Coventry City Council

Briefing note

To: Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1)

Date: 26 March 2025

Subject: #CovConnects Update

1   Purpose of the Note

1.1   To provide an update on the #CovConnects programme, highlighting the progress made in developing the #CovConnects Device Bank moving towards a digital reuse and repair model and social impact measurement.

2   Recommendations

2.1   That the Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1):

a) Note the details relating to the broader #CovConnects programme.

b) Make any relevant recommendations to the Cabinet Member.

3   Background and Information

3.1   #CovConnects is Coventry City Council's digital inclusion programme, which launched in October 2022. #CovConnects is a social inclusion programme tackling the digital inequalities experienced by our residents and communities.

3.2   Its core aim is to ensure that all Coventry residents should have equal opportunities to access digital skills, tools, technologies, and services. From this approach #CovConnects works in partnership, across sectors to ensure that meaningful, person-centred and holistic digital inclusion initiatives are co-created and embedded to meet our diverse communities needs.

3.3   #CovConnects has six key programme principles which shape the #CovConnects digital inclusion ecosystem;

- **Outcome based -** We prioritise around social inclusion not tech

- **Partnership led -** We don't set the agenda we respond to it

- **Research focus -** We gather the evidence to understand and adapt

- **Efficiency driven -** We create interest and excitement to find funding

- **Unique solutions -** We recognise community differences and tailor a response

- **Scalable core offer -** We create a sustainable tech, skills and data offer

3.4 In addition to the 'core offer,' an ecosystem of activity across local authority, NHS partners, voluntary and community sector and University partners has created sustainable, innovative and partner-led activity.

3.5 Within the core offer, key developments and deliverable since March 24 include;

3.5.1 **#CovConnects Device Bank**- full update below

3.5.2 **Community Connectivity**

- #CovConnects continues to partner with Good Things Foundation to distribute free sim cards via the National Databank to digitally excluded Coventry residents. In March 2024 7000 National Databank sim cards had been distributed across 42 National Databank Hubs within Coventry. Our most recent update has seen over 15,000 sim cards now distributed to 63 National Databank Hubs.

- The 'Jangala Get Box Pilot' which has seen 200 SIM-enabled connectivity devices provided to vulnerable residents in temporary accommodations through 12 partner organisations. An accompanying report will be published this spring to evaluate the impact of providing both unlimited and 'capped' data to residents within temporary accommodation, further framing digital exclusion as a wider determinant of health.

- #CovConnects recently secured 1250 MiFi dongles with two years of unlimited data through £340,000 UKSPF funding in partnership with CCC Skills Service. Devices will be distributed via the #CovConnects Device Bank to VCSE organizations and Council services, to further tackle digital connectivity challenges within our communities.

3.5.3 **Community Skills and Support**

- #CovConnects continues to develop and deliver bespoke Embedded Digital Champion training for organisations across the city. Offering 'Train-the-trainer' sessions to embed digital inclusion knowledge and best practices within services and organisations, with over 140 Embedded Digital Champions onboarded to date.

- #CovConnects has developed three bespoke community focused Digital Inclusion Networks across, Older Adults, Homelessness and ESOL. Networks have representation across sectors, meeting regularly to pursue partnership opportunities, share best practice and drive community focused digital inclusion initiatives.

- The #CovConnects Map was launched last year on the #CovConnects website, to provide an interactive resource for residents, practitioners and frontline workers to find bespoke community led digital inclusion initiatives across the city. There are currently 50+ venues included, ensuring services provided, contact details and wider organisational details are easily accessible.

4 #CovConnects Device Bank Developments and the Digital Re-use and Repair Proof of Concept

4.1 The #CovConnects Device Bank was launched in October 2023 based upon circular economy principles of re-using end-of-life corporate stock to enable meaningful community led digital inclusion activity. An additional boost of funding at approximately £635k worth of devices, was received via the WMCA Connected Services Programme in July 2023.

