2023 -26

Digital Access Strategy

Southway Housing Trust

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Welcome

Welcome to our new Digital Access Strategy. This is the third strategy; our first strategy and commitment to working towards digital access objectives was in 2013. The climate in which we are now operating has changed significantly since Southway started its digital journey.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the level of 'channel shift' globally as many people who had previously been reluctant to access services in this way were left with little alternative. Equally, companies had to quickly adapt to staff being able to (where possible) work from home, and this often-required greater flexibility about how and when services were delivered. We emerged from lockdown into a climate where there is an increased demand and reliance on digital services.

Many organizations (including Southway) are continuing to support hybrid and remote working, and our services also need to adapt to this change. The challenge now is to ensure that we develop credible digital options that meet the raised expectations of our customers and communities and will support our staff in working in a flexible way.

Additionally, the 'cost of living' crisis means that financial barriers to customers accessing our services online are a huge issue – many people simply cannot afford internet access or the equipment to access online services, particularly within our communities. Research has proven that a lack of digital skills and access can have a hugely negative impact on a person's life, leading to poorer health outcomes and a lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, and less access to jobs and education.

Our strategy has evolved since 2013, reflecting the changing environment and the growing reliance on digital services in many sectors. Alongside this, the opportunities for collaborating with partners and stakeholders have grown, including opportunities to work with local government, the community and voluntary sector, and service providers to accelerate progress. This new strategy covers the period from November 2023 to November 2026.

Strategy Approach

We have consulted widely with customers, staff, and other stakeholders in the development of this strategy. We also participated in a pilot project along with four other social housing providers to support a research project being carried out by Liverpool University. The results of this project will be used to further develop our approach to tackling digital exclusion.

https://aboutmanchester.co.uk/uks-biggest-social-housing-digital-inclusion-pilot-makes-positive-steps-towards-tackling-manchesters-digital-divide/

During the production of this strategy, we also received the results of our most recent STAR survey which has also included some useful feedback that we have used to inform this strategy.

The proportion of survey respondents that use our online services has remained static at 42%. This is despite the fact that there has been a small increase in the proportion that are happy to use email (55% v 50% in 2021).

We recognise that this may be a temporary change influenced by the recent issues with getting through to our Customer Hub on the phone.

Interestingly, when analysing the preferences of the 17% of tenants that were dissatisfied with their ability to deal with Southway in their preferred way, we discovered the following:

Email is the most common method they would be happy to use (73%), followed by phone (67%).

Key Messages

Service Levels

We have noticed an increase in the number of tenants asking Southway to improve digital services.

Due to extended call waiting times following COVID-19, there has been a rise in the use of alternative channels, such as email. While this is encouraging, feedback suggests that the customer experience with these channels has not always been positive.

It is essential that we establish clear service standards for these channels and ensure they are monitored and adhered to.

Digitally Uninterested

Within the category of Digitally Excluded, there are tenants who have no desire to engage in digital services. While cost may be the main barrier, it can also be combined with a lack of motivation or incentive to do so.

It's still important that we make efforts to engage with this group and understand to what extent this might cause issues for individuals in different situations.

(E.g., a tenant living in a sheltered scheme might be less impacted by being unable to use online services than an elderly person living alone with no family support.)

Language

This strategy outlines how we will reduce the number of digitally excluded tenants and, conversely, increase the number of digitally enabled individuals. As it sets out activities and plans targeted at this specific group, it is essential that the terms used are simple and clear in their meaning.

Accessibility is also a topic we need to consider when assessing our digital services.

Website

Feedback from the STAR survey indicates an increased demand for our online services, particularly the repairs portal, which allows customers to request and schedule non-urgent repairs themselves.

Priority will be given to improving the online service offer including consideration of a new website, development of a customer app, and improvements to the portal.

