

Inquiry Scope

Title	Digital Exclusion – How can Buckinghamshire Council and Partners work together to combat Digital Exclusion?
Signed-off by	Cllr Steve Bowles, Chairman, Communities and Localities Select Committee
Author	Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager
Date	29 th June 2023
Inquiry Group Membership	TBC
Scrutiny Team Resource	Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager
Lead Cabinet Member	Cllr Arif Hussain and Cllr John Chilver
Lead Service Officer	
What is the problem that is trying to be solved?	<p>In ‘The role of councils in tackling digital exclusion’, a report to the LGA in January 2023, the following definition of digital exclusion was given – <i>“situations in which people are at a material disadvantage through some lack of access to digital technologies, whether that’s down to a lack of motivation, awareness of the benefits, skills, trust or confidence, an inability to afford devices or services, or the quality of the available connectivity.”</i></p> <p>The number of households in the UK with access to the internet increased from 76% in 2011 to 89% in 2020 (Ofcom report, March 2022) However, whilst the Covid-19 pandemic then accelerated online working habits and enabled some adults to gain new digital skills, for others the digital divide has become even more entrenched as an increasing number of everyday activities and services have moved online.</p> <p>Groups most at risk of being digitally excluded include the elderly, those who are financially vulnerable or out of work, those living with a limiting condition e.g. hearing or vision impairment and those who live alone. If an individual has a combination of these factors, then their likelihood of digital exclusion increases further. Many of these people will be some of the heaviest users of public services, therefore as Councils and partners look to digital channels as a critical enabler for delivering effective and efficient services, it is important to consider digital exclusion as a potential constraint on this.</p> <p>Through this inquiry, Members will investigate what work the Council is already doing to combat digital exclusion, through supporting people in getting online and increasing their skills and confidence, as well as working with government and providers to maximise broadband coverage across the county. There are three key factors to consider:</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ACCESS – Quality of digital infrastructure available 2. ABILITY – Digital skills and confidence/motivation 3. AFFORDABILITY – Impact of device or data poverty <p>In the current cost of living crisis, affordability could be a key factor. The Lloyds Consumer Digital Index in May 2022 found that an estimated 35% of the UK population reported that the cost of living was impacting their ability to go online.</p>
What might the Inquiry achieve?	<p>Through holding evidence gathering meetings with a variety of stakeholders and whilst being mindful of the three key considerations of Access, Ability and Affordability, the Inquiry aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase understanding of the picture locally in terms of quantifying how many people in Bucks may be digitally excluded and the factors that contribute to this. This may be useful to further inform ‘Opportunity Bucks’ work. • Consider the impact of Covid-19 on digital exclusion in Buckinghamshire • Provide insight into work that is already being undertaken to support people in accessing online services, with a view to assessing how accessible and effective these initiatives are • Learn lessons from other Councils and organisations who have been proactive in tackling digital exclusion • Raise awareness and garner support for a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to combatting and reducing digital exclusion in Buckinghamshire
Is the issue of significance to Buckinghamshire as a whole and is the topic within the remit of this Select Committee?	Yes
What work is underway already on this issue?	Variety of work across the Council and partners tackling Access, Ability and Affordability in a number of different ways, which will be useful to map out.
Are there any key changes that might impact on this issue?	Govt Digital Inclusion Strategy from 2014 is very out of date so could be a new one in development but not seen evidence of this so far.
What are the key timing considerations?	
Who are the key stakeholders & decision-makers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Services – Libraries, Adult Learning, Digital, Customer Services, Economic Regeneration – Broadband Access & Skills, Cost of Living Board/Helping Hands team, Community Engagement, Public Health

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Social Care Commissioning and Health Partners e.g. PCN Social Prescribers • Digital Infrastructure Providers • Voluntary Sector organisations • Good Things Foundation • Other Local Authorities to share best practice • Residents who may consider themselves to be digitally excluded
What is out of scope?	Detailed evaluation of digital initiatives being introduced in Health and Adult Social Care.
What media/communications support do you want?	TBC

Evidence-gathering Methodology

What types of methods of evidence-gathering will you use?
List them here: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop research • Meetings • Discussions with other local authorities
How will you involve service-users and the public? <p>It might be helpful to hold a focus group with some residents who do not use the internet to discuss what the barriers are for them in accessing services digitally.</p>

Outline Project Plan

Stage	Key Activity	Dates
Scoping	Inquiry Scope Agreed by Select Committee	29th June 2023
Evidence-gathering	Evidence-gathering phase	July/August/September/October
Reporting	Final Inquiry Group report with recommendations completed	November/December
	Report published for Select Committee	February 2024
	Select Committee agrees report to go forward to decision-makers	28 th February 2024
	Cabinet/Partners consider recommendations	

