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Digital inclusion and superfast broadband

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This paper updates the Board on LG Group work on digital inclusion and invites the Board to consider whether to become a partner of Race Online and support that partnership with promotional activity. It also updates the Board on the roll-out of superfast broadband.

Recommendations

Members are asked to consider whether the LG Group should become a partner of Race Online and undertake promotional activity in support of that partnership.

Action

Officers to take forward Members' decision.

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Background

1. The Chair met Martha Lane Fox, the government's UK Digital Champion, on 1 December. The role of digital champion was created by the Labour Government in June 2009, and the Prime Minister expanded it in June 2010 when he asked Martha Lane Fox to sit on the Reform and Efficiency Board and review Directgov as well as lead the Race Online 2012¹ campaign.
2. The meeting followed correspondence between Baroness Eaton and Martha Lane Fox about the role of local government in helping people get online and the specific actions local government and the Local Government Association might take to support this agenda. Martha Lane Fox also attended the LGA Strategy and Finance Group last year.
3. Race Online's mission is to help the 9 million people in the UK, of whom 6 million are aged over 55 years, who have never used the internet get online to help them make consumer savings, access information and make social contacts.
4. The Board last discussed digital inclusion in July following the publication of Martha Lane Fox's Networked Nation Manifesto. At that meeting, the Board endorsed local government's role in promoting digital inclusion and drew the link to the roll out of high speed broadband in rural areas.

Digital inclusion

5. We would like the Board's views on two issues now – should the LG Group become a partner of Race Online and what would that involve?
6. Over 900 organisations are partners of Race Online including nearly 30 councils – districts, London Boroughs, counties and unitary councils - businesses such as BT and Microsoft, media organisations such as the BBC and ITV, the Post Office and charities such as Age UK. Many organisations that partner Race Online pledge to get a certain number of people online.

¹ Race Online 2012 is the government funded independent organisation set up to support the UK Digital Champion's work.

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7. Our pledge would be to promote digital inclusion in various ways (see below). We would make it clear that it is for individual councils to decide whether to partner Race Online.
8. There is a precedent for the LGA partnering a campaign – for example, we partnered “25th Hour”, the Olympics volunteering campaign.
9. **Are there any risks?** The local government finance settlement means that councils could be taking decisions that will not promote digital inclusion, for example library service reductions and closures. On the other hand, getting more people online is in the council taxpayers’ interest since it enables channel shift, reducing the cost of interactions with citizens. If the Board is minded to partner Race Online, we would take advice on the media handling and the timing of a public announcement.
10. **What could we do?** Our commitment would be to promote digital inclusion to members through a programme of work including:
 - 10.1 Setting out the range of actions councils might take to promote digital inclusion, highlighting the work of some councils to put services online (channel shift in the jargon) and the success stories councils have had in getting more people online, including the financial benefits from doing so;
 - 10.2 Identifying appropriate opportunities for Martha Lane Fox and her colleagues to speak at group events and contribute to the LG Group’s *First* magazine;
 - 10.3 Arranging a meeting with Race Online between council and business leaders to discuss the opportunities for innovative partnerships bringing together access to re-cycled computer kit, broadband access and community training programmes;
 - 10.4 Identifying suitable opportunities to highlight the role digital champions, on the frontline and in more strategic roles in local government, play in getting people online;
 - 10.5 promoting digital inclusion through LG Improvement and Development’s community of practices and embedding it in the wider work to support the sector with their online and IT strategies.

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Superfast broadband

11. There are interactions between digital inclusion and the roll out of superfast broadband – for example, a bigger demand for broadband makes roll out more financially viable to the private sector. An ideal scenario would be one where service transformation, digital inclusion and superfast broadband come together - councils are best placed to join activity up.
12. The government is investing over £800 million in superfast broadband infrastructure in those communities where it is not commercially viable – the so-called Final Third. Its preference for delivery is through local procurement and it is now working with three pilot areas (Cumbria, Herefordshire and North Yorkshire) with a further phase planned for later this year.
13. The LG Group is working with Broadband UK to support the role of local government in procuring broadband infrastructure in those places to help consolidate local government's leading role and ensure the lessons from the pilot are shared across the sector. We will be getting along side the pilot areas, and will bring a more substantive proposition to the board shortly.
14. Councillor Chris White has also attended the Ministerial Group on broadband and we have a request with officials to be included in the official level governance that underpins the ministerial discussions.
15. It is clear that there are a number of policy issues that are inter-connected – digital inclusion, superfast broadband, the post office network, the future of library services and the use of community buildings.
16. Discussions between Councillor Chris White and Ed Vaizey MP, Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries, have identified the need to bring together ministers and lead members of the LGA to discuss these inter-connected issues.

Financial Implications

17. None

Implications for Wales

18. The UK Digital Champion's work extends to Wales and we will be speaking to the WLGA following the Board's discussion.