Themes & Objectives

Our new Digital Access Strategy will:

- · Align with city-wide aspirations regarding digital inclusivity.
- · Recognize the new post-COVID operating climate.
- · Understand the expectations of both our customers and staff.
- · Support and complement our carbon reduction plan.
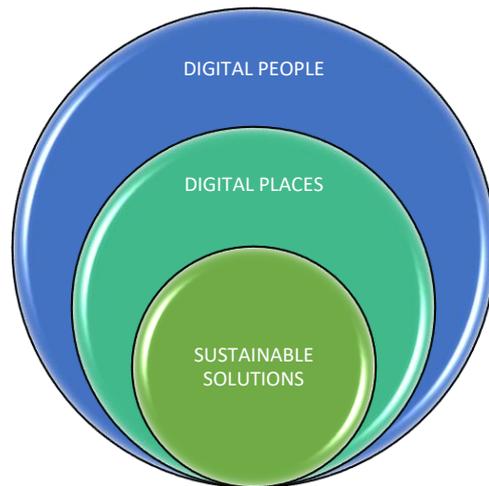
The strategy includes three themes that closely align with the Manchester City Council city-wide digital strategy from 2021 to 2026. The MCC Strategy aims to help Manchester become a world-leading digital city.

This involves addressing digital exclusion, which often goes hand in hand with social exclusion, and ensuring that the workforce in the digital sector reflects the diversity of the city. We will collaborate with MCC and other partners to ensure our plans contribute to this broader ambition.

Theme 1: Digital People

Digital People is about providing suitable skills, training, and equipment to allow customers to access services online. This supports the city-wide initiative to tackle the high levels of digital exclusion within Manchester.

Using our data and customer insight, we will take an informed approach, ensuring that we are targeting support to the individuals and groups within our communities that would benefit the most.

We aim to remove the current barriers that are preventing some of our residents from benefitting from digital services and recognise that affordability is the most common issue within our communities.

Objectives

1. **We will use our data proactively to understand digital exclusion across our communities and the barriers facing our tenants.**

2. **We will use this data to continue to offer targeted support around both gaining skills and confidence and obtaining equipment and internet access to our customers.**

Measures & Intended Outcomes

Theme 1: Digital People Digital People is about providing suitable skills, training, and equipment to allow customers to access services online. This supports the city-wide initiative to tackle the high levels of digital exclusion within Manchester. Using our data and customer insight, we will take an informed approach, ensuring that we are targeting support to the individuals and groups within our communities that would benefit the most. We aim to remove the current barriers that are preventing some of our residents from benefiting from the opportunities provided by digital services and recognize that affordability is the most common issue within our communities.

Measures & Intended Outcomes

We expect that achieving these objectives will result in an increase in digital inclusion across our communities. We will continue to measure this using the methodology detailed below. To classify a tenant as being online, we look for evidence of the tenant accessing online services or at least receiving correspondence from us digitally. When we have this evidence, tenants are flagged on our system as either:

- **GREEN (digitally enabled)**
- **GREEN + (digitally active within the last 12 months)**

These flags are applied automatically within our housing management system every 3 months. This means that the data is dynamic and can change throughout the year. Currently, 41% of our tenants are classified as digitally enabled.

This methodology has been in place for approximately 5 years, and we find it to be a reliable way of measuring digital inclusion compared to higher-level data that shows inclusion across our communities.

We intend to review the definitions used to classify a tenant as digitally enabled as part of a city-wide initiative to ensure that all organizations are measuring digital inclusion/exclusion in a consistent way. Throughout the duration of this strategy, we will also refer to other data sources that provide useful insight helping us understand more about our tenants who may currently be digitally excluded. This will include tenant consultation and feedback through processes such as the STAR survey and our Inspired by Communities program, as well as other research data being gathered across the city.

The current definitions we are using to understand a customer's digital status are listed below.