4.2 The #CovConnects Device Bank was created following an end-to-end re-design and build within our organisational customer relationship management platform, to create an online application process. ensuring consistency, efficiency, governance and reporting. Devices can be accessed via VCSE organisations, internal Coventry City Council services and NHS Coventry services.

4.3 The #CovConnects team provide wraparound support to each Device Bank applicant, ensuring a holistic package across skills, connectivity and support, in addition to access to digital kit.

4.4 To date, #CovConnects has distributed over 4000 devices across Coventry, including;

Device Type	Quantity	New vs reuse/repair
Laptops/desktops	1526	New
	1220	Reuse/repair
Tablet devices	91	Reuse/repair
Smart phones	358	Reuse/repair
Connectivity devices		
Mi-fi Units	684	New
Jangala Get-Box	270	

4.5 Since conception, longer term sustainability of the scheme has been explored via the Circular Economy Pathway of the Coventry Independent Climate Change Board, exploring opportunities to tackle digital waste and exclusion in tandem

4.6 Autumn 2023, saw the creation of the #CovConnects Digital Reuse and Repair Proof of Concept working group with key stakeholders across the council, University of Warwick, NHS ICB Coventry and Warwickshire, and the voluntary sector work together to explore opportunities to continue to build on the initial pilot.

4.7 Early 2024, #CovConnects was successful securing an initial £80,000 investment from the Virgin Media O2 Hubbub Time after Time Fund to kickstart the pilot, reusing and repairing end of corporate life digital kit from the NHS ICB Coventry and Warwickshire, and redistributing via the #CovConnects Device Bank

4.8 The year long pilot will enable #CovConnects to evaluate the city-wide approach, looking to measure impact across three key areas;

- Social impact- working with the Coventry Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) and partner Universities to capture the impact of the #CovConnects programme in improving residents and communities' quality of life with digital as an enabler, using qualitative and quantitative techniques

- Environmental impact- utilising a 'carbon calculator' developed by Warwick Manufacturing Group as part of the proof of concept- tracking digital devices donated across reuse, repair and recycle; quantifying e-waste reduction and embodied carbon emission savings.

- Economic impact- exploring both the return on investment for social impact activity, and the financial sustainability of the programme longer term.

4.9 Next steps for the #CovConnects Device Bank impact measurement include dashboard development across a range of standardised and accredited values to ensure the wider outcomes and outputs of the programme are more accurately captured.

5 Digital Inclusion as a wider determinant of health - health inequalities

5.1 #CovConnects was successful in securing NHS ICB Coventry and Warwickshire Health Inequalities funding in 2023, enabling the development of the #CovConnects community-based approach for digital inclusion and health participation, based upon the 100% Digital Leeds model.

5.2 Digital inclusion can impact health directly- whereby digitally excluded residents are unable to access health services and information available online or digitally. Equally, digital exclusion can impact health indirectly- whereby digital inclusion enablers better opportunities across education, employment, housing and service access, therefore can be viewed as a wider determinant of health.

5.3 #CovConnects works collaboratively with the Marmot Partnership, VCSE organisations, Public Health and NHS Trusts, to work collectively to reduce health inequalities associated with digital exclusion. Additionally, #CovConnects has worked closely with HDRC since its launch, positioning digital inclusion as one of the 'building blocks for health.'

5.4 #CovConnects has benefitted from additional research skills development and capacity to support programme evaluation and impact measurement, including;

a) HDRC council colleagues providing expertise on developing individual #CovConnects projects/initiatives evaluation

b) Identifying, supporting and collaborating on research funding opportunities, with currently ten projects at different stages

c) Two team members accessing paid Research Associate roles via the HDRC, in addition to their substantive posts, further enabling capacity and skill development to drive digital inclusion research and creating meaningful partnerships with our Universities, UHCW and voluntary sector.

d) HDRC facilitated workshops and events with a digital inclusion focus, enabling increased networking, relationship building and identification of shared priority research areas

e) Upcoming University researcher secondment within the #CovConnects programme to explore 'bridging the gap' by reducing loneliness and isolation via intergenerational digital inclusion activity for older adults.

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