worcestershire
c o u n t y c o u n c i l

CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
23 NOVEMBER 2023

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Summary

1. The Panel has requested an update on the County Council's (the Council) position with digital inclusion and digital inclusion initiatives within the Council.

2. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication and the Strategic Director for Commercial and Change have been invited to the meeting to respond to any queries the Panel may have.

Background

3. The Council faces various challenges in delivering services to its constituents. Budget constraints, limited resources, and the increasing complexity of service delivery require innovative approaches to provide quality services. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to transform the Council by improving efficiency, increasing citizen engagement, and providing data-driven insights.

4. Digital inclusion refers to the equitable and meaningful access to digital technologies, including the internet, computers, and mobile devices, as well as the skills and knowledge needed to use them effectively.

5. In today's increasingly connected world, digital inclusion plays a crucial role in promoting social and economic development, enhancing educational opportunities, and fostering civic engagement. However, despite the numerous benefits, a significant portion of the population still faces barriers to accessing and using digital technologies.

6. The benefits of digital technology on the delivery, experience and quality of services are well understood. However, there is no guarantee that the benefits of digitally enabled services will be realised by all members of the population until they are inclusive, designed for change, and meet the expectations of staff and the public.

7. The common barriers to digital inclusion can be broken down into three broad categories:
    *   access and accessibility
    *   skills and confidence
    *   motivation and trust

8. In England 27 per cent (14 million) people have the lowest digital capability. This means they do not have regular access to a device or the skills and confidence

to turn on a device, use an app, log in and/or enter information on a digital device by themselves.

Digital Divide

9. The digital divide refers to the gap that exists between those who have access to and can effectively utilise digital technologies and those who do not. This divide is multifaceted and can be influenced by factors such as socio-economic status, geographical location, age, gender, and level of education. The consequences of the digital divide are far-reaching, contributing to social inequalities and limiting opportunities for marginalized communities.

10. As more services are delivered through websites, apps, email, and SMS, and as online becomes the preferred means of contact - digitally excluded people are in danger of being left behind. National level evidence suggests the groups commonly considered digitally excluded or who experience poorer care through lack of digital services include:
    - older people
    - people with disabilities
    - ethnic minorities
    - people who are homeless
    - sex workers
    - people from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities
    - people living in rural areas
    - people from low socio-economic background
    - people with low digital or literacy skills

Importance of Digital Inclusion

11. Digital inclusion is more than just providing access to technology; it is about empowering individuals and communities to fully participate in the digital age. Embracing digital inclusion can lead to improved access to information and services, enhanced communication and collaboration, and increased economic opportunities. It also enables marginalised and underrepresented groups to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making processes, and advocate for their rights.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the importance of digital inclusion. As governments and organisations shifted many services and activities online to curb the spread of the virus, those without access to digital technologies or the necessary skills faced increased isolation and limited access to essential services. The pandemic served as a wake-up call, highlighting the urgency of addressing digital disparities to build more resilient and inclusive societies.

Local evidence and intelligence

13. Healthwatch Worcestershire ran a digital access to health care survey from August to November 2021, which had 712 respondents, of which 465 people completed paper copies. The survey highlighted the following barriers to digital services:

- 16% of respondents said they do not use the internet and many people experienced difficulties using functions on digital devices, such as sending photographs and making video calls.
- Only 27% of respondents said they would find it easy to discuss health concerns via phone or video call. Many people prefer face to face appointments, saying remote appointments lack personal interaction and make communication difficult.
- People had concerns about the privacy, confidentiality, and security of accessing services online and many found it difficult to find a private place to have a conversation via telephone or video call.
- Online access and remote appointments were found to be especially difficult for:
  - Older people.
  - People with a disability, including learning disability, Autism and hearing and visual impairment.
  - People with long term conditions including MS, Parkinson's, Dementia and for those who have had a stroke.
  - People with mental health issues.
  - People experiencing homelessness or on lower incomes.
  - Those for who English is not their first language.

14. From January to October 2022, Public Health in Worcestershire ran a series of focus groups and community research to better understand some of the barriers to access experienced by our communities, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. This engagement highlighted the following key themes around digital technology, as shown in the table below.

