The Highland Council – Resources Committee	Agenda Item	10(a)
Digital First Programme - Digital Inclusion	Report No	RES/ 62/15
26th August 2015		

The Highland Council – Resources Committee

Digital First Programme - Digital Inclusion

26th August 2015

Report by Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development

Summary

Highland Council has taken significant steps in developing online services for staff and customers. The benefits of using the internet continue to grow while the gap between those customers who have access, the confidence and the inclination to go online and, those who don't, continues to widen.

This paper provides an update on the work currently underway on Digital Inclusion and informs Members of the proposal to join the national campaign on Digital Inclusion by signing the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation's (SCVO) Digital Participation Charter.

1. Background

1.1 The Digital First programme aims to have 40% of customer transactions online by April 2017. This initiative will support customers to access online services anytime, anywhere, and on any device. At the same time designing more efficient processes and removing the potential for delay and error.

1.2 Research from the Office of National Statistics shows that 16.9% of Highlands and Islands residents have never used the internet. These residents may lack the access, skills or confidence to go online and as such may be missing out on the opportunities to seek and apply for work, manage their money, make savings, access and engage with healthcare, reduce social isolation and access learning opportunities.

1.3 The issue of digital exclusion features in the Scottish Government Digital Participation Strategy:

"*Critically, we need to ensure that we grasp the opportunity that digital technologies offer to tackle deep rooted social and economic inequalities in our society.*"

Members will be aware of the challenges posed as a result of welfare reform in relation to digital inclusion. In May, Resources Committee approved £90,000 funding from the Welfare Reform Fund in order to start to address these challenges. Highland Council are currently working with Citizens Online and partners on a test and learn project called Digital Resilience.

2 Digital Resilience

2.1 The Digital Resilience project is an initiative run by Citizens Online in 4 councils: Highland Council, Gwynedd Council, Brighton and Hove City Council and Plymouth City Council. The Highland Council project sees proposed partnership funding from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, SCVO and Big Lottery, with a total investment of £246,000.

2.2 The aim of this project is to build resilient partnerships across Highland which can support basic digital skills for citizens, businesses and communities this will maximise opportunities, minimise the risk of exclusion and help to tackle issues that contribute to poverty.

2.3 The project will map the existing provision of support and help to identify any gaps in the necessary digital skills. It will also help to identify and address any barriers that are facing Highland residents in accessing the internet. The project will also facilitate a partnership to fill this provision gap and will develop a supporting plan to take the work on digital inclusion forward.

2.4 Work is currently ongoing to complete the Project Initiation Documentation (PID) and project plans at national and local levels. Data gathering and analysis is also underway as part of the initial ground work. The project will gain further momentum and will move into the next stage following confirmation of additional funding from Big Lottery early in the autumn.

3 Digital Participation Charter

3.1 Scotland's Digital Participation Charter is run by SCVO and demonstrates a public commitment to addressing issues around digital inclusion. The Charter has already been signed by over 130 organisations, including other councils, public and private sector organisations, charities and community groups. Signing the charter commits the organisations to work in partnership with other signatories to promote digital participation and basic digital skills, as well as the following commitments:

- Ensuring that all of our staff and volunteers have an opportunity to learn basic digital skills, and that they take advantage of this opportunity.

- Encouraging and supporting our staff and volunteers to help other people learn basic digital skills, and help other organisations to embrace digital tools.

- Contributing resources and practical support for digital participation initiatives in Scotland in whatever ways we can.

- Channelling our efforts through the Digital Participation Programme, so that our activities can be coordinated for maximum impact and measured consistently.

- Using common language based on digital participation and basic digital skills, to make our thinking and actions as clear as possible.

3.2 These commitments largely reflect the work that is currently ongoing and is being further developed through the work of Citizens Online. This includes the development of an approach to digital skills for staff and customers which is being developed in conjunction with Customer Services, Learning and Development and Citizens Online.

3.3 Signing the charter will demonstrate Highland Council's commitment to digital inclusion and will support the ongoing work with Citizens Online and the development of online council services.

3.4 ***Members are asked to approve that Highland Council sign the Digital Participation Charter***.

4   Next Steps

4.1   Digital inclusion will feature in a number of significant pieces of work going forward. This includes:

- Digital First – continuing the work with Citizens Online as well as supporting staff and customers to gain digital skills.

- SmartCities – Digital Inclusion initiative to explore the provision of digital devices and skills training.

- Anti-Poverty Strategy - Digital inclusion will also feature in the development of the Anti-poverty strategy, enabling disadvantaged individuals to access employment opportunities, entitlements and benefits and financial and money management skills.

5   Risks

5.1   There are no current or anticipated risk implications

6   Resource Implications

6.1   Funding for 2015/16

Funder	Amount (£)	Status
Highland Council	90,000	Confirmed
Highlands & Islands Enterprise	55,000	Confirmed (to end September)
Big Lottery Fund	91,500	Proposed
Total	**236,500**	

7   Legal Implications

7.1   There are no current or anticipated legal implications

8   Equalities and Rural Implications

8.1   The work Highland Council is currently undertaking on Digital Inclusion will positively impact on those with protected characteristics, including those with disabilities and those on low income, by providing the opportunity to maximise the benefits of being online, and having access to services at a time, place and on a device that suits them.

9   Climate Change / Carbon Clever Implications

9.1   Increased use of digital processes and systems will have a positive impact on carbon emissions and on the environment. The volume of paper forms will reduce, hence reducing the impact on the environment. There will also be a reduction in the amount of customer travel to service points.

10   Gaelic Implications

10.1   There are no current or anticipated Gaelic implications

11 **Recommendations**

11.1 *Members are asked to:*

- *Welcome the initiation of the Digital Resilience project and ongoing work with Citizens Online.*
- *Approve that Highland Council sign the Digital Participation Charter.*

Designation: Michelle Morris, Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Development

Date: 17 August 2015

Author: Jenny Scotson, Business Change Manager