

Minutes of the Select Committee for Policy Review

20th February, 2018 at 5.00 pm
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Worsey (Chair);
Councillors Hickey and Sandars.

Apology: Councillors Cherrington, Edwards and Gill.

3/18 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd January, 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

4/18 **Digital Inclusion in Sandwell**

The Select Committee received a presentation on the work to increase digital inclusion in the borough. This formed one element of a Digital Strategy that was being developed for Sandwell.

Improving digital inclusion for the residents of the borough would:-

- support national, regional and local priorities;
- reduce unemployment through increasing access to education, training and job opportunities;
- reduce social isolation through increasing access to online services such as social media;
- improve household finances through increasing access to services and information to help people save money.

According to the digital exclusion heatmap which had been developed by a group of organisations including the Local Government Association, residents of Sandwell were rated as having a medium likelihood of being digitally excluded. This was based on eight measures; four digital and four social. These measures were:-

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- infrastructure;
- access;
- basic digital skills;
- using the basic digital skills;
- age;
- education;
- income;
- health.

Sandwell compared favourably to its Black Country neighbours for infrastructure and access. Although the score for basic digital skills in Sandwell was comparable to the national average, the proportion of residents using their basic digital skills was low. The Council was working with the third sector to understand the reasons for this – it could be due to affordability of technology that was the barrier.

It was reported that Sandwell had the youngest population within the Black Country, however it also had the highest proportion without level 1 qualifications. Income in Sandwell was considerably lower than the national average, but was in line with other Black Country authority areas. Sandwell residents were more likely to have a long-term illness or disability than elsewhere in the Black Country.

From the comments and questions by members of the Select Committee, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The Cabinet Member for Core Council Services was steering the development of a Digital Strategy, including the measures to increase digital inclusion in Sandwell.
- Sandwell's broadband infrastructure was amongst the best in the country.
- The basic digital skills had been identified by Go ON UK, a charity that worked to encourage people to go online. The skills were: managing information, communicating, transacting, problem-solving and creating.
- A workshop event had been held with over 70 third sector representatives in attendance. An action plan arising from that workshop was being developed.
- iSandwell had been launched which was a collaborative project

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between the Council, community organisations and residents. Its aim was to encourage the use of digital across Sandwell.

- A key element of iSandwell was the development of Digital Champions from amongst the residents of the borough. These Champions would work in existing community settings providing advice and support to residents and local organisations to help them develop their digital skills. Recruitment was ongoing, but eight Champions had already been recruited.
- The roll-out of Universal Credit across Sandwell meant that applicants for benefits would need to submit applications online, further increasing the importance of digital skills.
- The Digital Strategy formed one of the key areas of activity within the Resources Directorate Business Plan.
- There was a Google Digital Garage located in Birmingham which had been working with Sandwell. Funding for the Garage was currently scheduled to cease at the end of March, 2018, however if Google chose to continue its funding the Council would continue to work with the Garage.
- The Skills and Productivity Commission of the West Midlands Combined Authority would be looking at the steps beyond basic digital skills.
- There was a West Midlands Combined Authority Digital Board, with a range of working groups supporting it. Members felt it was important to ensure that Sandwell's needs and the opportunities in the borough needed to be represented.
- Funding opportunities for voluntary sector organisations had been impacted upon by the uncertainties surrounding Brexit.

The Select Committee thanked officers for attending the meeting.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Executive Director – Resources consider how best to resource the development of the Digital Strategy;

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- (2) that the possibility of ensuring representation for Sandwell on the West Midlands Combined Authority Digital Board be explored.

(Meeting ended at 6.08 pm)

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