MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Middlesbrough
moving forward

Report of:	Councillor Eric Polano - Executive Member for Regeneration Richard Horniman - Director of Regeneration and Culture Councillor Barrie Cooper - Executive Member for Environment and Finance & Governance Ian Wright - Director of Finance

Submitted to:	Executive - 11 January 2022

Subject:	Digital Inclusion Strategy

Summary

Proposed decision(s)
That Executive adopts the Digital Inclusion Strategy.

Report for:	**Key decision:**	**Confidential:**	**Is the report urgent?**
Decision	Yes	No	No

Contribution to delivery of the 2021-24 Strategic Plan		
People	**Place**	**Business**
The Digital Inclusion Strategy assists with the delivery of the Priorities of: 'We will show Middlesbrough's children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people'; and: 'We will work to address the causes of vulnerability and inequalities in Middlesbrough and safeguard and support those made vulnerable'	The Digital Inclusion Strategy assists with the delivery of the Priority of: 'We will ensure that we place communities at the heart of what we do, continue to deliver value for money and enhance the reputation of Middlesbrough.'	The Digital Inclusion Strategy assists with the delivery of the Priority of: 'We will ensure the recovery of local communities, businesses and the Council's operations from COVID-19, taking opportunities to build back better.'

Ward(s) affected
All Wards

What is the purpose of this report?

1. To adopt the Digital Inclusion Strategy (DIS).

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. The DIS will support the delivery of the Council's Poverty Strategy and the Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024. It is designed to identify and prioritise the actions required to better unify and enhance current local authority and partner agency digital inclusion interventions, bridge remaining provision gaps and embed future inclusion actions into "business as usual" in order to bring Middlesbrough in line with national digital inclusion standards. Adopting the DIS will affect more than two wards, meaning it is a key decision. As such, it falls within the remit of the Executive.

Report Background

3. On 11 May 2021, the Executive approved the Strategic Plan 2021 – 2024 workplan and associated outcomes, including the action to "Create and deliver a strategy to increase digital inclusion for children, young people and adults across Middlesbrough" within the Vulnerability priority.

4. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the scale and negative effect of digital exclusion has been exposed beyond previous understanding, impacting on quality of education, access to healthcare, employment and services, and ability to connect with loved ones. Ofcom research shows that 11% of the UK population still do not have access to the internet at home. In addition, there are those who do not have the appropriate device, quality of connection, or required skills in order to make use of the digital potential.

5. A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge negative impact on a person's life, leading to poorer health outcomes and a lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, less access to jobs and education. It can mean paying more for essentials, financial exclusion and an increased risk of experiencing poverty. People who are digitally excluded also lack a voice and visibility in the modern world, as government services and democracy increasingly move online. It is those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – who are most likely to be excluded, further widening the social inequality gap. Middlesbrough's high levels of multiple deprivation factors contribute to and are exacerbated by digital DISarity among residents. Within this context, it is becoming increasingly important that access to digital devices, connectivity, skills and services is sufficiently expanded and tailored to meet the needs of our population.

6. Many excellent individual short-term interventions and projects within the council and local partners tackling elements of the digital exclusion issue already exist, but until now these have not been coordinated within a single synchronised strategy or woven into the core priorities of interrelated long term service plans addressing associated vulnerabilities.

7. The DIS will be used by the Council to help shape the future of digital inclusion in the borough, to ensure that all our residents are supported to overcome digital barriers and maximise the social, health, education and economic benefits of enhanced digital access. The annually-reviewed action plan will enable us to target our leadership response, along with our key strategic partners, to emerging local needs, opportunities and priorities towards the ultimate aim of achieving parity with national digital inclusion standards.

8. The DIS takes into consideration, and builds upon, existing strategies and studies, including:

- Strategic Plan for Middlesbrough 2021 – 2024
- Customer Strategy
- Executive Digital Strategy 2018 - 2022 digitalising council services
- MCM Learning and Education Strategy 2021 – 2024
- Welfare and Financial Inclusion Strategy
- Gigabit City broadband expansion programme

9. In preparing the DIS, a director-led steering group, statutory consultees and other key stakeholders, were consulted and invited to take part in stakeholder workshops. The outcomes of the engagement have been taken into consideration in finalising the DIS.

10. The key aspects of the DIS are set out below:

- The Vision - Middlesbrough will be brought in line with national digital inclusion standards
- The Strategy – centred around the 5 digital inclusion Key Objectives, with issues and emerging opportunities for each:
  o **Objective 1:** Ensuring children and families are able to access digital learning and no pupil misses learning due to digital DISarity.
  o **Objective 2:** Ensuring job seekers are able to access digital skills and employability support.
  o **Objective 3:** Ensuring individuals (particularly elderly people) are able to engage with others to reduce isolation.
  o **Objective 4:** Ensuring local businesses are supported to trade digitally.
  o **Objective 5:** Ensuring town-wide connectivity plans support Middlesbrough's digital ambitions.

