

## Motion on Digital Exclusion and fair representation for all in Council consultations

A person is digitally excluded if they are unable to use information technology in the ways that are needed to participate fully in modern life.

The Council says in the District Plan 2024-28 that Accessible Services are a priority, particularly digitally. However it also recognises that some residents are not digitally savvy or cannot access digital services. It says "some of our residents can't or don't use online services, so we're committed to remaining accessible in other ways including by post, phone and via our Customer Service Centre."

A House of Lords committee report in January 2024 on Digital Exclusion in the UK identified issues with affordability, connectivity, skills, motivation and digital-only public services.

There is evidence to show older people are disproportionately affected by digital exclusion. Age UK has found that around 20% of people aged 65 or over do not use the internet and 46% cannot complete all the fundamental tasks to safely use it. North Hertfordshire has a population with 19.7% aged 65 or over, higher than the England average of 18.6% (ONS 2022 data).

However, digital exclusion is not only about elderly people. The Centre for Social Justice has estimated that 30% of digitally excluded people in the UK are of working age. Other groups that are disproportionately affected by the problem include people with low incomes and those with mental and/or physical health conditions.

The Council must be careful to avoid indirect age or other discrimination in its consultations.

The Council does have measures in place today that should address this. It is welcomed that the Council already has procedures in place to assess equality implications in reports put forward for approval. This includes assessing both the implications of proposed changes, as well as considerations for any community consultations – the latter being relevant here.

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The Council has a Community Consultation Strategy which lays out a range of suitable channels that are recommended to teams in the Directorates planning consultations. This covers provision for both for in-person / non-digital access as well as digital access, with the specifics being determined on a case by case basis based on the consultation's nature.

However the evidence of the Council providing effective non-digital access across consultations is variable. For example the Churchgate consultation included clear instructions for non-digital users and was also advertised broadly. However the consultation on Car Park charges used email, and the Parish Arrangements consultation was online.

The Council can do better at this consistently to give all our residents a fair deal in accessing all consultations and contributing into local democracy. Whilst Councillors themselves are a vital link to the community in person, they cannot be relied on to be the sole non-digital means of engagement with our residents.

As well as the Community Consultation Strategy, the Council has a Digital Strategy which aims for it to be "digital first for all our customers". This also includes a digital skills training and communication plan, targeted for councillors and employees. However it does not currently include an explicit digital skills improvement approach for residents, although we expect residents to access our services and consultations primarily digitally. This could potentially include raising awareness of existing resources.

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This motion highlights two additional complimentary steps the Council can take to ensure those digitally excluded are included in all public engagement and help close our community's digital gap.

Council therefore resolves that:

1. Reports brought to Council that propose ~~any element of~~ public consultation must explicitly ~~consider~~ explain the appropriate mix of digital and non-digital access provision for both communicating the consultation and obtaining feedback, based on the results of the equalities assessment and using the Community Consultation Strategy, in either section "12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS" or a new dedicated section;
2. The Executive Member for Community & Partnership is ~~instructed~~ required to develop a digital skills and literacy plan to help residents participate in consultations and surveys, as part of the mid-term review of the Digital Strategy 2024-27 ~~Digital Inclusion strategy to support the Council Plan~~, and report back to Cabinet and Council Overview & Scrutiny within ~~six months a~~ year with ~~details of~~ recommendations ~~and on possibilities and further actions.~~

Proposed by: Councillor Paul Ward

Seconded by: Councillor Tim Johnson

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