Area	Comments and Findings
Digital exclusion Some of the participants challenged the assumption that everyone could or should be digitally enabled. Some participants felt penalised because they were not able to access services digitally.	*"Please remember that not everyone has or wants access to technology, so if you are going to offer services / advice, then don't just do a webcast or a YouTube."* Source: HWBS Consultation Survey – Healthy Living at all ages *"People are getting sanctioned for messages they're not receiving and not understanding."* Source: People of working age with a mental health condition - COVID-19 Focus Group *"Those who had previously had face to face meetings had to learn to use zoom or Teams and if they couldn't (which most in our group couldn't) they missed out."* Source: Older adults over 65+ - COVID-19 Focus Group
Information & advice Providing information in a range of languages and formats is important to prevent exacerbating inequalities,	*"I've looked at it on the website and everything is in written English only, no BSL. It's really difficult to understand. It states that if anybody has problems they should phone and gives a*

particularly those whose first language is not English; for those who are Deaf or hard or hearing, and for those who have autism or learning disabilities.	*phone number. Obviously, this is completely inaccessible to Deaf people like us."* Source: Deaf and Hard of hearing - Covid-19 Focus Group
Service provision Services adapted to online delivery and supported members of the community by providing equipment and training.	*"[The charity organisation] got some money to provide tablets and internet access to people who needed it, they gave me a tablet and put data on my phone, I so needed it and wasn't made to feel embarrassed for asking."* Source: Young Women 18-25 years COVID-19 Focus Group *"[The charity organisation's] provision of technology such as mobiles and computer access helped people, to learn how to use them and chat to others."* Source: Deaf and Hard of hearing - Covid-19 Focus Group
Loneliness & Isolation Digital technology helped reduce social isolation with social groups going online. However, this further isolated those without digital skills or devices.	*"Accessing social groups electronically for this age group was sparse"* Source: Older adults over 65+ - COVID-19 Focus Group
New skills and further training The pandemic forced some people to learn IT skills to enable them to continue to access services. However, it also highlighted the need for further support for disadvantaged groups.	*"Covid has also forced Mum to learn new IT skills which she finds mentally exhausting & demanding – Zoom to replace face-to-face contact with family who don't live locally and to virtually attend family funerals, which upset her greatly."* Source: Carers - COVID-19 Focus Group *"We need more groups at [the] library... I did a computer course and also [the] mental health one helped me so much with day to day living... they are free we need more of these please."* Source: HWBS consultation survey – what does being well mean to you?

Digital Inclusion Initiatives

15. A range of activities are being offered across the districts and at a county level to address digital exclusion, for example basic computer literacy support and training, back to work workshops and safety online courses.

16. The Council provides adult learning courses at Fairfield Learning Centre in Bromsgrove and Redditch Library. Libraries reduce digital exclusion through free access to computers and internet and services that promote the development of IT skills and confident access of online information and services and basic computer courses.

17. IT and Digital are in the process of developing a new Digital Inclusion Triage tool with the backing of the Local Government Association. The tool can be used by staff and residents to identify needs and to signpost to the relevant local services and national services. This tool will be piloted in three libraries before rolling out across all services.

18. Several strategies are in place that will address the local response to digital inclusion such as the Council's Digital Strategy and the Integrated Care System (ICS) Digital, Data, Analytics and Technology Strategy.

19. District Councils offer basic computer skills, training and loan of equipment aimed at those aged 50 years plus and for housing tenants of all ages. This offer varies slightly between areas for example, in Bromsgrove and Redditch basic computer skills courses are a universal offer; in Worcester City there is additional support aimed at non-UK citizens living in the county, in Wychavon there is targeted support to digitally excluded communities such as Gypsy, Roma Travellers and in Wyre Forest, there is 'back to work' support for those aged 18 years or older. Worcester City has an online safety workshop aimed at young people and is about to launch a digital skills course for women of Asian heritage.

20. Appendix 2 sets out Countywide digital inclusion initiatives.

Website Accessibility

21. The Council has a statutory requirement to comply to the legislation **of The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (legislation.gov.uk)** that came into force on 23 September 2018.

22. The Council uses Silktide to monitor the corporate website, which is a comprehensive web accessibility testing platform that deciphers all the jargon, and helps to find and fix accessibility, content, search engine optimisation, and quality issues.

23. Website Content editors have been trained on Plain English principles. The website content will continue to be rewritten in Plain English to ensure that the Council's information, advice and guidance is easy to read and understand.

