

**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)**  
**held at 2.00 pm on Wednesday, 13 October 2021**

Present:

Members:

Councillor C Miks (Chair)  
Councillor J Blundell (substitute for Councillor M Heaven)  
Councillor G Hayre  
Councillor T Jandu  
Councillor R Lakha (substitute for Councillor R Lancaster)  
Councillor P Male  
Councillor E Ruane  
Councillor B Singh  
Councillor A Tucker

Other Invited Members:

Councillor R Brown – Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources  
Councillor J O’Boyle – Cabinet Member for Jobs, Regeneration and Climate Change  
Councillor K Sandhu – Cabinet Member for Education and Skills  
Councillor R Singh – Chair of Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1)

Employees (by Service):

Customer and Business Services	A Bellingeri
Education and Skills	K Mawby
ICT and Digital	P Ward
Law and Governance	G Holmes, M Rose

Apologies:

Councillor P Hetherton  
Councillor R Lancaster  
Councillor G Lloyd

## **Public Business**

### **11. Declarations of Interest**

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

### **12. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8th September 2021 were agreed and signed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

### 13. **Digital Inclusion**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a Briefing Note and Presentation of the Head of Customer Services which provided an insight into the early thoughts surrounding Digital Inclusion and the Digital Service & Inclusion Lead remit including an overview of the likely areas of focus for the service as it evolved.

The digital divide existed in a pre-pandemic world, in 2020 The Good Things Foundation Digital National Report highlighted that 9 million people nationally were unable to use the internet without help and that 7 million households had no access to the internet at home. Figures published in Lloyds Consumer Digital Index report of 2021 identified that 3% of West Midlands residents, equating to 11 thousand Coventry People were 'off-line' and 30% of residents, 111 thousand people in Coventry only completed basic tasks on an infrequent basis.

The Lloyds Consumer Index reports that 53% of people would improve their digital skills if access to the internet and devices were cheaper, with 67% of people suggesting that they would improve their digital skills if they could access available support. A growing number of people had, by necessity, used self-service provision since the pandemic with services in all sectors moving their offer to on-line access or provided through other digital solutions. This was advantageous for many however, it has served to increase the divide, further disadvantaging those who were not digitally confident or who did not have access to the required facilities.

The creation of a digital inclusion offer was intended to improve this position, supporting residents to:

- Improve digital skills and confidence
- Access suitable digital devices
- Access digital connectivity

The presentation outlined the role of the new Digital Service and Inclusion Lead and noted that initial recruitment to the temporary role was unsuccessful and the recruitment would now be for a permanent position.

Councillor R Singh had been invited to join the discussion as Chair of Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board 1 which had an interest in digital items.

Councillor Brown, Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources highlighted Ofcom statistics which placed Coventry in a fortunate position Nationally and Locally regarding infrastructure. That would enable consideration of what to do with the infrastructure and supporting people at various stages of learning skills.

The Board questioned officers, received responses and discussed the following issues:

- The digital ability of the organisation compared to digital inclusion

- Progress on delivering a Member casework tool and integration with the existing CRM Customer Relationship Manager
- Accessibility of the Digital Services Offer
- The involvement of other stakeholders such as the 3rd sector to establish what their digital offer is and consider supporting access to those services
- Ensuring the Council's digital offer was mobile friendly and the increase in use of apps on mobile phones rather than laptops to access services
- The need for this role before now and the need for a role to continue in future.

The Board requested that further details about case work tools be reported back to Members.

**RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3):**

- 1) Notes the report and request a further report back in 6-12 months' time.**
- 2) Requests that the Cabinet Member give further consideration to the split between the external and internal focus of the new role and the digital capability of the organisation.**

**14. Digital Skills for the Jobs Market**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a Briefing Note and Presentation of the Head of Employment & Skills and the Head of ICT & Digital regarding the position of provisions in place to support residents in gaining digital skills with a specific focus on digital skills for employment.

The report recognised that during the COVID19 pandemic, there had been a significant increase in the need for residents to be able to access and have confidence in using digital tools. It was important that the Council make provision for supporting residents in gaining the relevant digital skills but also to be realistic with regards to the extent of the provision provided solely as a local government organisation.

Through the work of the Digital Coventry strategy and wider city-wide digital activity with key partners, the Council continued to look for ways to support a digital skills ecosystem that not only included the provision provided by the city council (further details were provided), but activities provided by partner and community group organisations. The report explored the digital skills for employment provision provided by a range of providers such as Colleges and Independent Training Providers.

In the West Midlands 3% of the population were still offline (approx. 11,000 residents in Coventry). However, 30% of residents in the region still had very low digital engagement (completing basic tasks only and not regularly) – this would be approximately 111,000 Coventry residents. The Lloyds Consumer Digital Index (2021) found 53% would improve digital skills if devices and internet access were cheaper and 67% would if they knew support was available to help.

Libraries were the main place in which residents could freely access devices. All Coventry libraries were now fully re-open and allowed residents 2 hours a day of

free PC use. In addition, there was free access to Wifi for residents who brought their own device. The number of devices available was currently halved to allow for social distancing. However, in August 2021 there were still 10,275 sessions (PC and Wi-Fi). Whilst library usage was returning steadily, this remained down on pre-pandemic usage; for comparison there were 46,664 session in August 2019.