Green +

This group of tenants are Actively engaging with us online – they are not just capable of doing so. This is established by using one or more of the following criteria:

· Actively using the tenant portal to either book repairs and/or view rent account.
· Paying Rent online via Call Pay website All Pay to pay their rent online / DD.
· Paying online via their bank

Green

Customers in this group are already accessing or receiving information/ service digitally. This will be evidenced in at least one of the following ways:

· They are registered with the portal.
· They have an active email address (using email to communicate with us / used to register with Housing Support or Manchester Move / in receipt of e-newsletter).
· They are making enquiries via email, our website, or social media channels.

Amber

There is no evidence that the customers in this group have accessed our services digitally. However, they are likely to have the ability to do so based on one or more of the following statements:

· They have attended one of our training courses.
· Have been provided with a device by Southway.

Red

There is no evidence that these customers have either accessed our services digitally OR are able to do so. Currently once a tenant is recognised as Green, they never shift back to Amber or Red.

The Digital Conversation

We know that the majority of new tenants we sign up are digitally enabled. Many belong to a younger demographic who grew up using the internet, mobile phones, and social media. While there may still be families in this group that require support accessing affordable WIFI, generally, the group we have identified as 'digitally excluded' tends to be older existing tenants, approximately 500 people in total.

Not all of these tenants are interested in getting online, and while this might be due to barriers we can assist with (such as fear of scams or worries about cost), we completely respect this decision. Our concern is that digital exclusion can leave individuals isolated and unable to access the support they require when they need it, for example, as many GP surgeries have moved to online booking systems for appointments.

We are aware that some of our customers already have their own adequate network of support in place, for instance, a friend or family member may assist them with digital transactions.

We don't want to make assumptions about what people need in terms of support. Over the duration of this strategy, we intend to have meaningful conversations with each of these customers about this subject, as we believe this is the best way to identify exactly where we need to concentrate our efforts.

Progress on this will be included in the annual updates on this strategy, along with a summary of any lessons learned.

OFCOM DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Ofcom has been monitoring digital exclusion data since 2004, and recently summarized the divide, at a very high level, as: "6% of households did not have access to the internet at home in December 2021."
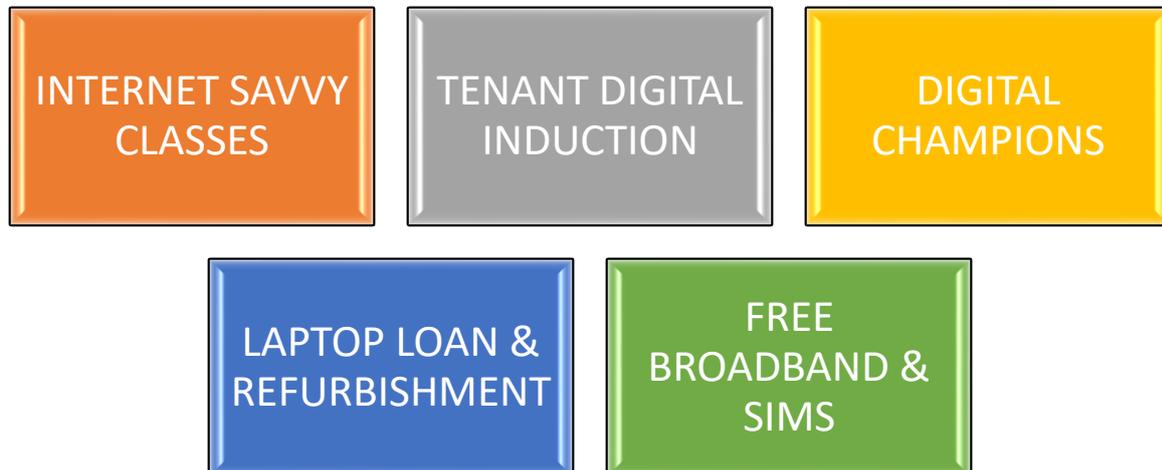
While this figure is promising, they also note that in October 2021, before the more recent cost-of-living crisis, "about 2 million households were experiencing affordability issues with either their fixed broadband and/or smartphone." Three of the biggest factors contributing to digital poverty and enabling the digital divide are:

- Financial poverty causing digital poverty (exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis).
- Access, which can be the result of geography.
- Skills, including lack of education.