24. The Council uses Google Translate, a multilingual neural machine translation service developed by Google to translate the website and content from one language into another.

25. During the development of the new website, engagement took place with Speakeasy N.O.W.[1] to gather the requirements of people with learning disabilities for the new site and feedback on the wireframes, this has been taken on board and will be reflected in the final wireframes.

26. A live accessibility audit was carried out on the Council website which involved an accessibility expert spending two half-days remotely with the Council's Web Development team identifying issues with the website. The majority of issues identified have been resolved.

27. The Council's Web Development team are continuing to build their skills in accessibility and inclusive design.

28. Please see Appendix 1 for the Silktide Website Accessibility score.

Digital Accessibility Strategy 2022 – 2024

29. The Digital Accessibility Strategy for 2022-2024 sets out the Council's ambition to achieve a culture of digital inclusion that will ensure Council websites and web-based systems and services are accessible to all customers.

30. When digital information and services are made accessible, tangible benefits are realised for everyone, not just individuals with disabilities:
   - Service delivery is broadened, by removing barriers to access.
   - legal, regulatory, and compliance issues are addressed.
   - customer experience, and customer satisfaction is improved.
   - A more diverse, and inclusive workforce is enabled.

31. The Council's vision is:

> To make digital information and services available to, accessible to, and usable by, the broadest audience possible, in a sustainable manner, through broad organisational buy-in and a culture of digital inclusion

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[1] SpeakEasy N.O.W. is a self-advocacy charity run by people with learning disabilities who have lived experience.

32. The Council's priorities are:

Priority 1 – Inclusive Culture
- Promoting best practice, developing, and sustaining a digital accessibility culture throughout the Council

Priority 2 – Compliance
- We will adhere to accessibility legislation, standards, guidance, and best practice to ensure our customers can fully engage with us through all digital services, systems and website

Priority 3 – Equality of access
- Providing all customers and employees, including those with disabilities, equal access to information, digital systems and services

Priority 4 – Skills and Training
- Ensure staff who develop documents for websites have the required training and access to resources to support them

33. The delivery of this Strategy will fall under the overall control of the Assistant Director for IT and Digital. Progress on the implementation of the strategy will be overseen by the Web Governance Board.

Digital Accessibility Maturity

34. The Council's AI policy is designed to establish guidelines and best practices for the responsible and ethical use of AI within the Council. It ensures employees are using AI systems and platforms in a manner that aligns with the corporate values, adheres to legal and regulatory standards, the Council's existing information governance and security policies, and promotes the safety and well-being of the Council's stakeholders.

35. The Policy states that the use of AI must be in a manner that is responsible and ethical, avoiding any actions that could harm others, violate privacy, or facilitate malicious activities. Use of AI should promote fairness and avoid bias to prevent discrimination and promote equal treatment and be in such a way as to contribute positively to the Council's goals and values.

36. To review the effectiveness of the Council's current systems and processes for accessibility across the organisation, key stakeholders within the organisation were invited to undertake a full accessibility maturity assessment using the [Socitm and Haddell Inclusion Digital Accessibility Maturity Self-Assessment Tool](#).

37. Key findings from the assessment showed that there is a clear understanding of the benefits that can be achieved by developing websites and systems that are accessible.

38. Digital accessibility is embedded efficiently within the Council's software development lifecycle and risk is assessed and managed in the level of accessibility in digital products that are developed or procured before and after launching them.

39. The assessment recognised that the web team had the strengths and practices in place that are required for digital accessibility, they have the specialist experience, knowledge and skills required to address and monitor accessibility in digital product developments and websites. The team also has the skills required to support users across the organisation to develop accessible web content and documents, which has resulted in the website performing well for accessibility overall.

40. The report highlighted that there is not expertise in all areas of the organisation. Although there is a central web team this team is small and there is a requirement for other staff in the organisation to have a certain level of skills and understanding. The main area of focus should be on the creation of accessible policies and documents that need to be uploaded to the web site. This is being addressed through eLearning, [SCULPT](#) and support from the web team.

Digital Inclusion Group

41. A corporate Digital Inclusion Group is being established to ensure the Council is digitally inclusive by ensuring residents have the capability to use the internet to do things that benefit them day to day'.

