Report of the Director of Housing & Communities

Digital Inclusion Update

Summary

1.   This report provides an update for Scrutiny Committee members on digital inclusion landscape in the city including the work of the city's Digital Friendly York (DFY) partnership.
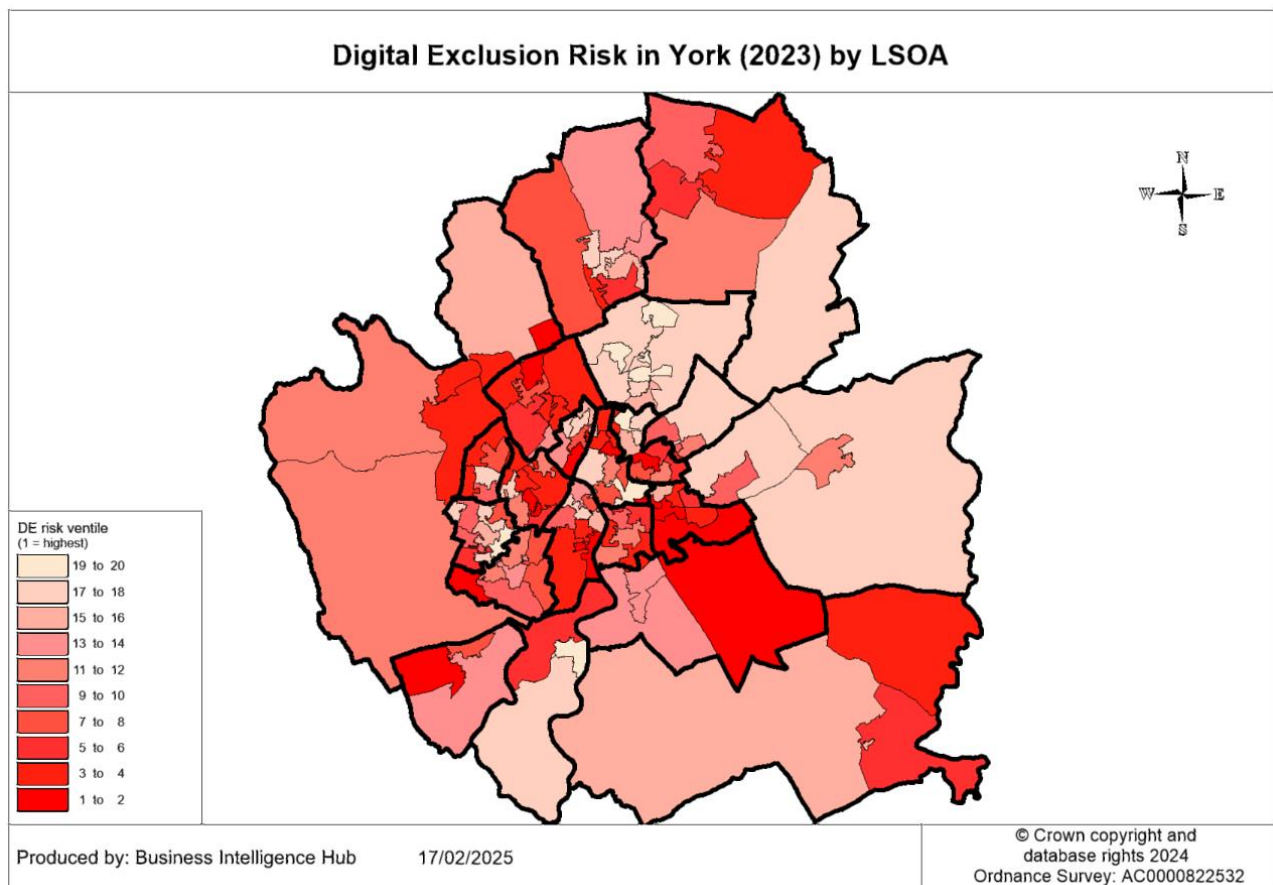
Background

2.   'One City, for all' the Council Plan 2023 to 2027, has a vision that York will be a vibrant, prosperous, welcoming and sustainable city, where everyone can share and take pride and share in its success. A city where history meets the future. It sets out 4 Core Commitments of:

   - Equality of opportunity
   - Affordability
   - Climate
   - Health and wellbeing.

