

## **Improvement Support to councils on digital**

### **Purpose of report**

For information.

### **Summary**

Following the lockdown due to the COVID-19 emergency, digital within local government has become an integral conduit for how councils provide services, ensure efficiency and deliver key roles such as their democratic and scrutiny functions.

Through our previous LGA digital transformation, housing and channel shift programmes we have enabled over 100 councils with funding and support to use digital tools and solutions to redesign and improve access to council services saving in excess of £4.5 million so far.

Currently our digital inclusion programme cohort of 11 projects are working to build skills and capacity in their communities to allow residents to engage with the authority with confidence and in convenient ways.

This report will accompany council case studies that will present at the Improvement and Innovation Board on 14 July detailing how we have been supporting councils with digital through the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting areas of innovation and support offers.

### **Recommendations**

That the Improvement and Innovation Board notes the update on the actions taken under the LGA digital improvement programmes and support work in response to COVID-19.

### **Actions**

Officers to continue delivery of the digital support offers and developing further proposals to excel and solidify progress made across the sector during COVID-19

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## **Improvement Support to councils on digital**

### **Digital Inclusion Programme**

1. Since September 2019, the LGA issued grant funding to 11 councils for projects aimed at increasing the skills and capacity of councils and residents around digital proficiency and improving the delivery and accessibility of services.
2. COVID-19 has exposed and deepened the digital divide within communities across the country reinforcing the need for programmes that focus on developing digital inclusion. In this meeting we have invited our project from Achieving for Children, the joint children's service for Kingston and Richmond. The project aimed to harness an AI chatbot initially for the SEND Local Offer page to help those looking for crucial information navigate the site in one accessible place. The project has launched to beta live ahead of schedule under COVID-19 and due to its popularity and success it will be launched across the organisation's website to increase accessibility across various services later in summer.
3. Among the other projects, councils are delivering the following: a voice bot for eased contact centre interactions for residents, a support app for care leavers to provide mentoring and messaging services for those feeling isolated and digital champion programmes that have developed into online communities over Slack, email and video tutorials.
4. For more information see here: <https://www.local.gov.uk/digital-inclusion-programme>

### **Remote Council Meeting Hub:**

5. Despite these unprecedented times, local authorities still need to deliberate and make decisions about the future of their localities, enable democratic participation from applicants and residents and maintain momentum on major developments.
6. From 4 April 2020, local authorities in England were given new powers to hold public meetings remotely virtually temporarily removing the legal requirement for local authorities to hold public meetings in person enabling them to be held by using video or telephone conferencing technology.
7. The LGA [Remote Council Meetings Hub](#) was launched to collate and centralise information, advice and guidance for councils to facilitate remote meetings with input from our partners across the sector. This sector wide partnership included ADSO, Centre for Public Scrutiny, Lawyers in Local Government, Nalc, Socitm and LGA.
8. Within this hub is a collection of case studies setting out several notable examples and resources of councils that have piloted virtual meetings using various video conferencing platforms signposting to key points to consider and contact details.

9. Since the hub launched over 200 councils have engaged and viewed the guidance and support. An interactive map is currently in development to illustrate and compile the national picture of remote council meetings in one location. Furthermore, the partnership is working on providing support for councils moving toward hybrid meetings as the lockdown restrictions ease.
10. At the meeting, Councillor Blaney, Chairman of Planning Committee at Newark and Sherwood District Council will present on their experiences of remote council meetings.