Two of the groups least likely to have home internet access – just behind those aged over 65+ (of whom 18% are without access) – are lower-income households (11% without access) and the most financially vulnerable (10% without access).

Poor connectivity often occurs in economically disadvantaged communities, where a strong overlap between digital poverty and financial poverty exists. Throughout the duration of this strategy, we will continue to offer support to our customers to access skills, equipment, and affordable Wi-Fi.

We will use our customer insight to target this support to those who need it the most. These are some of the projects we are currently delivering that support this theme. We will provide updates on these projects via the annual update report supporting the delivery of this strategy.

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INTERNET SAVVY CLASSES	TENANT DIGITAL INDUCTION	DIGITAL CHAMPIONS
LAPTOP LOAN & REFURBISHMENT	FREE BROADBAND & SIMS	

Theme 2: Digital Places

We aim to ensure that our customers always have a choice in how they access our services. This choice will include a low-cost digital option that is reliable and easy to use.

Objectives

- **We will ensure that our customers have a choice in the way they access our services. This will include a 'digital' option that is both reliable and affordable.**

- **Stay updated on new technologies that may improve the way we deliver our services and ensure that all our communication options are reliable and accessible.**

- **We will ensure that our workforce is suitably trained to operate within the new digital environment we create.**

Measures & Intended Outcomes

Over the course of three years, we intend to develop an approach to digitally evaluate our different services. This will consider factors including those shown in the graphic below:
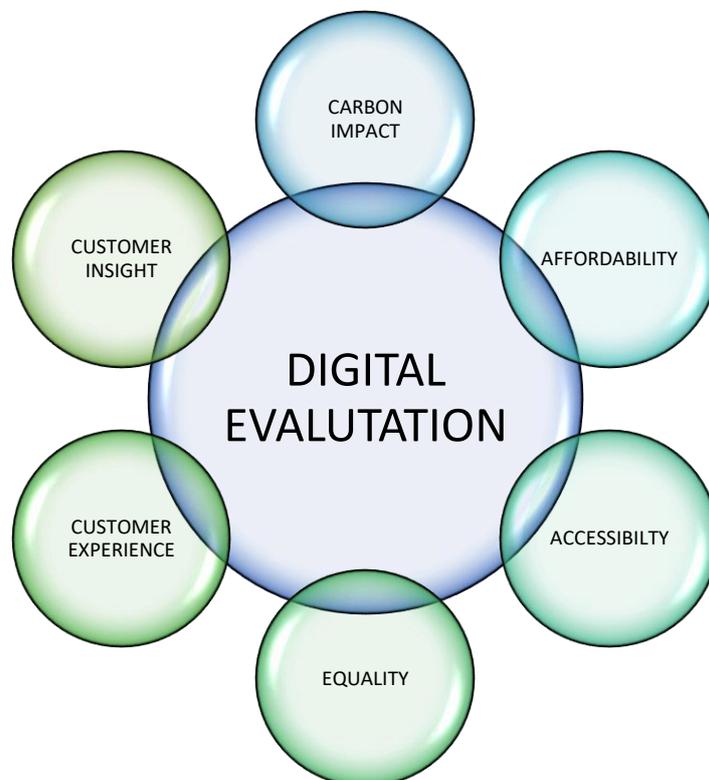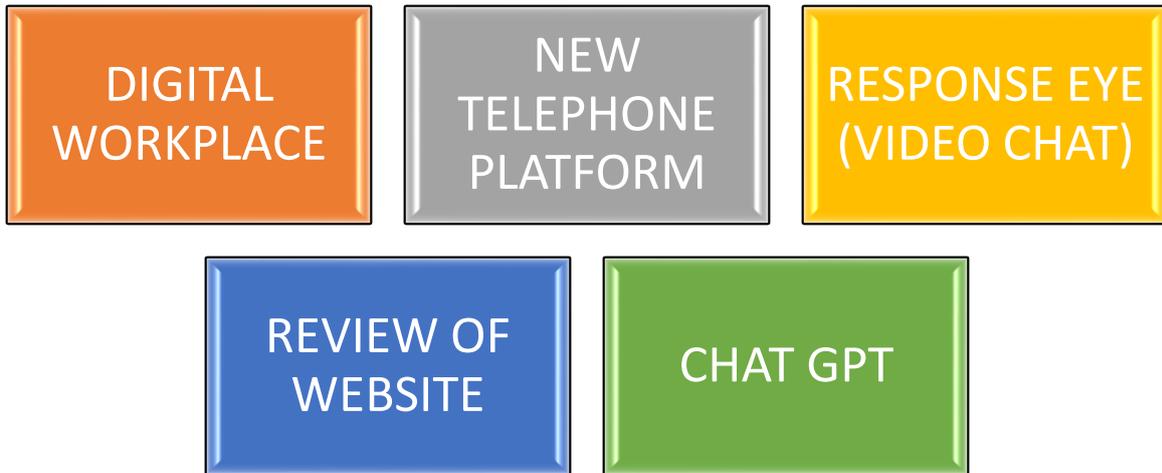