3.   Digital exclusion is a barrier to achieving these aims for the city's residents and businesses. Learning digital skills and confidence is vital for economic activity, employment, social participation, and accessing services, including the NHS, and keeping up with rapid societal changes. Where basic skills and lack of digital confidence is either the primary or a main barrier to opportunities, this requires an ecosystem of support which enables different people to learn the skills they need to achieve outcomes that matter most to them, and to society and the economy.

4.   Access to digital infrastructure, devices, data, digital skills and confidence are vital in today's society. The people likely to be most digitally excluded are those who have other challenges that make it more difficult for them to engage, such as being disabled, in poverty, homeless, addiction, language barriers, long-term health conditions, social isolation, memory problems or other factors.

5.   Digital exclusion and the inequalities faced by those without access to skills, knowledge, IT equipment and/or internet access makes all aspects of modern life more difficult:

- Accessing education, training, and employment;
- Children accessing schoolwork and other learning;
- Managing household and day to day tasks – banking, shopping, engaging with services, paying bills;
- Accessing online discounts for essential household costs, fuel, insurance, phones, for example;
- Accessing health-related support such as GP services;
- Accessing other help and support from organisations;
- Making new or managing benefits claims for vital support;
- Connecting with family and friends;
- Taking part in social and leisure activities.

6.   The landscape of poverty and digital exclusion can be seen below in York:

Digital Exclusion Risk in York (2023) by LSOA

DE risk ventile
(1 = highest)

	19 to 20
	17 to 18
	15 to 16
	13 to 14
	11 to 12
	9 to 10
	7 to 8
	5 to 6
	3 to 4
	1 to 2

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York's Digital Inclusion Partnership

7.   The city's digital inclusion partnership was set up in 2020 and was led by Explore York alongside the council. A joint action plan was developed by the partnership to help identify and tackle areas of digital and social exclusion. The partnership named 100% Digital York acted as an 'umbrella' brand to bring all the work happening across the city together.

8.   Through the provision of grants City of York Council (CYC) has funded a part time post (to March 2025) to support the partnership and co-ordinate its work. Using the experience and learning from Leeds digital inclusion work, the Digital Inclusion Co-ordinator has prioritised work on a community-based approach. This approach has focussed on work with community organisations to support staff and volunteers with digital confidence who in turn can work with the community. In this way digital support is provided improving skills and confidence in local trusted spaces with local trusted people.

9.   In December 2023 York Explore after three years of leading the partnership handed the reins over to a new steering group of members led by York Learning, alongside the continuing wider partnership network group.

10.   In summer 2024 it was agreed by partner votes to change the partnership name to Digital Friendly York to reflect the views of some of the partnership that 100% Digital was not inclusive and did not take into account choice and the recognition that support should be available for those who cannot access services through digital routes. An updated Terms of Reference and new action plan were agreed. Leads for each action have been identified and have started to report progress at each partnership meeting. The Action Plan is included in Annex A.

11.   The Digital Inclusion Co-ordinator, working now under the leadership and direction of York Learning on a part time basis, has accomplished the following:

- Worked with community partners to identify residents or community groups where access to digital services is compromised by lack of access to data, providing that data for free in the form of SIM cards supplied by mobile suppliers and Good Things Foundation which is a charity focussing on digital inclusion. Whilst bids for continuation of this partnership with Good Things Foundation for SIM cards

have not been successful, links have been made with mobile data suppliers and other DFY partners in order to continue the supply of SIM cards via other pathways.

- In partnership with local communities - researching, establishing and running two 'Coder Dojo' clubs, one in Acomb and one working with the Travellers Trust. These are clubs delivering free coding sessions to young people aged 7-13 years who attend with their families and are affiliated with the Coder Dojo brand which is a national charitable organisation. The aim is threefold:

    i.   To stimulate awareness of coding in young people which in turn can lead to a current skills gap being filled in the future both locally and nationally;
    ii. To promote digital access in a positive way and make digital learning free – because the children are taking part with their parents, the parents are also learning digital skills/gaining digital confidence; and
    iii. Using these sessions as a platform to promote organisations within York and the DFY partnership who promote digital inclusion to the parents who are attending and make them aware of what they can access – eg free training courses/free equipment through IT ReUse (see below) who can help them if they are struggling to engage with something digitally for example.