42. The activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies and this includes five elements:
    - Affordable, robust broadband internet service.
    - Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user.
    - Access to digital literacy training.
    - Quality technical support.
    - Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage. self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

Accommodating non-digital access to information and services

43. Despite the proliferation of digital services, there will always be individuals who prefer non-digital means of accessing information. This preference may stem from cultural factors, personal comfort, limited digital literacy, or physical limitations. Neglecting this cohort could result in further marginalisation and hinder their ability to fully participate in society.

44. The Council therefore will continue to provide 121 services, which include telephone calls, SMS, and chatbots, to bridge the gap between digital and non-digital information access. These services provide an avenue for individuals who are digitally excluded to obtain the information they need, seek assistance, and engage with the Council.

Plain English

45. Plain-language documents are accessible and present information in a way that is easy to absorb. Because they use short sentences and common words, plain-language documents allow every member of the audience to understand the piece in a single read.

46. Like every other form of accessibility designed to accommodate broad categories of disability, Plain Language writing isn't an exact science, and it can never meet everyone's needs; it aims for a major improvement, not for total access.

47. The broader goal of Plain Language is to prevent cognitively disabled people from being left "out of the loop" on information that most of the community can access with little difficulty. This includes information vital to health, safety, legal rights and opportunities, and financial security.

48. Plain Language done correctly ensures that accessible information is complete and fully informative — not over-simplified, heavily edited, or censored.
Providing less information on a subject, or significantly editing out details and ideas is not access, as truncated text may be easier to read, but if it leaves out important content, it's not accessible.

49. A Plain English course is currently being developed. Once available, COG is asked to promote the adoption of Plain English and ensure appropriate staff undertake the training.

Risk Management

50. The risk implications of not being digitally accessible can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and businesses. Key risk factors associated with digital inaccessibility include:
    a. **Reduced Productivity and Competitiveness**: Businesses and organisations that are not digitally accessible may suffer from decreased efficiency and productivity. Digital tools and technologies can be used to streamline operations and engage with customers more effectively.
    b. **Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities**: The Council is more vulnerable to cyber threats and scams if staff lack the digital literacy to identify and protect themselves and the organisation from online risks.
    c. **Decreased Civic Participation**: Inaccessible digital services can hinder civic participation, making it difficult for citizens to engage with government services, participate in public discourse, or access critical information related to public policies and events.

d. **Legal and Regulatory Compliance**: The Council is legally required to provide digital accessibility, and non-compliance can result in legal liabilities and reputational damage.
e. **Reputational Damage**: Inaccessible digital services can lead to negative perceptions of the Council, causing reputational harm and eroding trust among stakeholders.
f. **Government and Public Services Challenges**: If the Council does not prioritise digital accessibility, it may face difficulties in efficiently delivering public services, such as processing applications, disseminating information, and facilitating public engagements.
g. **Environmental Impact**: A lack of digital accessibility may result in increased reliance on traditional paper-based methods, contributing to higher paper consumption and environmental impact.

51. In conclusion, the absence of digital accessibility poses significant risks to individuals, businesses, and society at large. Emphasising digital inclusion and ensuring equitable access to digital technologies is not only a matter of social responsibility but also a critical factor for sustainable development and progress in the digital age.

Equality Impact

52. The risk implications of not being digitally accessible can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and businesses. Key equality impact factors associated with digital inaccessibility include:

a. **Social Exclusion and Inequality**: Without access to digital technologies, individuals and communities can be socially excluded from vital services, opportunities, and information. This can perpetuate existing inequalities, leaving marginalised groups at a severe disadvantage.
b. **Economic Disadvantage**: In today's digital-driven economy, being digitally inaccessible can hinder access to job opportunities, online marketplaces, and financial services. This creates economic disparities and limits upward mobility for those unable to participate fully in the digital job market.
c. **Educational Limitations**: Lack of digital access can impede access to online educational resources and eLearning platforms, affecting students' academic performance and prospects. This educational disadvantage can perpetuate the cycle of poverty and limit social mobility.
d. **Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities**: Some individuals and organisations may inadvertently become more vulnerable to cyber threats and scams if they lack the digital literacy to identify and protect themselves from online risks.
e. **Decreased Civic Participation**: Inaccessible digital services can hinder civic participation, making it difficult for citizens to engage with government services, participate in public discourse, or access critical information related to public policies and events.
f. **Health and Well-being Impact**: Inaccessibility to telehealth services and digital health information can limit individuals' ability to access

medical advice and care, especially in remote areas or during emergencies.