The libraries cannot currently offer face to face close support to residents in using the devices. However, they could offer support from a distance and via help sheets. There was also access to an online learning package called 'Info based learning cloud' which supported people in various online learning. In addition to using libraries residents could freely access devices at all 9 Family Hubs and at the Coventry Job Shop.

In the West Midlands at least 82% of jobs required digital skills, but 56% of the population did not have essential digital skills for work which equated to approximately 138,000 working age residents in Coventry. Supporting residents with key digital skills could help to improve their job prospects and financial stability.

Coventry Adult Education were the largest provider of basic digital skills in the City and provided basic skills for 725 residents a year, many referred through the Coventry Job Shop. Courses were delivered across the city including the City Centre, Cheylesmore, Stoke, Tile Hill and Willenhall as well as offering online courses. Other providers of basic digital skills included Pet Xi and Go Train.

For residents who wanted to develop their digital skills further; either to develop a digital career or for roles which required a higher level of digital skill, there were clearly defined digital pathways. Residents could access a wide range of courses available through Coventry's FE and Higher Education providers as well as Independent Training Providers, and progress through academic levels. For some they may be eligible for full funding, depending on factors such as their employment status and benefits entitlement. Others could access the student loans system with the Government's new Lifetime Skills Guarantee making it possible to use loans more flexibly for further education as opposed to just higher education. A list of courses was attached to the report.

There was increased jobs growth in programming (especially coding) and software development with approximately 4530 jobs in Coventry and the surrounding areas and also many jobs in cyber security. In addition, there was increased employer need for data science and analytics, cloud systems and services, ethical hacking and digital marketing including social media.

Skills support to meet demand in digital growth sectors: Through their £5 million Digital Retraining Fund WMCA commissioned providers across the region to focus on both newer and emerging digital skills such as coding, ethical hacking and cyber security. Some of these courses had been focused in other areas of the region so had not been easy for Coventry residents to access. However, Coventry Job Shop had been successful in engaging with Code Your Future who provided coding training specifically targeted at refugees. In addition, Netcom who attended Coventry Moves Into Work Event were providing higher level digital skills specifically focused on digital infrastructure.

At the same time FE Colleges including Coventry College and North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire College (NWLSC) had improved their digital offer in the city. Coventry College now do courses in cyber security and data management and NWLSC had opened a Digital Skills Academy at Coventry University Technology Park which offered coding, cyber security and cloud systems and services.

Coventry City Council were the lead for the ESF SME Skills for Growth Programme. This supported SME businesses with 50% of their costs in providing training to upskill their workforce. This included digital upskilling which supported both residents and businesses. In the last year 8 SME employers had requested digital skills support and the scheme had helped 18 residents gain skills in areas such as digital marketing, search engine optimisation, Google ads training and Microsoft PowerPoint and Excel.

The Board questioned officers, received responses and discussed the following issues:

- Employers working in collaboration with colleges and training providers on course content
- Bidding for Institute of Technology (IoT) funding as part of the government reforms to qualifications
- The extent of discussions with possible IoT anchor employers
- Disappointment that Coventry University had developed an IoT on their London Campus
- Digital skills in demand now and future planning of a Skills Strategy to attract businesses and give Coventry marketing strength to attract businesses to the city.
- The quality of Digital skills learned in school and the possibility of a Digital Academy
- Support for businesses to enable them to become more digital in their business model
- Flexibility of courses and the ability for people to attend if they are already working

Councillor Sandhu, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills highlighted the positive partnership working and good relationships with Academies in Coventry and welcomed a discussion with Headteachers on Digital Skills acknowledging the current challenges faced by schools. Also, schools had developed relationships with Companies in the City.

Councillor O'Boyle, Cabinet Member for Jobs Regeneration and Climate Change acknowledged that working together was key to understanding opportunities and filling any skills gaps. However, the environment was constantly changing, and businesses were managing lots of uncertainty. He suggested that discussions with the Inward Investment Team could be useful.

Officers recognised that working in partnership and collaboration was really important as everyone in Coventry would be at different parts of their digital skills journey and also the environment was constantly evolving, and funding changed.

**RESOLVED that, Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) recommended that the Cabinet Members for Education and Skills, and Jobs, Regeneration and Climate Change:**

- 1) Champion with funders, employers and training providers, the possibility of an Institute of Technology based in Coventry subject to the Fund's availability and to feedback to the Board in 3 months.**
- 2) Continue to support the Council in partnership working with employers in the digital and emerging technology industries and training providers in the City, to ensure that the training offered matches the skills required by employers.**

**15. Work Programme 2021/2022**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a report of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that detailed issues on the Board's Work Programme for meetings of the Board for 2021/2022.

Members of the Board noted that the item on Apprenticeships, Skills and Training (joint with the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) and the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)) would be referred to Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee, as the issues concerned more than one Scrutiny Board.

**RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) notes the issues on the Board's Work Programme for 2021/2022 with an update to the Programme that the item relating to Apprenticeships, Skills and Training be referred to Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee.**

**16. Any other items of public business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 3.45 pm)