

The Highland Council – Resources Committee

Digital Highland Project

25th May 2016

Agenda Item	11b
Report No	RES 28/16

Report by Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Development

Summary

This report provides an update on the Digital Highland Project, a project run by Citizens Online aimed at developing a sustainable approach to the delivery of digital skills training and support for residents in the Highlands.

1. Background

- 1.1 In May 2015, resources committee approve the allocation of £90,000 from the Welfare Reform Fund to support the Digital Highland project.
- 1.2 Digital Highland is a project run by digital participation organisation Citizens Online. It is part the Digital Resilience project, an initiative run by Citizens Online in 4 councils: Highland Council, Gwynedd Council, Brighton and Hove City Council and Plymouth City Council.
- 1.3 The aim of this project is to build resilient partnerships across Highland which can support basic digital skills for citizens, businesses and communities this will maximise opportunities, minimise the risk of exclusion and help to tackle issues that contribute to poverty.
- 1.4 Recent research has shown that the social value of being able to access the internet could be as much as £1,024 per year for a new internet user. This comes from increased confidence, making financial savings online, new job seeking skills and a reduction in social isolation. In the Highlands, 17.9% of adults have never accessed the internet. The Digital Highland project aims to encourage and support Highland residents to realise the benefits of being online and improving their skills to maximise these benefits.

2 Baseline Research

- 2.1 The Digital Highland project has carried out detailed research into the geographic and demographic profile of the Highlands and the barriers residents face to going online. This research included information gathering from Highland Council and DWP as well as survey work with partner organisations and analysis of open data e.g. Experian
- 2.2 The research has identified four key areas that will form the basis of future work by the Digital Highland Partnership. These are geographic areas or demographic groups that are particularly at risk from being digitally excluded. These areas are:
- 2.3 *Low Income Urban Households* - Helping working age people on benefits adapt to a digital by default system and helping them exploit the internet and its resources to mitigate the impact of poverty is a priority theme for the project. It is clear that the majority of people affected within this theme are in or near urban areas, especially

Inverness¹. Housing benefits are a good indication of lower income households. The changes to Universal Credit will affect this group and ensuring joined up support to manage this will be important.

- 2.4 *Remote and Rural Communities* – Almost 1/3 of Highland residents live in remote rural locations. This work will help people who are living and working in remote rural areas to exploit the internet to help them in their homes and working lives. The people we are targeting are by their nature self-sufficient and have low reliance on the state so our opportunities for engagement with them are more limited.
- 2.5 *Retired life in Rural Communities* – Over 20% of adults in the Highlands are over the age of 65. Helping people who have retired and are living in rural/isolated areas to exploit the internet for support including benefits. Targeted primarily at the outlying isolated fringes of the urban areas, this is also accessible to residents in rural areas. The Digital Highland team has mobile digital champions across the rural communities and can grow other local digital capacity through the partnership and the development of the digital champions network.
- 2.6 *Rural Unemployment and Skills for Job Finding* - working with DWP/JCP and The Highland Council to help join up digital support and access in rural and isolated communities with the support that is being provided to benefits claimants. The aim is primarily a joining up of existing provision, rather than creating new courses.
- 2.7 An action plan has been developed to target these areas and this will form the focus of future work and will guide the work of the Digital Highland Partnership.

3 Digital Highland Partnership

- 3.1 A key aim of the project is to establish a sustainable partnership approach to addressing issues around digital inclusion. In order to achieve this, the Digital Highland Partnership has been established, led by a steering group.
- 3.2 The steering group aims to:
 - Work together to achieve each other's shared objective of basic digital skills for customers / residents / claimants / citizens
 - Focus on practical actions and tasks, defined by the local project plan both for the group as a whole and as individual organisations
 - Provide support and guidance to the Project and assist with decision making
 - Share knowledge
 - Ensure that resources are available within their respective organisations to deliver the Project
 - Liaise and share information with other relevant groups, projects and meetings, through shared members, for example Welfare reform groups, those focusing on financial inclusion and so forth.
 - Ensure that the Project complements existing work in the Highland Council area, and that desirable outcomes are achieved through the alignment of project work with existing strategies and policies.

¹ Mapping Housing Benefit shows hotspots around Inverness, following the coast including Nairn, Alness, Invergordon and Tain, with Inverness the most significant.

- 3.3 The Digital Highland partnership involves a number of public sector organisations, charities and community groups with the aim of working together to collectively increase the value of current digital skills training and support, and to close the gaps identified in the baseline research. The partnership has now met twice and has already resulted in partners identifying opportunities to work together. An example of this is a joint project on digital skills training for care home staff and residents, run in partnership by the Unison and Scottish Union Learning. A further example is the partnership with HighLife Highland Adult Learning team in identifying and training digital champions who can then create learning opportunities at a local level.
- 3.4 The next step for the partnership is to identify currently levels of provision in the particular areas detailed above, and to identify how provision could be changed and better implemented to avoid duplication, deliver services in partnership and meet the needs of key groups in these areas.