53. Addressing the digital divide and promoting digital inclusivity is essential for creating more equitable and vibrant communities. Councils play a crucial role in bridging this gap by investing in digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy programs, and ensuring that online services are accessible to all residents. By fostering digital inclusion, the Council can build stronger connections with communities, improve service delivery, and enhance overall quality of life for citizens.

Purpose of the Meeting

54. The Panel is asked to consider the information provided and:
    - determine any comments to make to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication
    - agree whether any further Scrutiny is required at this stage.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1: Silktide Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Score;
Appendix 2: Countywide digital inclusion initiatives

Disclosure

55. Disclosure: Some of the content of this report was generated with the assistance of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) based system to augment the effort. AI generated content has been reviewed by the author for accuracy and edited/revised where necessary. The author takes responsibility for this content.

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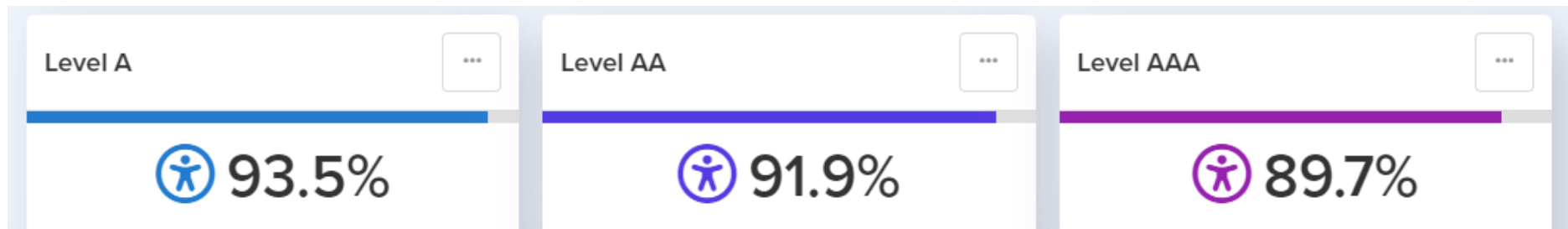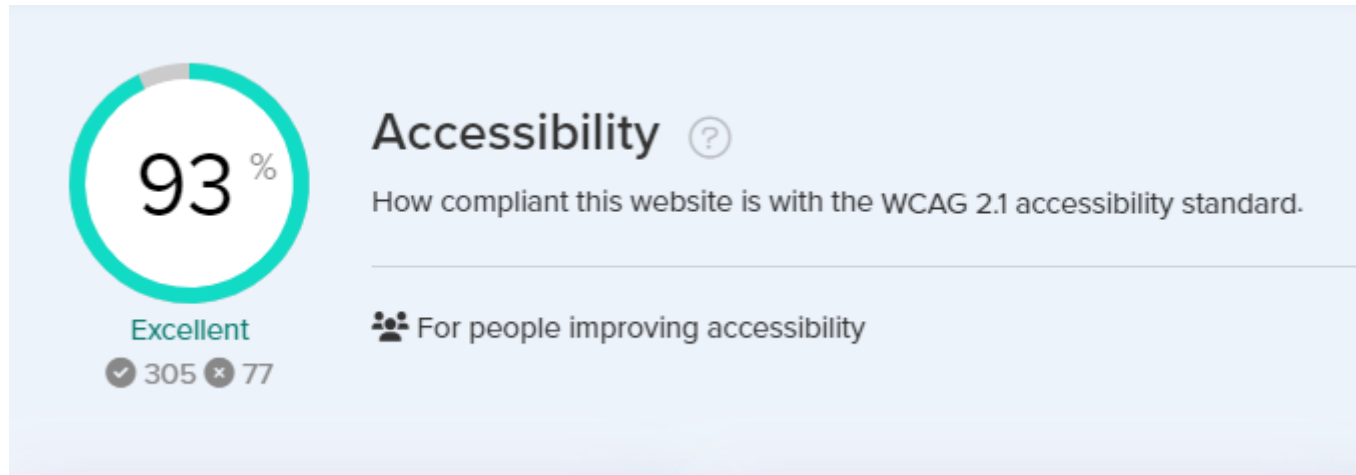Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer, in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agenda and Minutes of the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 29 September 2023

All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.

