Executive summary

Background

This report presents the findings of the independent evaluation and learning review of a 'digital inclusion triage' pilot delivered by four London boroughs – Barnet, Kensington and Chelsea, Southwark and Westminster – and co-ordinated by the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI).

The aim of the pilot was to test whether a triage process for digital inclusion could help councils identify digitally excluded residents when they engaged with council services and signpost them to locally available digital support.

The research objectives of the evaluation and learning review were to answer the following headline questions:

- What can the triage process tell us about local digital support needs?

- What lessons can be learned about how to effectively triage digital inclusion?

- What impact has the triage process had?

> The London Office of Technology and Innovation **(LOTI)** was established to help its members collaborate on projects that bring the best of digital and data innovation to improve public services and outcomes for Londoners.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach consisting of qualitative and quantitative analysis of three key data sources:

- **Project data on 499 residents** captured by boroughs as part of the pilot

- Data generated from **nine semi-structured interviews with practitioners**

- Data generated from a phone **questionnaire of 57 residents** who had been signposted to support

Key findings

Digital inclusion needs

- Older residents tended to be over-represented both in terms of residents who were triaged and who had a digital need, while residents aged under 45 tended to be less likely to be reached by the triage process or be digitally excluded.

- 'Developing digital skills' was the largest digital inclusion need identified during the pilot followed by 'Getting access to a digital device' and 'Support with broadband at home'.

- The need for digital skills support increased with age up to 80+, after which it remained high, while the need for help with getting access to a device or broadband connection was greater for younger age groups.

- For many residents, digital exclusion was multifaceted and often resulted from a combination of low digital skills and financial challenges that prevented access to devices or broadband at home.

- Despite high levels of need for accessing devices and broadband, very few residents were signposted to support for this. This suggests there may be a mismatch between need and existing digital support.

Implementation insights

- There was significant variation in how the triage process was delivered both across and within boroughs, reflecting the early stage of the intervention. Key differences were triage channel (in-person or phone) and resourcing approach (add-on to a frontline role or dedicated resource).

- Training helped practitioners to identify digitally excluded residents. A more standardised approach to training and support may help ensure all staff have the skills and knowledge to identify digital exclusion.

- The digital inclusion questionnaire was well designed and user friendly. It was widely reported as both easy to use and a helpful tool to identify digital needs – with only a few areas for improvement.

- There is a need to ensure that sufficient digital support capacity is available across the borough to meet the increased demand that would come from an effective digital inclusion triage process.

- The majority of residents spoken to via face-to-face channels did not want to complete the digital inclusion questionnaire.

- There is a need for digital support to help some digitally excluded residents engage with online council services, especially where face-to-face and telephone channels are being replaced with digital-only ones.

- The most common implementation challenges experiences included:
  - Lack of capacity of frontline staff to triage residents
  - Insufficient capacity or range of support available to which residents could be signposted
  - Confusion or lack of understanding for some practitioners caused by lack of training, support or resources
  - Many residents simply wanted to get support with the issue they came in about, particularly for face-to-face routes
  - Lack of engagement from some triage channels

Impact

- Nearly three in four residents triaged were digitally excluded, suggesting that a significant proportion of residents reached by the triage process experience some kind of digital exclusion.

- Models that relied solely on frontline staff to triage residents face to face in addition to their normal tasks appeared unsuccessful at triaging high numbers of residents (fewer than 20 residents were triaged by each staff member).

- Triage approaches that use phone channels to contact residents and utilise dedicated triage staff appear to be more effective.

- The triage process appears to be effective at accurately identifying residents' digital inclusion needs but there is insufficient data to be conclusive.

- Nearly three quarters of residents who were signposted to support did not receive any digital support despite over half still actively wanting help.

- Most residents who received support found it helpful with informal digital skills support being the most commonly accessed form of support.

Recommendations

A. Boroughs should consider models that use dedicated digital inclusion staff to triage digitally excluded residents.

B. Boroughs should not use triage models that rely on frontline staff to triage residents face to face in addition to their existing roles.

C. Boroughs should focus on improving the capacity of existing digital support to ensure they are able to meet the level and range of residents' digital needs.

D. Boroughs should explore other means of reaching and supporting digitally excluded residents, such as building the capacity of the local VCS.