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**Meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee – 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2023**

**Report of the Director of Digital, Customer & Commercial Services**

**Digital Platform Consultation Update**

**Purpose of report**

1. To provide an update to the Audit and Standards Committee on ongoing and planned consultation and support for residents to use online services, specifically elderly and vulnerable.

**Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the Committee note and comment on the contents of the report.

**Background**

3. The Audit and Standards Committee on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2022 considered a report on the Code of Corporate Governance and questions were raised around the digital strategy. The Committee resolved that a report be submitted to a future meeting on the strategy of how the Council will support residents, particularly the elderly and vulnerable, to access services online.
4. The 2021/22 MTFS approved spend in (1) a new digital platform to improve resident self-serve experience, (2) additional staff to improve the information we provide our residents on our web site.
5. In May 2022 we completed the restructure of the ICT team creating a Digital team and a Technology team with 2 newly appointed heads of service. The team responsible for the content on the web site and for the new digital platform report into the Head of Digital and Customer Services.

6. The Digital and Customer Services team is leading on the purchase of a new digital platform. This platform will provide quick and easy online access to council services from paying bills to booking a bulky item collection and much more. Residents will be able to access services online 24/7.
7. Whilst online self-service will be the first choice for many of our residents, they will still be able to contact us by phone and visiting us in-person. We will continue to ensure the needs of our residents are met.
8. The more we enable residents to self-serve, the more resources we have for residents of different communities who cannot self-serve, or are vulnerable, or have complex needs. We will have more resources to support these residents via phone or face-to-face. This will improve our response rates and save costs and mean elderly or vulnerable residents access the services they need quicker.
9. The introduction of this new technology and online services has the potential to bring about long-term improvements and efficiencies for the council. However, it can also be a further barrier for digitally excluded groups and communities to access services.
10. We are committed to understanding how different groups and communities use existing council services. We are carrying out Community Engagement Sessions to understand how residents use digital technology and what we need to do to make these technologies meet the needs of different communities. Involving users in the co-creation of the platform is a way of reducing exclusion due to digitalisation.
11. To bring independence and help local people amplify their views, the team recently partnered with Healthwatch Dudley to facilitate the first two of our digital platform community engagement sessions at the end of February/early March 2023.
12. We held the first sessions at Queens Cross Network and DY1. They were attended by residents and carers with wide ranging age, ability and accessibility needs. From having BSL interpreters, to working with residents to understand their needs, online process development will focus on accessibility at every step.
13. These sessions also create awareness amongst residents and community organisations of the self-service options we will create.

14. Feedback will help us identify existing community groups that service users' access for support already. We will work with those groups on the design and roll out of the services and work with them to build their capacity to play a role in supporting elderly and vulnerable residents use new digital services.
15. Once we have collated the insight from these recent sessions our aim is to demonstrate 'You said, we did' and directly trace aspects of the new platform back to what residents told us.
16. Where there are common themes emerging, there will be future engagement sessions on different topics for residents to share thoughts and experiences with us as we continue to enhance Dudley's offer to the community.
17. Work is already taking place to bake in inclusion and maximise the use of feedback already being sought across the council. We have insight from:
  - Digital and Customer Services,
  - Adults Social Care,
  - Public Health
  - and CaPA
18. We are also using the input from local and regional community groups, for example:
  - Just Straight Talk
  - and NHS "Black Country Get Connected" Integrated Care Board (ICB) also engaged in the sessions.
19. Joining up with other organisations creates opportunity to review and include the outcomes of work such as "Digi Dudley" and the "Inclusive Digital Health" study researchers at University of Birmingham, in collaboration with ICB are doing.
20. The Black Country Integrated Care Board's Involvement Team are holding 'feet on the street' sessions and will be asking questions to the public and service users living in the Black Country on digital access and solutions. Joining up and co-designing three top level questions extends the reach of our consultation as is likely to reach different people who may not come to one of our events.

21. The Just Straight Talk project “Digi-Dudley” funded by Public Health until October 2023 is focussed on supporting older people to reduce the risk of becoming lonely through digital exclusion. Since its launch in August 2021, Digi Dudley has received 134 referrals for tablet loans and currently have 60 older people actively engaged. The project supports 1:1 teach and show support and provides a signposting service to drive residents to community group skills workshops within libraries and adults and community learning.
22. Digi Dudley has provided over 300 hours of support each quarter to older residents. Support includes building trust and confidence to go online for day to day needs such as setting up email, online shopping, ordering prescriptions, booking a GP appointment and using social media and information searching. Support is given to use whatever device the resident has.
23. The project has strong connections with adult social care. Residents are shown how to access services through the Adults Social Care portal (Liquid Logic). Subject to continued funding, there is good opportunity to extend this to the new digital platform and show residents how to use the new online services.
24. In December of 2022, Just Straight Talk made a successful application to the Good Things Foundation for an agreed monthly amount of data from O2, Vodafone and Three. The data will be made available for Digi Dudley participants via pre-loaded SIM cards and data vouchers. For Digi Dudley, there will be sufficient data to provide support for about 4 people each month with data.
25. Within Dudley, there are over 20 organisations who have joined the Good Things Foundation online centres network. This means they provide digital skills to people to improve their confidence and knowledge. This includes Dudley’s libraries, adult community learning and Dudley Archives in addition to voluntary sector groups, organisations and Dudley College.

## **Finance**

26. We will need to do more consultations with residents within the existing budget. Partners will need to establish their funding requirements for ongoing work.

## **Law**

27. We review feedback from consultation to ensure all development meets current legal and accessibility requirements

## **Risk Management**

28. Any risks will be mitigated using the Council's existing risk management framework

## **Equality Impact**

29. Being digitally literate opens-up opportunities for all age groups to enjoy the social, cultural, economic, and educational benefits being digitally active brings. Digital technology allows people who are housebound to interact with the outside world, overcoming loneliness and social exclusion. Advancements in technology that enable visually impaired residents and hearing-impaired residents to use technology.
30. The work described in this report has no effect of the decision on children and young people. Being digitally literate opens-up opportunities for all age groups.

No consultation with children and young people has taken place; and we did not involve children and young people in developing the proposals. We may extend engagement activity to young people as we develop the platform.

## **Human Resources/Organisational Development**

31. Colleagues within HR Organisational development are working with the Digital Platform project to develop employee engagement sessions.

## **Commercial/Procurement**

32. Procurement legislation and compliance with Contract Standing Orders will be adhered to should the purchasing of goods be required

## **Environment/Climate Change**

33. Being digitally literate enables a greater reach of climate change information and resources to residents, increasing accessibility to information such as becoming more energy efficiency, reducing pollution and waste management. Using digital services encourages less use of paper. Becoming paperless reduces chemical and physical waste and reduces carbon footprint.

## **Council Priorities and Projects**

34. The contents of this report relate to the key Council priorities including the Borough Vision, Council Plan 2022-25.

Dudley The borough of Ambition and Enterprise

Digital opportunities are being exploited to modernise our working culture, customer experience and public services.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Luisa Fulci". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Luisa" and the last name "Fulci" clearly distinguishable.

**Luisa Fulci**

**Director of Digital, Customer and Commercial Services**

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