11. The DIS is accompanied with an action plan, which identifies a series of 10 Practical Actions required to launch the coordinated digital inclusion programme and attain tangible improvement over the next 12 months against the Key Objectives:

- **Action 1.1:** Support schools to access and provide digital devices for all pupils, and develop use of digital and remote learning platforms
- **Action 1.2:** Embed new Digital Entitlement offer - free government initiative aimed at those who do not have ICT skills up to Level 1 – into MCLS
- **Action 2.1:** Develop business case for device "lending library" through libraries / hubs / MCLS
- **Action 2.2:** Host Digital Event – promoting local digital businesses, employment opportunities and digital learning services
- **Action 3.1**: Develop Independence Hub in Cavendish House including live device and software demonstrations, and creation of a digital skills buddying system (train the trainer / family member inclusion programmes)
- **Action 3.2:** Create business case for a "safety net" scheme run through MCLS for all residents which offering basic ICT training on engaging with friends, family and essential public services
- **Action 4.1:** Develop Middlesbrough Digital campaign to provide advice for local businesses, signposting for digitalization support and promotion of town's digital cluster
- **Action 4.2:** Explore the utilisation of open data more widely as per best practice in Sunderland and Leeds

- **Action 5.1:** Develop planning/procurement policies to influence developers to incorporate superfast/fibre broadband infrastructure into new housing/investment developments as a basic minimum requirement
- **Action 5.2:** Work with CityFibre to ensure full roll out of new fibre infrastructure.

12. In addition, the Action Plan identifies 4 pledges with associated Strategic Actions to ensure the council provides the necessary local strategic leadership:

- **1: Embed Digital Inclusion into our core council business**
    - o **1.1:** Include digital inclusion measure within Strategic Plan
    - o **1.2:** Create internal "Digital Leads" working group, to review DIS, coordinate actions and ensure objectives and actions are incorporated into all future linked service plans and strategies
- **2: Provide strategic local leadership to coordinate digital provision**
    - o **2.1:** Coordinate DIS with South Tees Digital Group to address local provision gaps, monitor progress and prevent initiative overload
    - o **2.2:** Synchronise DIS with Local Poverty Strategy

- **3: Ensuring infrastructure provision**
    - o **3.1:** Maintain Local Infrastructure Improvement Plan in partnership with TVCA
    - o **3.2:** Apply for future capital grant funding streams to further advance infrastructure
- **4: Improving signposting to and promotion of local digital assistance**
    - o **4.1:** Create dedicated Digital Inclusion signposting page on council website and intranet
    - o **4.2:** Improve training for all contact centre/resident and business support staff on available internal and external digital support

Next Steps

13. The DIS has been finalised, taking into account the contributions from the cross-directorate Steering Group, plus all of the comments received during the stakeholder consultations and workshops. The final version of the DIS has two parts, which are attached at Appendices 1 and 2.

14. Following its adoption, the DIS will be used: as part of the evidence base for the Strategic Plan; to inform the Poverty Strategy; and to support relevant local and regional digital projects.

What decision(s) are being asked for?

15. That Executive adopts the Digital Inclusion Strategy.

Why is this being recommended?

16. The DIS sets out the key digital inclusion priorities and opportunities to help deliver the Council's Strategic Plan, and ensure that barriers in the way of maximising the social, health, education and economic benefits of enhanced digital access are reduced for existing and future residents.

Other potential decisions and why these have not been recommended

17. **Not to adopt the Digital Inclusion Strategy**. This will mean that the Council will not have a clear strategy for delivering a coordinated local action plan for reducing exclusion and maximising local digital access. It will be more challenging to deliver the digital

infrastructure, skills, devices, services and support, of the right quality, to support current and future needs.

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

Legal

18. There are no statutory requirements relating to the preparation of documents such as the DIS.

19. Once adopted, the DIS will become part of the evidence base for the Strategic Plan, and a material consideration in the determination of strategies for the support of vulnerable residents, such as the Poverty Strategy.

Financial

20. The costs associated with the preparation of the DIS have been met from established departmental budgets. The costs associated with the 12 month Project Management of the coordination and governance of the Action Plan, supporting the transfer from recovery to adoption into 'business as usual', have been approved to be met through the Covid Recovery Grant.

Policy Framework

21. The DIS will support preparation and delivery of the Strategic Plan, which is part of the Council's Policy Framework.

22. The adoption of the DIS will not alter the Policy Framework.

Equality and Diversity

23. The Digital Inclusion Strategy has been subject to an initial Impact Assessment (IA), which accompanies this report (see Appendix 2). This identifies that a full IA is not necessary.

Risk

24. The following risks are considered to be affected by this report:

Risk No	Risk Description	Impact of Report
R001	Substantial areas of the town and key groups of vulnerable residents experience significant digital exclusion compared to others, if this exclusion is not tackled in a systematic, targeted way through a cohesive plan these gaps are at risk of widening.	The vision of the DIS is to bring Middlesbrough in line with national digital inclusion standards, by enabling digital access for those residents who are currently excluded, and enhancing access for those who are currently unable to maximise their digital potential, thus reducing the risk of widening gaps.
R002	If existing digital inclusion schemes and interventions remain uncoordinated there is a risk of wasted resources through duplication of effort and lack of economies of scale, missed	The DIS, its incorporated Action Plan and associated governance working group of strategic digital lead officers from each directorate will underpin and coordinate the Council's ambitious digital inclusion projects. This will ensure they operate harmoniously,

	opportunities to share best practice and ensure gaps in support provision are addressed.	offer best value and complement schemes offered by our local strategic partner organisations, thus reducing the risk of wasted resources and effort.
R003	Without a research-based strategic plan incorporating a detailed gap-analysis of need there is a risk of the Council committing to costly interventions that ultimately do not achieve an increase in digital inclusion.	The DIS has taken into account research on the key gaps in service provision and the local level of need for the key vulnerable groups. The priority objectives and action plan have been designed to address the areas of highest need, and be refreshed annually to respond to emerging local requirements, thus reducing the risk of ineffective costly interventions.

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

25.   Once adopted, the DIS will become part of the evidence base for the Strategic Plan, and performance against the objectives within the action plan will be monitored quarterly through the cross-service Digital Inclusion Governance Board.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Appendix 2 - Initial Impact Assessment of the Digital Inclusion Strategy

Background papers

26.   No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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