POVERTY

Rochdale Borough Council

Working Together to Bridge the Digital Gap

Context

Rochdale is ranked the 15th most deprived borough in England based on a rank of the average for LSOAs in the area (defined in the Indices of Deprivation). Many of the people in the borough were already significantly disadvantaged when the pandemic struck.

The pandemic revealed a number of inequalities but the rapid default to and reliance on, delivery of services online, highlighted the large number of people who were digitally excluded. Those without access to the internet and/or lacking digital skills were left further behind, missed out on support and access to services and provision.

Rationale

Aside from a lack of IT equipment and IT skills, one of the biggest digital barriers that people in Rochdale face is access to internet provision that is affordable. This became especially apparent when venues that offered free Wi-Fi to residents were not able to open during the pandemic. Equally, many of the drop in centres that currently offer free Wi-Fi have an internet service which is insufficient to accommodate multiple devices, resulting in access which is somewhat inadequate.

Rather than simply providing equipment and free Wi-Fi to some public buildings and households, it was recognised that a more radical approach was required. A mesh network was provided for residents living in one of the most deprived and digitally excluded areas, College Bank and Lower Falinge. It enabled provision of large-scale outdoor Wi-Fi coverage, extended from key central points across the area. It enables a much more cost effective way to provide free internet access working out at approx. 35 pence per household per month. It allows residents to access the internet when they choose in their own home. In doing so it allows individual choice and removes reliance and dependency on services for internet provision.

Implementation

While many of the organisations involved are not formal co-operatives, provision of the network has been underpinned by an ethos of co-operation. By working together to facilitate this programme, the reach and accessibility of digital provision has been increased. The funding for the scheme has been provided by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the scheme has been project managed by Rochdale Council. The installation of equipment was undertaken by Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, the largest Registered Social Landlord in this locality. Poignantly, the original Rochdale Pioneers store, which is now the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, run by The Co-Operative Heritage Trust is the host site for the mesh network. The original Pioneers opened their store to address food poverty, it seems entirely fitting that it now plays a direct part in addressing digital poverty. The roll out of the mesh network from this location allows equitability to the people who benefit directly from it and affirms that co-operation remains relevant and is not just a thing of the past.

 Having provided Wi-Fi it was recognised that many residents also had a need for digital equipment. This was provided through the borough's 'Digitech Library'. This library was established by Action Together, a community CIO supporting VCFSE organisations to provide an integral role in local solutions, in partnership with Rochdale Council. The Library, a consortium of VCFSE organisations facilitated by the infrastructure charity Action Together alongside the Council, improves access to digital equipment for those who are digitally excluded. It also provides support and training for residents to develop basic digital skills. This helps to foster autonomy, enabling easier access to services to improve to health and well-being and employment opportunities which are available online. Equally importantly it enables social interaction with friends and family and access to leisure and cultural activity.

Looking Forward

Following the success of this project, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing is keen to continue to work with the Council to widen the reach and build additional mesh networks. It is anticipated that the scheme will be extended across the borough to other areas which also have high levels of unemployment and deprivation. Talks are currently underway with another Registered Social Landlord in the borough, who is also keen to fund a mesh network for its tenants alongside other career and well-being support, which they currently provide. The Council is looking to identify further Registered Social Landlords who are also keen to participate.

The roll out of the Mesh Network, provision of equipment through the Digitech Library and equipping people with necessary digital skills is helping to address digital exclusion, caused by deprivation. This co-operative approach is providing households in some of the most deprived communities with facilities which would otherwise be unaffordable and which are needed more than ever during the current cost of living crisis.

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