Champions from amongst general needs tenants and leaseholders. In addition, those residents attending the 12 week courses, will be encouraged to volunteer.

**3.13 Communal WiFi:** One of the biggest barriers for being online amongst Council tenants and leaseholders is the installation and monthly cost of a broadband connection. For those on low incomes, these costs can add up to over £350 per year.

**3.14** BT have recognised this gap and are now offering a new package aimed at Social Housing landlords, whereby the landlord can directly meet the cost of a communal WiFi provision for a block or development and then recharge for this via a service charge to the tenants.

**3.15** The advantage of this arrangement is that the cost to the tenant could be significantly lower than an individual broadband line.

**3.16** Because most of the Council's estates are mixed development, there would also be scope to offer this Council-provided WiFi to private residents within the estate/block - though at a higher price (in the same way that Council garages are rented to private tenants)

**3.17** This report therefore asks for approval to run a feasibility project with BT to assess whether a communal tenant/leaseholder WiFi charged as a rent/service charge item can be delivered within an acceptable budget as described above.

## 4. Implications

(a)    **Financial Implications -** The training courses and Digital Champions training can be delivered through a combination of existing budgets and grant funding. The pilot 12-week course was funded using grant funding made available under the anti-poverty strategy.

The communal WiFi project is a scoping project only, with no financial commitment. If necessary a report will be brought to committee for approval.

(b)    **Staffing Implications**    - Nil

(c)    **Equality and Poverty Implications** – Digital Inclusion creates routes out of poverty, particularly when targeted at those on low incomes

(d)    **Environmental Implications -** Digital interaction is greener than traditional methods as it cuts down on paper and travelling

(e)    **Procurement -** Nil

(f)    **Consultation and communication -** Data quoted in the report came from the 2014 Tenant & Leaseholder Satisfaction Survey – see background papers for link

(g)    **Community Safety -** Nil

## 5. Background papers

**STAR Survey 2014:**
https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/sites/www.cambridge.gov.uk/files/documents/2014%20STAR%20Survey%20Report%20-%20General%20Needs.pdf

## 6. Appendices

**None**

## 7. Inspection of papers

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact:

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