

***Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission - 9 March 2021  
Avoiding Digital Exclusion During The Pandemic***

***Report of David Padfield, Interim Strategic Director, Housing***

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. The Covid-19 pandemic has, globally, led to many services shifting on-line. In many ways this is a positive acceleration of a pre-existing trend and has the potential to offer enormous benefits to many of our residents. However, in designing and offering Council services, we are always cognisant that a significant minority of our residents are “digitally excluded” and may not be able to benefit from these changes.
- 1.2. The size of this significant minority is the subject of some debate. Research as part of the Council’s wider customer services strategy tells us that 1 in 5 of our residents lack the tools and skills to confidently transact online. This ‘digital divide’ is particularly pronounced for our tenants where up to 40% tell our surveys that they will not use the Council’s online services. However, we have also found that designing simple, intuitive services can help reduce this reluctance.
- 1.3. This paper sets out some of the actions undertaken by Housing Services during the pandemic to mitigate the risks of digital exclusion and how these might shape our longer term thinking in this area. These actions obviously work in concert with and complement the Council’s ambitions for a full fibre roll-out as set out elsewhere on this agenda.

## **2. Telephony**

- 2.1. Whilst the Council has successfully used its website throughout the pandemic to convey important information about services to residents, it was recognised early on that telephony services would be crucial in successfully managing relationships with residents. An early decision was made to temporarily merge the management of the Council’s main telephony contact centre with the two contact centres within Housing Services (the Neighbourhood Contact Centre and the Repairs Contact Centre). This was so that the rapid change to remote working could take place in a uniform fashion and resources could be pooled to maintain services at all times. The success of these changes has led to the temporary management change now being made permanent and appropriate changes to the management structure for the unified service are now under consideration.
- 2.2. We piloted the use of voice-activated services so that tenants could check their rent balances and make a payment by phone, 24/7 without needing to speak to a person. Whilst this service won’t be appropriate for everyone, the 2,000+ tenants that accessed the service reported high levels of satisfaction and this freed-up staff time to support more complex queries. We’re building the findings of this into the procurement of the new telephony system for 2021-23.

- 2.3. Throughout this period, the Council has made extensive use of voice messages on its telephony in order to convey important messages to residents concerning diverse issues such as the availability of the repairs service and the importance of Covid-testing. Staff have also made large numbers of outbound calls to elderly and vulnerable residents to check on their well-being. In total, officers called more than 7,000 tenants and 3,000 leaseholders. For those most in need, we launched the popular Let's Talk service where lonely and vulnerable residents were able to chat to specially trained Council officers about whatever issue was on their minds. Over 500 residents were supported by this service, with some residents linked into mutual aid groups who could provide practical support in their locality.
- 2.4. Customer services has helped develop the initial Coronavirus response into the Here To Help service which puts residents in need of support in touch with voluntary sector providers in the borough to provide whatever assistance they may require, such as the collection of prescriptions or help with shopping, and provides support and multidisciplinary working to council officers and other delivery partners (eg health) so that we can work better together to support our vulnerable residents.

### **3. Face-to-Face Offer**

- 3.1. Housing Services have always relied on a strong face-to-face offer to residents in order to deliver services. Obviously, this has been considerably disrupted by the pandemic and our local housing offices have now been closed for more than a year. Nonetheless, officers have maintained a presence at the HSC throughout this period and have also been out-and-about on estates to ensure that health and safety inspections are undertaken and any urgent issues are attended to. Although our property surveyors have developed a highly efficient and effective way of undertaking inspections via WhatsApp, a personal inspection is always available for those who might not have access to a mobile phone or tablet.

### **4. Written Communication Channels**

- 4.1. Our Housing newsletter, Our Homes, has continued to be published quarterly throughout the pandemic in order to update residents on our services. This is delivered to every home as a supplement to the Hackney Today, which we have also used to convey important news to tenants and leaseholders and encourage input to key consultation exercises, such as priorities for the Resident Estate Improvement Fund. In addition to these publications, we keep residents updated via a regular Newsletter.
- 4.2. During the initial lockdown period, we distributed additional editions of Our Homes with dedicated information about the Council's pandemic response on top of the regular quarterly publication. Alongside specific Housing Services information in the Hackney Life and Hackney Today publications, this provided a monthly written update for Council tenants and leaseholders on the Council's pandemic response during the first lockdown period. The Resident Participation Team and Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) Client Team also sent out regular updates to keep TMO Chairs / managers and involved residents abreast of Housing and wider service developments and to promote key messages.

4.3. Although Housing Officers have spent less time on estates during the pandemic, they have tried to keep noticeboards up-to-date and we have published a number of posters to convey important information. This is in addition to the special posters and banners produced to communicate information about lifts, playgrounds and MUGAs. We are currently piloting a small number of digital noticeboards.

## **5. Text Messaging**

5.1. Housing Services have recently been improving the ability to undertake either mass or targeted text messaging to residents. This was used for the first time this year to expand consultation on resident-led improvement works (together with Covid safe walkabouts for up to six participants organised in parallel). We are now looking at incorporating it into our lift protocol to convey information about lift repair dates and any planned shutdowns of electricity or water.

