SHROPSHIRE HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD
Report

Meeting Date	21st November 2024				
Title of report	**Digital Exclusion**				
This report is for (You will have been advised which applies)	Discussion and agreement of recommendations	X	Approval of recommendations (With discussion by exception)		Information only (No recommendations)
Reporting Officer & email	David Baker, Head of Automation and Technology david.baker@shropshire.gov.uk				
Which Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy priorities does this report address? Please tick all that apply	Children & Young People		Joined up working		X
	Mental Health	X	Improving Population Health		X
	Healthy Weight & Physical Activity	X	Working with and building strong and vibrant communities		X
	Workforce	X	Reduce inequalities (see below)		X
What inequalities does this report address?					

Report content - Please expand content under these headings or attach your report ensuring the three headings are included.

1. Executive Summary

Digital exclusion remains a significant challenge both nationally and locally, with barriers including lack of access to technology, insufficient digital skills, and socio-economic factors. Shropshire faces unique challenges due to its rural landscape and demographic profile. The Digital Inclusion Network (DIN), co-chaired by Robert Smith from Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin and David Baker from Shropshire Council, has been established to address these challenges. The network includes representatives from local government, NHS, community organisations, and businesses, and aims to raise awareness of digital exclusion, engage stakeholders, conduct research, and propose solutions to reduce the digital divide.

Over the past year, the DIN has made progress in identifying barriers and promoting digital inclusion across the community. The Digital Skills Programme, launched in 2020, has been instrumental in improving digital literacy among Shropshire residents. Significant progress has also been made in improving digital infrastructure. In Shropshire, 98% of premises can get broadband, but uptake is only around 70%. Efforts should continue to enable the remaining 2% of premises to access broadband and help those not yet accessing the internet to do so.

In conclusion, efforts in addressing digital exclusion through the Digital Inclusion Network and the Digital Skills Programme have made significant strides, but there is still work to be done. Continued investment and collaboration with local government, NHS, community organisations, and businesses are essential to further reduce the digital divide and ensure that all residents can benefit from digital services and access the digital resources they need.

2. Recommendations

Endorse the Expansion of Digital Infrastructure: Continue to invest in improving broadband connectivity, especially in rural areas, to reduce digital exclusion.

Endorse Enhancing Digital Skills Training: Continue and expand the Digital Skills Programme to reach more residents, particularly the elderly and those in low-income brackets.

Endorse the Promotion of Collaborative Efforts: Strengthen partnerships with local organisations, businesses, and national bodies to address digital exclusion comprehensively.

Monitor and Evaluate: Regularly assess the impact of digital inclusion initiatives and adjust strategies based on data-driven insights; HWBB receive a further report in one year to monitor progress.

3. Report

Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion remains a significant challenge both nationally and locally. Across the UK, barriers to digital inclusion include lack of access to technology, insufficient digital skills, and socio-economic factors. Shropshire is no exception, facing unique challenges due to its rural landscape and demographic profile.

Digital exclusion in the UK is influenced by a range of factors:
- **Access to Technology:** Many individuals lack access to the necessary devices and internet connectivity, particularly in low-income households.
- **Digital Skills:** A significant portion of the population lacks basic digital skills, which are essential for accessing online services and opportunities.
- **Socio-Economic Barriers:** Economic disparities contribute to digital exclusion, with marginalised communities being disproportionately affected.
- **Geographical Disparities:** Rural areas often face connectivity issues, leading to a digital divide between urban and rural populations.

Shropshire faces its own set of challenges in addressing digital exclusion:
- **Rural Landscape:** The rural nature of Shropshire presents connectivity challenges, with some areas lacking reliable broadband access.
- **Aging Population:** A significant proportion of Shropshire's population is elderly, and many older residents struggle with digital literacy.

Digital Inclusion Network

The Digital Inclusion Network (DIN) was established to address these challenges. Co-chaired by Robert Smith from Age UK Shropshire Telford & Wrekin and David Baker from Shropshire Council, the network includes representatives from local government, NHS, community organisations, and businesses. The network's objectives are to raise awareness of digital exclusion, engage stakeholders, conduct research, and propose solutions to reduce the digital divide.

