worcestershire
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Scrutiny Report: Digital Inclusion

Response from Councillor John Campion, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Change and Councillor Sheila Blagg, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care

Introduction

The Cabinet Members note the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group and in particular the focus on Digital Inclusion at a time when rapid changes are being made in the way the Council reaches its residents. In responding to the Scrutiny Report, we note that the Task Group did not make any specific recommendations. The Group sought assurance, and in this response we provide further assurance on the specific points raised by the Scrutiny Report.

Digital Strategy and the Principles of Customer Access

1. In common with declining demand and the consumerisation of technology the Council are adapting to and encouraging online access to services.
2. This is based on re-designing how services are accessed "end to end" in line with the evidence of customer insight (what we know about the customer who accesses those services) so that we design the "right channel, for the right service for the right price"
3. In this way we maximise our resources to those who need it most.
4. It is not the intention of this re-design to stop face to face or telephone contact but to make sure those who can access services online can do so at a time and place that suits them and those who cannot are not excluded.
5. Face to face services are still provided via District Councils, Libraries and the Worcestershire Hub Shared Services. There is no intention to close traditional face to face centres. However, the Council will continue to look for multi-partner access points to maximise access while minimising costs. The Hive and the Library at Malvern are clear examples.
6. We continue to maintain our adults' and children's social work teams to response to people in need. One of the benefits of offering online access as an option is that we will be able to protect the time of our social workers so that they can continue to help the most vulnerable.
7. As the report has noted there are significant cost savings required by the Council and using technology more effectively is playing a significant part in achieving those savings. As to the Scrutiny question over the purpose of the digital strategy, saving money or increasing those who are digital included, these are not mutually exclusive and both outcomes are part of the Council's Digital Strategy and how it is responding to and driving how customers access services. It is in not in anybody's interests to force access to specific channels because this creates additional costs and customer service issues in other areas e.g. an overflow of customer demand in libraries.

Digital Inclusion

7. Although the task group heard concerns that the strategy was unclear as to whether its aim was to save money or to increase the number of people who are digitally included, the Digital Inclusion Partnership has a clear aim 'to make Worcestershire a place where everyone has the opportunity and support to go confidently online.' Savings will be made through channel shift, but this benefit will be compromised if new inequalities develop, creating new vulnerabilities. Therefore, the Digital Inclusion Strategy is focusing on making sure that everyone is able to access the new opportunities afforded by the internet.

8. The Council has taken a leading role in developing the Partnership, and many of our partners are already working closely with residents on co-production. For example, our partners in social housing and voluntary organisations such as Age Concern have long experience of empowering residents and service users and the Council is building on this in developing its coordinated work.

9. Those with complex needs will continue to have access to non-digital options and this will be made clear in forthcoming communications about the implementation of the Care Act and the Future Lives Programme in Adult Services and Health. We will also be mindful that accessing the internet can bring new opportunities to those with complex needs and we will seek to maximise these.

10. The uptake of basic on-line skills training provided through the Libraries and Learning Service is already monitored. The Digital Inclusion Partnership is also mapping provision of on-line skills training by other providers, and will be monitoring uptake more widely. Members of the Adult Care and Well-being Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be given the opportunity to view and comment on the new website before it goes live.