CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL

Individual Executive Decision Notice

Report title	WV Online: Device and Connectivity Lending Scheme
Decision designation	GREEN
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Louse Miles Cabinet Member for Resources
Wards affected	(All Wards);
Accountable Director	Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy
Originating service	Strategic Projects and Funding
Accountable employee	Heather Clark Service Development Manager Tel Tel: 01902 555614 Email heather.clark2@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report to be/has been considered by	Strategic Executive Board 7 July and 24 August 2020 Scrutiny Board 14 July 2020

Summary

To provide an overview of activities to address this digital divide as part of our city recovery work to support our commitment to be digitally inclusive city. This includes a pilot device and connectivity loan scheme through trusted partners and development of a longer-term digital inclusion strategy, bringing together work on access to kit, connectivity and infrastructure and digital skills across the city system.

Recommendation for approval:

That the Cabinet Member for Resources, in consultation with the Director of Strategy approve the pilot device and connectivity lending scheme, as part of a broader whole city approach to delivering our commitment to be a digitally inclusive city.

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Signature

Date:

1.0 Background

1.1 'Driven by Digital' is a cross cutting theme of the Relighting the City recovery commitment, approved at Full Council on 16 September 2020. The city is at the forefront of digital infrastructure and digital skills and connectivity are vital to ensure residents can access services, interact with friends and family and enter the jobs market. 'Connected Cities' has also been identified as a cross cutting theme of Scrutiny Panels for 2020-2021.

1.2 The current COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of digital connectivity during lock down ranging from working from home to reducing isolation through maintaining contact with friends and families. In extreme cases, digital connectivity offered people the only chance to say goodbye to loved ones. However, for some, the lack of digital connectivity has compounded exclusion resulting in isolation, increased stress and impacting negatively on mental health.

1.3 Lloyds Bank consumer digital index 2020 highlighted particular issues around cost and connectivity which alongside motivation and skills are the key barriers to digital inclusion. It emphasised that digital connectivity is a right not a privilege. The inability to connect digitally is impacting on isolation and mental health as well as restricting benefits around wellbeing, financial status and work readiness. The report summarised:

- Only 52% of workforce have the necessary digital skills for work
- 22% do not have life skills (being safe, legal and confident online; communicating; problem solving; transacting; handling information and content).
- 16% lack foundation skills allowing them to participate in a digital world.
- 9 million are struggling to use internet.

1.4 The Digital Exclusion Heatmap found that although overall digital exclusion in Wolverhampton was medium, this was skewed by our good connectivity for broadband and 4G connectivity, whereas our residents fell into the most digital excluded categories for both going online and use of the five basic digital skills. Based on these assumptions (which were pre-lockdown), we can assume that approximately:

- 35,000 residents have not been online in the last 3 months (before lock down)
- 59,000 residents do not have all the five basic digital skills

1.5 Although age is the biggest indicator, 44% of those that are offline are under the age of 60. They are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, with people with impairments 28% less likely to get online.

1.6 Local Intelligence has highlighted the extent of the issue locally:

- Adult Education Wolverhampton found that 700 (50%) of its 1378 students on roll at lockdown needed alternative teaching and communication methods due to low digital skills, a lack of kit or no data in the home.
- Access to Business, one of the Wolverhampton Learning Platform, found that only one out of ten residents enrolled on a basic skills course have access to digital connectivity to enable online learning due to lock down.
- Approximately 60% of our customers on Wolves at Work do not have access to laptops/ICT but do have smartphones.

- Black Country Impact, which supports young people into employment, education and training, estimate that 25% of the young people they are working with do not have the devices to access support online.
- Schools have reported issues relating to their pupils being able to get online during lockdown. Some schools have reported this to be an issue for over 50% of their pupils due to lack of device (including unsuitability of device or need to share) and connectivity.
- Numbers attending recent online carers wellbeing cafes were low due to digital exclusion. Being able to host carers wellbeing café virtually going forward will mean more carers can attend and the length of time they have to spend away from the person they care for will be greatly reduced.

2.0   Addressing the Digital Divide

2.1   An action plan has been developed to address the digital divide which includes:

A. **Support access to Devices and Connectivity (Children and Young People):** the crisis has highlighted a particular issue with some schools reporting that over 50% of their pupils have not been able to engage in online learning during lockdown due to lack of device(s) and/or connectivity. 900 laptops were secured through the Department for Education (DfE) scheme targeting disadvantaged children in Year 10, care leavers and children with social workers with 200 remaining devices being lent through the device lending scheme outlined below. In addition, we are proactively working with schools to access more equipment to facilitate online learning including participation in a national pilot around connectivity.

B. **Support access to Devices and Connectivity (adults)**: during lockdown, the lack of devices, connectivity and digital skills has hugely impacted on ability of our residents to get online for learning, access employment support and jobs and support available. Our partners have proactively accessing national schemes such as device dot now giving their clients access to devices, however due to the scale of the issue, we are exploring rolling out best practice from elsewhere such as the device and connectivity lending scheme outlined below.

