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Date *Dyddiad:*	26 May 2021	

To:
Councillor Andrew Stevens
Cabinet Member for Business Improvement and Performance

cc. Councillor Louise Gibbard, Cabinet Member for Stronger Communities

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Digital Inclusion Scrutiny Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Business Improvement and Performance following the meeting of the Working Group on 11 May 2021

Dear Cllr Stevens,

Digital Inclusion Scrutiny Working Group – 11 May 2021

We would like to thank you, the Chief Transformation Officer and the Web Development Manager for attending our meeting. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the views of the Working Group.

We considered the report which gives an overview of the work done to increase digital inclusion before and during the pandemic, the work already planned for 2021/22 and a look towards the future, post-COVID-19.

Our comments below follow our discussion on a number of key areas.

Non Digital Inclusion

We understand that access to online services is hugely beneficial for people in increasing their life chances, by for example, helping find work, getting access to cheaper goods/services online and reducing loneliness and isolation. Whilst this is recognised we believe there is always going to be a small group of people that do not or cannot, for whatever reason, go online. We therefore continue to emphasise the importance of ensuring that these people are not excluded from accessing our services.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE
GUILDHALL, SWANSEA, SA1 4PE / NEUADD Y DDINAS, ABERTAWE, SA1 4PE
w w w . s w a n s e a . g o v . u k / w w w . a b e r t a w e . g o v . u k

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The make-up of those people who do not access our services online may have changed after Covid, with many more people becoming more able to use online services learnt through the necessity to keep in contact with friends and family and to access many other necessities of life. We feel that it is likely to no longer be particular groups of people that are not online but individual people dotted about in our communities. We will therefore need to target our inclusion activities slightly differently to react to this, whilst of course offering services in other ways like by telephone or in some cases face to face. We were encouraged to hear about the example of help given to a small group of 79 individuals who needed more intensive support to access our services through Covid. We did recognise that staff across the authority pulled together to do their best for citizens through this period and that there were no complaints received relating to accessing services.

We were pleased to hear the Councils Contact Centre is still a big part of what we do, that if people can access our services online that is good but everyone has a range of channels to access our services and in the way that best suits them. Although we did hear that one barrier to inclusion can be the digital infrastructure which included the mobile and broadband infrastructure in Swansea. We were keen to hear that the City Deal Infrastructure Programme will hopefully address this deficit.

Safeguarding and Privacy

We felt that safeguarding including safety online and privacy issues are still a big concern with online use, especially with the rapid growth of use of the internet which has been matched by a big growth in online scams. We were told about the continued promotion of online safety and scam awareness activity that encourages privacy and security online, also that Council is building a library of scams with Trading Standards. These scams are communicated to the public via social media and via the Councils Communication Team. We were also pleased to hear about the phishing campaign and training is soon to be provided that will make more people aware. It was also recognised that some people do not like transacting online because of their concerns over safety and security and these concerns need to be recognised and addressed where possible moving forward.

Digital Inclusion Strategy/Framework

We need to look at how people are accessing our services now as opposed to pre pandemic, as we recognise that the landscape has changed rapidly since the start of the Covid Pandemic. We understand that many more people are now online in some form, so we feel that the strategy should be more equality focused and that the title of digital 'equality' framework be used rather than the term digital 'inclusion', as this would better reflect the strategy moving forward.

We asked about digital touchscreen technology and how the Council is using this in our public places. The Web Manager said she would look at what is being done across the authority and inform us of her findings due course.

We agree with you that Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework needs to be reviewed in light of new data emerging post pandemic and to reflect the natural demographic shift over the coming years. We understand that the milestones and dates will also need to be revisited to ensure they are fit for purpose before discussing again with

stakeholders. We were told that a draft Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework had been developed pre Covid and will now be reviewed. We would like to contribute to this piece of work and have asked to be contacted when it is most appropriate to be included.

We were interested to hear about the Council working towards what is called a Swansea Account, where people are able to log in and see all the transactions they have made with the Council in a secure way. We look forward to seeing how this progresses.

Communication and Language

We heard that a variety of methods of communication are used to reach Swansea residents, whether digitally included or excluded, for example offline channels e.g. press releases and posters, letters to residents plus text messages. As well as online channels like the website, social media and emails. Awareness has been raised online for all sources of help to get online and improve digital skills. These included sharing Digital Communities Wales courses on the Council's website and on social media and promotion of the Lifelong Learning helpline and courses. Online messaging have been targeted at people who may know someone who needs help.

We were pleased to hear about the Chatbot that went live during the pandemic to assist people when looking for information and signposting in relation to domestic violence. We felt that this is a good example of how we can use our website to assist those who are most in need.

New Council Website

We heard that a new council wide Website is being developed and that it will ensure for example, the search aspects are right, good practice in accessibility and that plain English/Welsh used. The Web Manager is working with the Access to Services officer so views can be sought from the different equality groups in its development. We understand the new website will be delivered in late summer. We would like to feed our thoughts into the new website design and would appreciate being contacted when it is appropriate to engage.

We congratulate officers for the good work done so far, especially through the difficult Covid period. Overall, we agreed that the Council is on the right track with its Digital Inclusion Strategy and do recognise that the Council is keen to make the right improvements moving forward.

Your Response

While we do not require a formal reply do this letter we do expect that these issues will be given full consideration. With this in mind, and given the importance of this issue, we will be asking it be revisited by scrutiny annually perhaps as a further Working Group. In the meantime:

1. The draft Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework has been circulated to us but can you contact this group in due course so we can give feedback on the updated version.

2. Can you contact the Group, when it is appropriate, to consult with us on the new website.

Yours sincerely

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