4 Digital Champions

- 4.1 One of the first outcomes of the project has been the recruitment of mobile digital champions – people employed to support digital skills training covering all areas in the Highlands. These mobile digital champions are arranging and running digital skills training courses as well as recruiting and managing volunteer digital champions in their area.
- 4.2 Citizens Online also uses volunteer digital champions to increase the availability of digital skills training and support – volunteers within local communities who are trained to support others to go online. The target for the Digital Highland project was to recruit and train 20 digital champions across the Highlands through the life of the project. Currently, 70 have been trained with many of those now offering digital skill support, signposted on the Digital Highland portal. This has been a particular success of the Highland arm of the project, and has been particularly valuable due to the diverse and wide ranging Highland geography.
- 4.3 Citizens Online will continue to recruit and train digital champions in the Highlands, and an event is proposed both to link together this network of champions, to share best practice and to encourage new digital champions to undergo training.

5 Digital Skills

- 5.1 Citizens Online Digital champions have been running a range of digital skills training sessions across the Highlands, including tablet taster sessions, basic skills courses, basic internet classes and digital champions training. Through the life of the project, Digital Highland has run a wide range of different digital skills sessions, delivering digital skills and confidence to approximately 450 Highland residents.
- 5.2 Examples of this include a basic skills course in Caol where the attendees have returned to improve their skills further, and a series of taster sessions run in conjunction with Black Isle Leisure.
- 5.3 Citizens Online staff have also been available in Inverness Service Point since it's relocation, supporting customers to use both the digital queuing system and the self-service computers. This has been a useful learning opportunity and has identified that with the correct marketing and signposting by staff, customers are willing to try online services. The lessons from this exercise will be used to further develop a plan for

digital signposting in service points.

- 5.4 Citizens Online will also be supporting Highland Council customer services staff to increase their digital awareness and to enable them to better support customers to go online and to access our online services.

6 Signposting tool

- 6.1 The Digital Highland project has led to the development of an online signposting tool. The tool is primarily for use by frontline staff to help them point customers towards places they can get internet access and digital skills training, however will also be available for customers to use themselves. This will support customers not only to access Highland Council services online, but also to improve their digital skills and maximise the benefits to them of being online.

- 6.2 The signposting tool is available at www.digitalhighland.org.uk.

7 Next Steps

- 7.1 Over the remaining months of the project, the next steps include:
- Development of a model to enable continued collaborative working of the Digital Highland partnership that will deliver joined up support that meets customer requirements.
 - Analysis of customer journeys (focusing initial on Housing Benefit applications) to identify opportunities to improve the digital customer experience.
 - Continued recruitment and training of a digital champions network that will provide ongoing support for local communities.
- 7.2 This project is due to run until November 2016, at which point a project closure report will be presented to this committee including analysis of the impact and benefits this project has delivered to local communities and Highland residents.
- 7.3 A presentation featuring more detail on the Digital Highland project, and it's work in local communities, will be included on local area committee agendas over the next 3 months.

8 Risks

- 8.1 There are no current or anticipated risk implications

9 Resource Implications

- 9.1 This project receives a funding contribution from Highland Council of £90,000. This contribution was made in 2015/16, although this project will continue until November 2016, with a significant financial contribution from Big Lottery Fund.

10 Legal Implications

- 10.1 There are no current or anticipated legal implications

11 Equalities and Rural Implications

- 11.1 This project will positively impact those facing digital exclusion, primarily focusing on those on low income, those facing unemployment and older people. Digital skills training and support though will be available for anyone.
- 11.2 This project will particularly target those communities in remote and rural areas. This will ensure that individuals in these areas have access to digital skills and support, improving their access to services such as healthcare, employability and reducing social isolation.
- 11.3 Due to the short timescale of the project, work will need to focus on areas that already have internet connectivity. There are proposals to look at establishing digital hubs where customers can access the internet in areas of low connectivity and this will be looked at by the Digital Highland Partnership in the mid to longer term.

12 Climate Change / Carbon Clever Implications

- 12.1 There are no current or anticipated climate change / carbon clever implications

13 Gaelic Implications

- 13.1 There are no current or anticipated Gaelic implications

14 Recommendations

14.1 *Members are asked to:*

- Note the progress of this project to date

Designation: Michelle Morris, Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Development

Date: 13 May 2016

Author: Jenny Scotson, Business Change Manager