### **Digital Case Study Hub and sharing good practice**

11. As part of the LGA COVID-19 response and support offer, a [good council practice hub](#) was created to display the remarkable work being delivered to address the challenges brought by COVID-19. The hub contains a diverse, current and informative range of case studies that can be accessed by local authorities when they are navigating the tumultuous environment of COVID-19.
12. At the time of writing over 90 case studies have been uploaded to the hub, of which 20 are digitally related collected through interviews with a wraparound support being offered by the productivity/improvement offer to further develop and share learning. Here is a selection of examples collected:
  - 12.1. Sutton Council launched an online booking system for a waste management centre reopening in accordance with the easing of lockdown and transition into recovery. This digital tool allowed the staff to control traffic flow and demand while maintaining safe social distancing in line with government regulations. The system was set up to allow 20 visitors per hour and the onsite team reduced the parking bay capacity from 12 to 5 to ensure safety of residents and colleagues. This digital management tool averted the exceeding of demand on the centre that could have compromised the safety of residents and council staff.
  - 12.2. Oldham Council created the 'Thriving Communities Index' alongside partners to reflect geographic localities. The index is made up of 30 socio-economic indicators for each neighbourhood so the council and partners who use it can understand the different needs across the borough. By cross-referencing the data from the COVID-19 call database and overlaying the data, the council were able to identify unmet needs in areas and truly understand the needs of residents across all socio-economic backgrounds. This allowed the council to support 3,522 people with urgent food, meds and personal items, £72,000 raised locally by the coronavirus fund and over 189,000 visits to the coronavirus council website.

13. Working with Salford City Council and their digital inclusion team an [article](#) was published in May titled *Digital Eagles*. This covered the importance of digital inclusion

projects before and after COVID-19 highlighting work cross sector with initiatives such as the Barclays Digital Eagles and the Good Things Foundation to provide residents with digital skills. Councillor Bill Hinds, the Lead Member for Finance and Support Services at Salford City Council by-lined and contributed to the publication.

14. Furthermore, in collaboration with colleagues in the productivity team climate offer, a First Magazine [article](#) was published in May on the topic of *A green silver lining?* Following the pandemic, it covers the benefits to climate change when holding remote council meetings. Councillor Liz Green and Councillor Andrew Cooper, both members of the Climate Change Improvement and Innovation Board working group, by-lined and wrote a case study for the publication.

### **LGA Conference Webinars**

15. Following the relaunch of the LGA Conference as a virtual offer, there will be two digital webinars included in the new programme.
16. The first will focus on how Local Government has responded through digital means to the COVID-19 crisis covering how internally organisations have had to adapt using digital platforms to alter ways of working, how the sector has harnessed digital tools to ensure the continuation of services or how digital has led to the delivery of innovative solutions to assist vulnerable and shielded residents during COVID-19. This is scheduled for Tuesday 28 July.
17. The second will focus on the remote council meeting workstream walking attendees through the officer and member perspectives of delivering this new often unexplored format of local democracy. We will hear how officers have worked to deliver the technical aspects of virtual meetings and then we will explore the perspective of councillors and how they have experienced the altered theatre of politics. Date to be confirmed.

### **Implications for Wales**

18. Resource developed under these workstreams are available and shareable with our Wales Local Government Association colleagues with opportunities to work collaboratively on any common issues present.

### **Financial Implications**

19. The support offers are funded through the Improvement Grant from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government through the Memorandum of Understanding.

### **Next steps**

20. Officers to continue delivery of the digital support offers and developing further proposals to excel and solidify progress made across the sector during COVID-19

**Appendix 1:**

Agenda for the IIB Digital Update:

<p>Item 1 (5 mins)</p>	<p><u>LGA Digital Inclusion Programme:</u> Digital inclusion has become extremely important as lockdown has exposed the digital divide and isolation within communities. The LGA has funded 11 projects to combat digital exclusion across localities while contributing to efforts to make savings to council budgets. We would like to shine a spotlight on one of our projects that has met the challenge of COVID-19 head on and are looking to deliver their projects at pace despite the restricts of lockdown.</p>	<p>Jabed Hussain, Head of Digital Transformation @ Achieving for Children</p>
<p>Item 2 (5 mins)</p>	<p><u>Remote Council Meeting Hub:</u> Councillor perspective on the change in legislation to enable councils to host remote and virtual meetings. The councillor will share what has gone well, what the benefits have been and what has been learnt?</p>	<p>Councillor Blaney, Chairman of Planning Committee from Newark &amp; Sherwood District <u>(Confirmed and ready for invitation)</u></p>
<p>Item 3 (10 mins)</p>	<p>Discussion from the board on examples and experiences with digital inclusion, innovation and remote council meetings.</p>	<p>All</p>