In addition to testing the robustness and overall usability of our various digital services, this will also be a way of identifying gaps and broadening the scope of services offered. This will be strongly supported by our ICT Team, who are already carrying out significant work to ensure that our staff and ICT infrastructure and systems are suitably supported and prepared to deliver our objectives.

Progress against this objective will be reported in the annual reports on the delivery of this strategy. This will clearly explain:

- **The number of services that have been digitally evaluated, including details of actions taken and changes made.**
- **The number of staff who have been digitally trained.**
- **The number of new properties that have been digitally evaluated.**

These are some of the projects we are currently delivering that support this theme. We will provide updates on these projects via the annual updates of this strategy.

DIGITAL WORKPLACE	NEW TELEPHONE PLATFORM	RESPONSE EYE (VIDEO CHAT)
REVIEW OF WEBSITE	CHAT GPT	

Theme 3: Sustainable Solutions

We want to ensure that the actions and initiatives covered by this strategy truly make a positive impact on the lives of our residents. Additionally, as a provider of social housing, we have a duty to ensure that we are investing in robust long-term solutions that provide true measurable benefits and value for money.

As technology and the needs of our customers can change so quickly, it's essential that throughout the duration of this strategy, we are communicating effectively and regularly with both stakeholders and customers so that the solutions we provide and the actions we take are achieving these goals.

OBJECTIVES

1. **We will consult closely with both our customers and staff throughout the life of this strategy to ensure that the changes and initiatives we introduce have a positive and meaningful impact on people's lives.**

2. **We will ensure that due consideration is given to both the sustainability and environmental impact of our digital services. The actions and initiatives delivered by this strategy will directly support our carbon reduction plan.**

3. **We will consider digital access in the design of any new properties or services that are implemented.**

Measures and Intended Outcomes

Wherever we have a digital service, we will put mechanisms in place to collect feedback specifically around these transactions and the customer experience. We will compare this with feedback gathered from our other communication channels. Updates for this strategy will contain the results of these consultation exercises as well as any themes or learnings that we take from this. Equally, we will be considering the environmental impact and sustainability of our digital solutions, and there is a strong link between this strategy and our carbon reduction plan. Our digital evaluation will include the use of our carbon calculator that is already used across the organization to assess the impact of our services.

These are some of the projects we are currently delivering that support this theme. We will provide updates on these projects through annual updates of this strategy:

CARBON CALCULATOR

DIGITAL FEEDBACK DASHBOARD

CUSTOMER JOURNEY MAPPING

NEW BUILD ASSESSMENT

MYSTERY SHOPPERS