

Statement from the Digital Inclusion LECG Task & Finish Group

Background

The Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group (LECG), at its meeting on 11th December 2020, flagged up a wish to host a task group to discuss equality implications of digital access.

Liz Blackshaw and Alison Adams (LECG members) chaired the task group, which has met twice using zoom.

At the first meeting on 29th January 2021, the Group exchanged views and experiences on a number of issues relating to:

1. Digital access
2. Impact of inequalities
3. Mitigating actions
4. LCC's IT & Digital Strategy in particular Fitness for purpose for its audience in 2021 and beyond

The notes of the meeting are attached.

At the second meeting on 26th February 2021, the task group invited the following individuals to attend:

- Leela Damodaran, Professor Emerit of Digital Inclusion and Participation, School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University
- Councillor Louise Richardson – Equalities and Community Engagement
- Kay Wyeth – LCC Interim programme manager, Superfast Leicestershire
- Jo Morrison - LCC Head of Communications and Digital Services
- Jayne Glasgow – LCC Asst. Director IT, Customer Services and Commercial Services

The purpose of the second meeting was to discuss in more detail the county's broadband coverage and to help inform and address inequality in LCC's future IT & Digital Strategy.

REPORT

1 Broadband Coverage

Kay Wyeth described the current arrangements for the provision of Broadband in Leicestershire: LCC have been working with commercial suppliers since 2014 to provide infrastructure to County areas that do not have broadband coverage. Currently although 75,000 homes now have access to superfast broadband, there are still significant pockets in some County districts, particularly in hard to reach rural areas, that do not have any broadband access. LCC is working with commercial suppliers such as BD UK to support these areas with a roll out of interventions. As a commercial supplier, BD UK roll-outs broadband only in places that will generate a profit from this – a procurement issue for LCC to consider? LECG members, particularly those from Leicestershire Deaf Forum, voiced strong concerns that

for such reasons many people remain outside the 'broadband and digital tent'. The consensus was that whilst LCC was seen to be doing a good job in terms of infrastructure coverage for many, it needs to consider and implement measures to ensure provision for those who do not have broadband availability or are excluded by the high costs of signing up to broadband contracts and technology.

2 IT & Digital Strategy 2017-2020

Officers are in the early stages-of a process to review and refresh the strategy. The existing document was acknowledged to be an 'inward-facing' document, reflecting its origins in 2016/17. It was written at a time when LCC was focussing on the mechanics of configuring and implementing digital technologies and embedding a digital culture through its workplace.

Now in 2021, LCC is keen to develop a new digital strategy that is less internal facing, and that takes into account for example, how Covid19 has dramatically changed the way that council staff have had to work and on how technology has changed the way that people currently live e.g. smartphones are becoming part of the everyday life of some people. During the Covid19 pandemic, many people have become more reliant on the use of online and smart technology to access information and services 24/7 (whether they are on the move or from comfort of their own homes).

There is now a greater expectation and reliance on digital routes to make appointments, to report problems and to contact social care workers, schools, libraries, etc. The challenge for officers will be improve digital means of accessing more traditional council services whilst bearing in mind the need to ensure equality issues in the process. Going online/using video for appointments etc continues to be intimidating and challenging for many of the digitally disadvantaged/excluded (see case study of use of an iPad by an 84-year-old. Compassionate human-support (not structured, top-down training) is crucial to enable their participation in the digital world).

Links also need to be made with LCC'S other strategies such as its customer strategy and channel strategy. This is a one page visual, that looks at the various means of communication used for council services i.e. websites, online chats, email, phone, postal mail, and face to face contacts. This strategy is now being reviewed to consider the development of modern technology and inclusion aspects of digital services.

The new revised digital strategy needs to link to other LCC strategies and provide a variety and blend of means of communication to access services.

3 LECG's input in the new IT & Digital Strategy 2021

LECG members discussed the context and challenges in which COVID19 has impacted on the access to council service provision and limitations of the previous IT & Digital Strategy.

Members were particularly pleased that officers welcomed the opportunity to work with LECG and were open to receiving constrictive feedback and suggestions from the Group.