C. **Skills and Employment**: online access and digital skills are increasingly important for education, training and employment. Home access to the internet can improve children's educational performance; adult digital skills increase the chance of getting many jobs, even at entry level; getting online can increase the chance of getting a job (both job search and applying) and boost total lifetime earnings. Hence, we will proactively target job searchers for the library lending scheme and explore other opportunities such as European Social Fund (ESF) funding for digital interventions for ESF participants. In addition, we are developing a Digital Wolves website which will bring together online learning opportunities to enhance digital skills to complement support provided by our Learning Communities.

D. **Health and Isolation**: digital has become increasingly important during lockdown with a 41% reduction in GP appointments with appointments moving from face-to-face to virtual. Digital has been one of the few ways of keeping in touch with family and friends during the lockdown. Support to Connect, part of social prescribing, is a 6-month pilot around getting online to support health. Carers and vulnerable adults are

also interested in exploring the potential of supporting their customer groups getting online to access support utilising devices lent through the library lending scheme but exploring longer term solutions such as the use of personal budgets. Liverpool's 5G testbed which focused on health and social care demonstrated a reduction in loneliness and reduction in COVID transmissions in care homes.

2.2 Key to addressing the digital divide is introduction of Wolves Online: a tablet and connectivity loan scheme co-ordinated by libraries to help address the digital divide.

- Devices are loaned to residents known to a partner organisation including adult education and Wolverhampton Learning Platform (to access online learning and apply for benefits), Wolves at Work and Impact (to access employment support and apply for jobs); WVCS social prescribing service (to address isolation), carers and vulnerable adults (to access support).
- Access to a Device is conditional on accepting wrap round digital skills support to ensure maximum use of device.
- Explore access to recycled and donated devices to offer a longer-term solution.
- Progress to ongoing support to develop digital skills (Libraries, Adult Education, Wolverhampton Learning Platform)

2.3 Funding has been identified for an initial pilot involving 50 devices, however in light of the scale of the issue, further investment will be needed to increase the scale of the lending scheme, approval to which will be subject to future reports to Councillors.

2.4 We are currently exploring external funding from the COVID Emergency funding and European Social Fund (ESF) resources providing devices and connectivity for ESF participants. Ward funds are being explored to address digital inclusion. Other opportunities will also be proactively sought to request funding within future bids.

3.0 Evaluation of alternative options

3.1 Do Nothing – research (pre-COVID) indicates that 35,000 residents have not been online in the last three months, with 44% being under 60, however local intelligence indicates that the scale of the issue is a lot greater especially in our deprived communities. Not addressing this digital divide will ultimately impact on residents ability to access services, resorting to more expensive face to face methods, impact negatively on their health, impact on their ability to improve their skills, access employability support and employment.

3.2 Pilot – currently resources have been identified for a pilot of 50 devices with connectivity that will be lent out through trusted organisations for a range of purposes including accessing online learning, accessing employability support and applying for jobs and accessing services. However current indications from trusted partners already signed up indicate this will not meet immediate demand and additional Council departments such as vulnerable adults have expressed an interest in becoming involved. Work is also underway to review how a pilot could be scaled up if successful and broaden to include other target groups to meet the extent of the need, for which further investment would be required.

4.0   Reasons for decision

4.1   The recommended option is to pilot the device and connectivity, with work to expand this if successful.

5.0   Financial implications

5.1   The pilot Wolves Online scheme requires investment to facilitate the purchase of 50 devices and connectivity for a period of time. The purchase of the devices will cost in the region of £6,300. Connectivity per device is estimated to be £12 per month.

5.2   A Universal Support grant balance of £20,000 has been identified that will be sufficient to accommodate the purchase cost of the devices inclusive of connectivity for up to 22 months.

5.3   Work is underway to understand the implications of a scaled-up scheme to build on the success of the pilot. It is anticipated that this will broaden the offer to include other target groups to meet the extent of residents needs in order to continue to address the digital divide. Further investment will be required for a scaled-up scheme and a range of external funding opportunities are currently being explored to help facilitate this. The outcome of such work and further investment requirements will be subject of future reports to Councillors for approval.

[TT/22102020/O]

6.0   Legal implications

6.1   There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendation in this report. If the Council is required to enter into contracts or agreements these will need to be authorised in accordance with the Constitution and relevant legislation

[TS/26102020/R]]

7.0   Equalities implications

7.1   Addressing the digital divide will have positive equalities implications since digital divide is most likely to impact on disadvantaged groups. An equalities impact assessment has been completed.

8.0   Climate change and environmental implications

8.1   Getting people online will have positive climate change implications since it enables working from home and other activities online which reduces the need to travel.

9.0   Human resources implications

9.1   Should the pilot be scaled up, this may put pressure on ICT and Libraries so additional resource may be required.

10.0 Corporate Landlord implications

10.1 There are no corporate landlord implications arising from the recommendation in this report.

11.0 Health and Wellbeing Implications

11.1 Digital connectivity can play a significant role in improving health and wellbeing facilitating access to health services and reducing isolation.

12.0 Covid Implications

12.1 Covid has highlighted the extent of the digital divide in Wolverhampton hence is part of the rationale for this report.

13.0 Schedule of background papers

13.1 None.

14.0 Appendices

14.1 None.