## **6. Resident Participation**

6.1. Most of the Council's resident participation activities are built around face-to-face meetings. During the pandemic period, such meetings have not been possible. As well as utilising the various communications channels set out above, we have offered residents groups the option of having on-line meetings facilitated. Although only a minority of residents groups have taken up this offer, those that did have been able to hold successful meetings on-line, usually using Zoom. In some cases, this has enabled us to reach out to some communities which we have traditionally struggled to reach.

6.2. The team has also used its 55 community gardens and grow spaces to promote engagement. These have often provided safe spaces for residents to get together during the pandemic, and been a focus for some socially distanced TRA and other meetings. A number of new grow and garden projects have also been taken forward, with planning and liaison taking place outdoors. For many residents these spaces have provided much needed respite during the pandemic.

6.3. The Council's main housing consultation body, the Resident Liaison Group (RLG) has met on-line throughout the pandemic. Although meetings have been successful, there has been a notable decline in attendance. The Resident Participation team are currently undertaking an exercise to establish what barriers to on-line participation might be and how these might be overcome. Initial feedback suggests that other pandemic-related causes such as pressure of work and childcare have been a factor, and not just a reluctance to engage using digital platforms. The team have also linked TRAs to corporate ICT initiatives, such as the Digital Buddies scheme which provides online 'how to' guides and can link someone to a trained young person to help with their digital or technical issue over the phone.

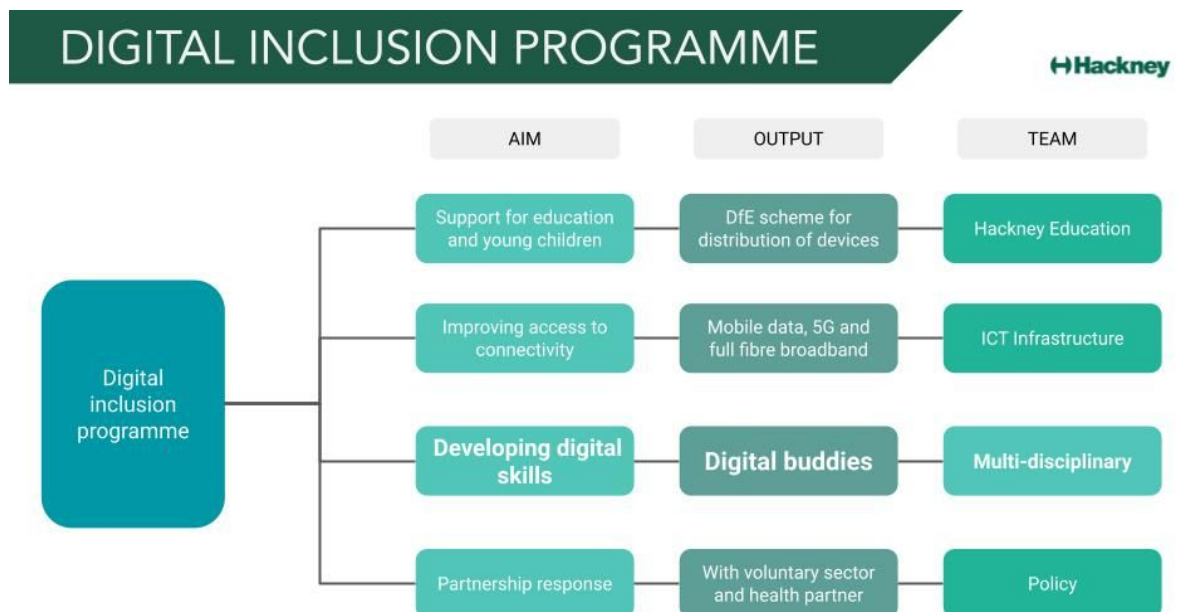
6.4. We have made use of our community halls and participation funding to deliver services which have offered important support to tenants and leaseholders. For example, over 350 children and young people on our estates were engaged through Resident Participation funded summer projects, with many sessions delivered outdoors and /or in small groups

in indoor settings. We have also accommodated seven food poverty projects within five Council-run community halls across the borough, providing meals and food support for many residents in need.

- 6.5. As part of the development of the Resident Engagement Strategy, we will explore in more detail how we can better promote digital inclusion with options including inter-generational and peer support schemes, silver surfer training sessions, and online guides, as well as mixed virtual /physical meetings.

## 7. Digital Inclusion

- 7.1. We have a number of complementary pieces of work underway to narrow the digital divide through providing equipment to residents and support their skills. The diagram below shows how these fit together.



- 7.2. The work to develop digital skills has produced a number of instructional videos to help people access online services (for example, how to use a QR code). These have reached over 23,000 people since they were created during lockdown. We are also using these to help residents understand how to stay safe online.
- 7.3. We have developed a 'digital buddies' scheme so that residents who are interested but nervous about using online services can get support from someone more confident. Buddies are currently either 17-18 year old students or ICT apprentices.
- 7.4. The roll out of the full fibre programme to estates and - in particular - community halls clearly presents us with huge opportunities to address digital inclusion amongst tenants and their children. This work will be taken forward through the full fibre roll out and the development of the new Community Halls Strategy.

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