    There has also been further research and investigations into additional clubs being established in other areas of York and this work continues.

- Set up and managed the onboarding of volunteers who will staff the Coder DoJo clubs in order to ensure project sustainability long term so the volunteers can have ownership of their own clubs and to embed these groups into their own communities.

- Organised and hosted various digital drop ins and free digital support courses using Explore libraries as a base to allow people to access basic digital skills/support for free.

- Conducted ongoing research to identify what the current barriers to digital inclusion are locally including speaking to local community leaders/workers/groups to create both case studies and generate data to generate evidence for bids that have been put in for funding for continued DFY work.

- Worked within York communities, signposting groups/individual residents to organisations within the DFY partnership to suit their specific need. For example, some people have been referred to York Learning/York Explore for digital skills courses including free accredited courses, there have also been supported referrals for some people to their banks so that they can discover how to use their banking apps. This is an ongoing piece of work across the areas of the city which are digitally excluded and is about making people aware of what is available and, in most cases, supporting them to access those organisations.

- Currently working with partners in Joseph Rowntree Trust to draw up the basis for a Digital Inclusion Charter (see Action Plan) which would be used as a driver for local businesses to sign up to as a demonstration/marker for how they are supporting residents of the city to be digitally inclusive. This is an ongoing piece of work and is still in its infancy however this has already involved research of existing national charters and meeting with their organisations to look at how to carry out such a piece of work as well as the draft which is currently under review by the DFY steering group. This work originated from recommendations from a small sub group of Community Commissioners from the York Poverty Truth Commission.

- Currently researching the practical aspects of setting up a tablet loan scheme to allow residents to borrow a tablet for free for a period of time to allow them to gain digital confidence without a financial cost that they may not be able to afford. This process has included discussions with existing tablet schemes in other parts of the United Kingdom.

12. Funding has been secured via the next round of Household Support Fund, to provide a further year's funding for the Digital Inclusion Coordinator post for 18.5 hours per week until March 2026. York Learning will continue to manage the post to deliver digital inclusion support services across York as part of Digital Friendly York.

This will build on the above earlier work to enable people of York to get information, advice, and guidance to access services they need via digital solutions and focus on digital inclusivity needs for the City of York, to identify areas of digital exclusion and to collectively work to provide possible solutions to support digital inclusivity, particularly in relation to financial inclusion.

13. As part of ongoing developments, it was agreed by the partnership to explore the viability of establishing a separate independent charitable organisation to develop and promote digital inclusion in the city. At present no one partner organisation has the single responsibility for or capacity to drive these key priorities for digital inclusion in York forward. Discussions had taken place across the partnership to see if this role could be taken on by one of the partners, however this was not seen as a viable option.

14. A separate organisation will be able to apply for independent funding to develop new areas of work and work with partners to support ongoing work. It will be able to solely focus on and champion digital inclusion in York, whilst coordinating and building on the individual areas of focus and expertise, including skills, community support, equipment and infrastructure.

15. Pending this development the existing agreed plans and priorities have enabled applications for funding to be submitted, one of which was a successful application to the University of York Cost of Living Fund. This has enabled the partnership to engage an adviser to work with DFY to develop proposals for, for example, a Community Interest Company or other structure to take the work forward.

Other Digital Inclusion Activity by Digital Friendly York Partners

16. IT Reuse (https://itreuse.org.uk/) is a partnership project led by York Community Furniture Store and is part of the digital inclusion partnership. IT Reuse supports residents offering free refurbished computer equipment, mobile phones, wi-fi hubs and data sim cards and funding for this work has been provided through the council from the Financial Inclusion Steering Group and Household Support Fund grant schemes. The project provided a vital service to residents during the pandemic when connectivity was so vital for people having to isolate in their homes, particularly those on low incomes and with complex needs.

17. Live Well York Digital Friendly York page provides a centre information point for a range of activities across the city https://www.livewellyork.co.uk/information-and-advice/learning-training-employment/digital-inclusion-digital-friendly-york/

18. Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust employs a Digital Inclusion Officer to support their residents with ongoing community activities available https://www.jrht.org.uk/support-for-residents/grow-your-digital-skills .