Appendix 1: Silktide Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Score

93 %

Excellent

✓ 305 ✗ 77

Accessibility ⑦

How compliant this website is with the WCAG 2.1 accessibility standard.

👥 For people improving accessibility

Level A		Level AA		Level AAA	
🧑 93.5%		🧑 91.9%		🧑 89.7%	

Appendix 2: Countywide digital inclusion initiatives

Organisation	Project name	Area	Offer	When	Target Population
Age UK Redditch, Bromsgrove & Wyre Forest	Amphlett Hall Computer Club	Bromsgrove	• Learn more about modern technology and how it can help them:	Tuesday 10 – 12 Noon Tuesday 1.30- 3.30pm Wednesday 1.30 – 3.30pm £3 charge	50+
Age UK Worcester & Malvern Hills (including Tenbury)	Digital Champion Programme	Worcester Malvern Hills	• Access online services/fill in online forms • Basic computer skills • Loan of equipment	6x 1:1 session 10 tutors Can do home visits if mobility is an issue	50₊
Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT)		Charford, Bromsgrove (The POD)	• Access online services/fill in online forms	Every Friday drop-in session 11-1pm	Open to anyone (tenants & non tenants)
Midland Migrant Centre		Commandery Worcester	• offering face to face advice to people struggling with internet services		non-UK citizens living in Worcestershire
Platform Housing https://www.digital-champion.co.uk/	Digital Inclusion Worcestershire	Worcestershire (However definitely targeting Worc City, Malvern Hills, Wychavon	• **Help Centres – General Needs** Basic IT support, plus help looking for work, form filling, registering for Platform portal, reporting repairs, anti-social behaviour, plus referrals for homelessness, debt and advice on energy, registering with GP online, and online prescriptions. Run with the DWP, Shaw Trust, the Shared Prosperity Fund, CAP	**Help Centres – General Needs** • Every Tue, 12-2pm to 2pm, The Hive, 3rd Floor, Worcester • Every Wed, 2pm- 4pm, Malvern Library, Worcester • Every Thur, 10am – 12 Malvern Town Football Club • Fortnightly Fri, 10am - 12, The Octagon Centre, Malvern	Tenants' - late teens to 60+

- Every Fri, 10am to 12pm, Warndon Library, Worcester

Help Centres – Retirement Living
- Every Mon, 10.30-12noon, Clarence Park Village, Malvern
- Every Mon 10-12 noon, The Heriotts, Droitwich
- Every two months rotating through Dancox House, Worcester, Meadow Court, Worcester, The Hamptons, Ombersley, and Copcutt Court, Droitwich

- **Help Centres – Retirement Living.**
Basic IT support for 55+ in our schemes, including keeping in touch with family, online quizzes, ancestry, plus form filling, registering for Platform portal, reporting repairs, anti-social behaviour, plus referrals for debt and advice on energy, plus registering with GP online, online prescriptions. Run with Age UK Malvern Hills & Worcester.

- **Laptop Lending Library**
Run a laptop lending library in Malvern where customers can loan a laptop and dongle for two months and can refer Platform Customers to the Wellbeing Fund where they can access free laptops.
- **Help Centre – Redditch Library (**Setting up a Help Centre)
- **Other support**

- **Help Centre – Redditch** Library - which will run every Wed.

			Loaned equipment to Perry Wood Primary School Oasis Academy Hub Worcester Community Trust, Cranham Primary School Worcester St Pauls Church Worcester, who deliver IT courses and support on our behalf.		
Rooftop housing	No programme	Evesham Properties across Worcestershire	• Access online services/fill in online forms	Drop into office, also housing officers support with access online services in districts	Tenants (Inc Travel community and eastern Europeans)
Sandycroft Centre (run with HOW college)		Redditch	• Basic computer skills	Monday 10am -12 FOC	Open to anyone who wants to learn
Simply Limitless		Wyre Forest (however open to other areas)	• Basic computer skills • Back into work skills • Help with devices	Appointment only	50+ 18+ All ages

Worcester Community Trust	Joy Project	Worcester	• laptop for use with clients and tablets.	Depots	All ages
			• introductory digital skills course with women of Asian heritage in Ronkswood.	That will be redelivered at some point soon.	Asian women
	Online safety workshops		• Online safety workshops	Planned for the future	Young People
	Wellbeing & Social Isolation project		• Plus (Loneliness services in partnership with Onside) has also run a beginner's IT course.		Older people