Over the past year, the Digital Inclusion Network has made progress in addressing digital exclusion in Shropshire. Our efforts have focused on setting up the network, identifying barriers and promoting digital inclusion across the community.

- **Awareness and Understanding:** We have raised awareness and understanding of digital exclusion and its implications for the community.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Engaged and promoted working with stakeholders, including local government, integrated care systems, service providers, community organisations, local businesses, and residents.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Conducted research and gathered data to assess the current state and trends of digital exclusion in Shropshire.
- **Task and Finish Group:** Established a task and finish group to review and refine triage questions to identify and support digitally excluded individuals.
- **Infographic Creation**: Discussed creating a Shropshire-specific infographic to signpost people to relevant schemes and services.
- **Digital Voice Switchover (PSTN switch off):** Had a representative from BT/EE update stakeholders on the digital voice switchover, address questions and outline the available support for vulnerable residents.

Future Plans:
- **Continued Collaboration**: We will continue to work closely with stakeholders to address digital exclusion and promote digital inclusion.
- **Ongoing Research:** We will conduct ongoing research to monitor trends and assess the impact of our interventions.
- **Policy Advocacy:** We will continue to advocate for policies that support digital inclusion at both the local and national level.

Digital Skills Programme

The Digital Skills Programme (detailed in a separate paper), launched in 2020, has been instrumental in improving digital literacy among Shropshire residents. The programme offers free digital support through one-to-one sessions and digital drop-ins, benefiting over 1,800 residents to date. It operates from 26 learning locations across Shropshire, including libraries and community centres. The programme's success has been recognised, and it continues to receive funding until March 2026 to expand its reach. The Digital Skills Programme in partnership with Shropshire ICT and Kier has distributed over 120 repurposed devices to people in need.

Digital Infrastructure

While digital infrastructure remains a challenge in some areas, there has been significant progress in improving the digital infrastructure. In Shropshire 98% of premises are able to get broadband, but uptake is only around 70%. Clearly, efforts should continue to enable the remaining 2% of premises to access broadband, while helping those not yet accessing the internet to do so.

- Project Gigabit Contracts: Two Project Gigabit contracts are in delivery and progressing well in North Shropshire and Mid-west Shropshire.

- Superfast Broadband Access: 99% of premises in the Shropshire Council area now have access to a superfast broadband connection (30 megabits per second), and 65% have access to gigabit-capable broadband (1,000 megabits per second), a rapid increase from 37% last year.

- Full-Fibre Broadband: 640 premises have been connected to full-fibre broadband, thanks to £1,243,254 of Shropshire top-up voucher funding.

- Mobile Phone Coverage: Indoor 4G mobile phone coverage from all four providers in the Shropshire Council area has risen from 64% to 67%.

- Consortium Involvement: Shropshire Council is actively involved in a consortium awarded £9.9m to install and test improved mobile connectivity in Bath, Cardiff, and Shrewsbury.

- Funding Success: A funding bid for £3.75m submitted by Shropshire Council for the River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless Innovation Region was successful.

In conclusion, efforts in addressing digital exclusion through the Digital Inclusion Network, and the Digital Skills Programme have made significant strides but there is still work to be done. Continued investment and collaboration with local government, NHS, community organisations, and businesses are essential to further reduce the digital divide and ensure that all residents can benefit from digital services and access the digital resources they need.

Risk assessment and opportunities appraisal (NB This will include the following: Risk Management, Human Rights, Equalities, Community, Environmental	This work seeks to reduce inequalities and the digital divide.

consequences and other Consultation)		
Financial implications (Any financial implications of note)	None as a result of this report	
Climate Change Appraisal as applicable	N/A	
Where else has the paper been presented?	System Partnership Boards	N/A
	Voluntary Sector	N/A
	Other	N/A

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Portfolio holders can be found [here](#) **or your organisational lead e.g., Exec lead or Non-Exec/Clinical Lead**

Councillor Robert Macey, Culture and Digital

Appendices
(Please include as appropriate)
None