With regards to the new strategy, LECG recommended:

3a Early involvement in developing new IT & Digital Strategy

- strong plea from LECG to involve its members in the early stages of developing the new strategy and to allow sufficient time to shape and discuss recommendations. There is much enthusiasm amongst LECG members to share and contribute their expertise and local experience to input and provide independent challenge.

3b Language in the New IT & Digital Strategy

To make the strategy more accessible to everyone, experience suggests that LCC needs to explore more inclusive and better use of language and terminology, so that engagement and communication can be done in the most effective and appropriate way. For instance, referring to everyone as a 'council customer' suggests that residents have little or no role to play in the community apart from consuming services, yet, in reality many contribute, participate and play an active role in creating the vibrant, resilient and thriving communities around them. Regarding use of jargon, where technical terms cannot be avoided, an explanation should be included in a glossary.

The shortcomings in quality of translation were as identified as a recurring problem. LCC officers were encouraged to pay more attention to complex practicalities of translating English words into other BAME languages. Sometimes mistranslation of even the most simple words can change the whole meaning of the word or context of a sentence.

Information and advice should be available in the language that people speak, i.e. not in 'council-speak' or 'tech-savvy' speech modes.

3c Voice Activated Access

Make the LCC website accessible by voice enquiry methods such as Alexa (although preferably without surveillance implications).

Explore integrating websites with automatic translation systems i.e. voice is turned into live text and vice versa.

3d Other Access Points

For those who, for whatever reason, do not have internet access at home, there is a pressing need to provide Wi-Fi in more public spaces along with smart boards and terminals for those who do not have their own devices.

3e Separation of IT and Digital

LECG members and LCC officers both agreed that the remit of previous strategy was too broad, and it would be helpful for the new strategy to separate out the digital estate (computers, hard drive, cloud) from the IT aspects. Keeping them merged would make it more challenging to engage with the audience of the new strategy, stakeholder groups and make it difficult to identify LCC officers' responsibilities.

Separating the two would also allow IT to retain its 'Value for Money', Council centric focus and allow Digital to reflect how digital equality is important for quality of life and standard of living issues

IT use helps people to be part of the community, to lead their lives better, to stay in touch with family and friends and to maintain or improve their quality of life. Without it, they miss out on education, dealing with govt agencies and booking appointments, dealing with the utilities, shopping online, job search the list is substantial and can be seen as the right of any citizen.

3f Local Expertise

Covid19 pandemic highlighted that large numbers of people/families who are digitally excluded due to affordability of technology and exclusion figures have not changed much since 2014. It cannot be assumed that everyone has access to smartphones or modern technology. National strategies can take too long to implement and may not meet local needs. Communities need to be able to source local solutions using local assets matched to local requirements. LCC officers were encouraged to identify, support via funding and work more closely with local voluntary groups and charities who have been dealing with above realities on the ground. Many for instance, have community loan schemes for iPads, tablets, dongles, etc. and they also provide a variety of IT training and learning support programmes.

3g Case Studies

Linked to the above, it was recommended that LCC needs to collect more case studies/local stories to illustrate local digital issues and solutions (see attached examples), as people quickly understand and relate to this type of information. See attached two case studies.

Conclusion

There was consensus that digital access means different things for different service areas, for instance the digital approach to adult & social care services would be different to that required for highways services. It would need to be tailored to specific needs of the different cohorts and to the different stakeholder groups engaging in those areas. The group also agreed that whilst technology would play a big part moving forward into the future, it should not replace 'face to face' service provision and that a more blended approach, incorporating readily-available human-support, should be taken.

LECG thanked Councillor Richardson and LCC officers for contributing to the task group and for their commitment to continue to work with LECG (post April 2021) to develop the council's new IT & Digital strategy.

LECG Task Group Members

Liz Blackshaw

Joint Chair of Task Group

Alison Adams

Joint Chair of Task Group

Jill Vincent

Equality Action and Charnwood Arts

Lucy Smith

Older People

Tad Stenzel

Leicester & Rutland Minority Ethnic Forum

Anne Glasper

Trustee of Shepshed Foodbank & Leicestershire Life Education Trust and a committee member of Shepshed Local committee of JSC

John Catt

The Secular Society and Loughborough & District Cycle Users' Campaign

Anne Lawrence & Pam Sly

Leicestershire Deaf Forum

Resham Sandhu

The Inter Faith Network

Troy Young

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