Digital infrastructure in York

19. The Digital City Team within the council's ICT Service are continuing to engage and work with several broadband infrastructure providers as part of their work programme to retain interest and investment into York's digital connectivity landscape. They also work with central government teams with Department for Culture, Media, and Sport and Building Digital UK to identify areas of intervention to maximise their funded programmes and projects to help provide access to improved levels of digital connectivity for residents and businesses to broadband services.

20. The current level of access to future proof and high-speed broadband services across the city is around 76% and some of the more recent expansions include:

   - Elvington, Wheldrake and Stockton on the Forest now have access to full fibre broadband, this serves approximately 2000 premises across the 3x villages within the city's rural areas.
   - 5000 premises now have access to full fibre broadband within the city centre, rising to 8000 premises by the end of 2025.

21. The team is working hard to target remaining areas where intervention is required for investment and digital infrastructure build programmes or expansion particularly into areas where connectivity is less available and/or poor such within rural areas and York city centre. Whilst this work is related to ensuring that residents and businesses have access to future proof and affordable infrastructure, members may wish to consider whether this falls within the remit of digital inclusion and whether this detail should be included in any requested future updates if so.

Access to Free Wi-Fi and affordable broadband services

22.   For several years, City of York Council has been undertaking extensive public free Wi-Fi implementation within council-owned buildings including its libraries, sports centres, sheltered housing schemes, community centres and hubs and council offices. In York City Centre, there is a free Wi-Fi concession in operation for all visitors and residents to use with free Wi-Fi also available on the city's local and regional bus services whose routes include York.

23.   Within affordable housing developments free Wi-Fi does not offer the bandwidth for home-based requirements and so the Digital City Team as part of their work programme, actively work with the digital network companies and their broadband service providers to establish a choice of service and help address the broadband affordability challenge.

24.   The arrival and possible expansion of 5g networks within York will also help provide access to broadband services and add to the choice of solutions and providers, as well as other opportunities as they arise (for example working with suppliers on offering affordable broadband within multi dwelling housing stock).

Consultation

25.   The Digital Friendly York partnership meets quarterly and has consulted members from the following services/organisations on the Terms of Reference and action plans.

Digital City Officer, CYC	Welfare Benefits Strategic
York Learning	Partnership Manager, CYC
YHREN/York University	Keeping it Digital
Yor Explore	York Disability Rights Forum
York CVS	Make It York
Lived Insights	Aviva
Local Area Coordinator CYC	Livewell York Lead, CYC
MySight	Good Organisation
Digital Inclusion	Citizens Advice York
Accessibility Officer,	IT Reuse, Community
Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust	Furniture Stores
I am reusable	Director, Customer &
University of York	Communities, CYC
Angie Padfield, York Learning	Blueberry Academy
Age Friendly York	Age UK York
Digital City Executive, CYC	Purpose Partners

Options & Analysis

26. As this report is for information, there are no options and related analysis to consider.

Council Plan

27. The City of York Council's Council Plan (2023-2027) includes the 4 core commitments which are relevant for this report and the work of the digital inclusion partnership. Digital inclusion activity meets all four of the commitments, including recycling of equipment which meets the council priority around climate change and impacts positively on affordability and health.

Implications

28. There are no implications for members to consider as there are no decisions to make as it is a report for information.

Risk Management

29. Without the work of this partnership there would be no co-ordinated digital inclusion activity in the city. This work seeks to mitigate the impact of a lack of digital skills, data and equipment where people are facing financial hardship in the city and to improve their access on online support, information and services.

Recommendations

30. Members are asked to note the information relating to the ongoing work of the Digital Friendly York Partnership alongside the other digital inclusion work going on in the city.

   Reason: So that members are aware of the work undertaken by the Digital Friendly York Partnership.

Contact Details

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Specialist Implications Officer(s) None

Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all   **All** ☑

Background Papers:

None

Annexes

Annex A: Digital Friendly York Partnership Action Plan

Abbreviations

CYC City of York Council
DFY Digital Friendly York
ICT   Information, Communications, Technology
IT   Information Technology