What We Heard: Digital Equity Stakeholders Report

Understanding the digital equity issues faced by Calgarians

June 15, 2022

Phase one: one on one conversations

The Digital Equity team listened to stakeholders within our community and asked questions around the experiences of connecting online of organizations and the individuals that they serve. The insights and stories shared with us echoed the experiences that we have heard from other municipalities and gave us a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by Calgarians.

Though the focus of these conversations was around barriers, we heard a great deal about solutions that organizations and services have put in place to help bridge the digital divide faced by Calgarians both on long-term and short-term basis.

The information gathered in these conversations allowed us to identify three primary barriers faced by Calgarians, those being:

- No device or a device that does not meet users need (ex. iPhone to participate in virtual learning)
- Digital literacy skills (including digital safety)
- Internet connection - accessibility and affordability

During these conversations we also heard stories around the emotional impact the digital divide has had on those affected by it. We felt it important to highlight these comments separately from other themes as they speak directly to effect on the individual and the gravity of impact the digital divide may have. These are the effects to keep in mind when working through possible solutions.

The most common stories included:

- Feeling fearful and/or overwhelmed by technology use or interaction
- Feeling concern for safety (when online or when accessing available services)
- Feelings of isolation due to inability to connect virtually

Phase two: solutions workshops
February 2022

The City of Calgary held three brainstorming sessions focusing on potential actions that can be taken to help close the digital divide. The information gathered in previous one-on-one conversations around barriers was used to create four theme areas to generate ideas on addressing barriers during these sessions:

- Hardware/devices
- Internet connectivity
- Digital literacy
- Advocacy

During these sessions we heard many ideas around where we would like to see Calgary progress digitally, solutions to consider as the Digital Equity Strategy is being developed, and reminders of guidelines that should be followed.

These ideas were captured on virtual sticky notes and categorized during the brainstorming sessions. Boards from these sessions can be found in Appendix 1.

Out of 300+ points of data provided during these three sessions we were able to identify 19 specific actions that can be taken as a community to help us address the challenges and barriers to reaching digital parity in Calgary.

Two such actions are already underway as part of our path towards a strategy:

1. Centralize and maintain list of supports available to Calgarians and promote awareness of digital inequity and these supports. Make this available on and offline. This work is underway in conjunction with 211.

2. The City to act as coordinator and convener for community stakeholders working on digital equity and create a steering committee (coalition) to over-see strategy and delivery of solutions. This is an ongoing part of the process of building the Digital Equity Strategy.

The remaining 17 actions identified were as follows:

Free Wi-Fi - More wi-fi access in more places.

Digital Literacy Mentorship Platform - Pairing people with supports who meet them where they are at.

One Window - One stop shop for digital support that could include access to devices, affordable internet and/or skill development.

Grant Programs - Helping organizations/programs already undertaking this work to become better.

Subsidized Internet - Making it easier to get connected to affordable internet.

Recycle Municipal Devices - Get old municipal devices into the community

Telecom Advocacy - Moving forward telecommunication regulation.

Device Donation - Giving and receiving of devices made easy

Digital Literacy Workshops - Available across the city and including cyber security.

Lending Programs - Uniting and building on existing device lending

Bandwidth Sharing - Sharing costs for internet access across neighbouring organizations to improve service.

Public Service Kiosks - Revive public service kiosks across the city to make it easier to access City services.

Digital Literacy Standards - Adopt and promote digital literacy standards within Calgary.

Rights Advocacy - Moving forward access to devices and connections as a basic human right

Digital Literacy Events - One off or collection of events to promote digital literacy awareness.

Business Incentives - Providing motivation for businesses to be more digitally accessible.

Digital Service Standard Advocacy - Pushing digital service standards across government levels

Phase three: prioritizing solutions
March 30 to April 14, 2022

Stakeholders were given the opportunity to go online and prioritize the 17 actions generated in the February brainstorming sessions. The input provided in this prioritization will help to determine where we all should spend our initial energies to have the greatest impact on bridging the digital divide in Calgary.

Each action was assigned a points value based on the resources that may be required to deliver said action. Resources are inclusive of cost, complexity, and human power. Participants were allotted points to "fund" the actions they would like to see happen first. Participants were not given enough points to "fund" all actions.

Input from 45 agencies was received with over 400 data points resulting in an overwhelmingly selected top priority of Subsidized Internet.

The top five priorities were:
- Subsidized Internet
- Free Wi-Fi
- Recycling municipal devices
- Digital literacy standards
- Telecom Advocacy

These were selected by most respondents. All other priorities were selected by less than the majority. The tables in Appendix 2 show overall prioritizations followed with prioritization by resourcing requirement type.

In addition to prioritizing actions, we also asked stakeholders to tell us why they prioritized the actions they did. Not surprisingly, most responses referenced peoples need to connect to the internet. Verbatim responses can be found in Appendix 2.

Finally, we asked stakeholders to let us know how much involvement they would like to have with Digital Equity moving forward. We will continue to work with organizations that have expressed their desire to be actively involved with moving the Digital Equity Strategy forward.

Research

In addition to engaging with social impact organizations and the people they serve, the Digital Equity team has been looking at the digital divide from a research lens locally, nationally, and globally. This has helped give perspective to the actions brought forward as well as add shape to the stories heard locally.

Partnership with University of Calgary

The Digital Equity Team partnered with the University of Calgary to undergo a systematic exploration of existing research findings, policy recommendations, and practical experiences on issues associated with digital equity. This exploration included examining both formal academic papers (white papers) and digital literature (grey papers) to gather findings, policy and strategy recommendations, and individual and collective practical experiences regarding digital equity in an urban environment (resembling Calgary). Findings confirmed and reinforced what has been heard locally that the digital divide itself is a three-pronged problem of access, affordability, and digital literacy. This allows Calgary the opportunity to learn from the success and challenges of other's approaches.

Research also indicated that the overarching issues of the digital divide are embedded in pre-existing structural inequalities. The result of which is a high correlation between the dynamic nature of digital exclusion and an individual's intersectionality, socioeconomic factors, and geography. Specific populations found to be increasingly vulnerable to the digital divide are:

- Low-income individuals and families
- Older adults
- Indigenous populations
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Newcomers/new immigrants / refugees
- Persons with disabilities
- Women
- 2SLGBTQ+
- Single parents

Business perspective panel survey

The Business Perspectives panel is comprised of business leaders, including business owners, executives, managers, and decision-makers. Participants are self-selected; as such, they cannot be considered representative of the entire business population in Calgary. The focus of the digital equity survey conducted in April was on the respondent's experience with offering services online.

Key findings of note where that less than half of respondents considered the digital divide when shifting their services to online platforms. And, though restrictions have all lifted, changes made to service customers online are here to stay. Key finding details can be found in Appendix 3.

Next Steps

The Digital Equity Team is exploring several potential roles The City may have as Calgary moves towards closing the digital divide. These roles include:

- Convener/coordinator bringing together and spreading awareness of existing programs that are currently supporting individuals affected by various areas within the digital divide
- Initiating or leading services that provide direct support to those experiencing the digital divide
- Advocate across government levels and to telecommunications companies to include digital access as a fundamental human right
- Storyteller ensuring ongoing engagement in the community and weaving the thread of the importance of digital parity to citizens, private sector, and telecommunication companies; and
- Internal policy review and updates to address the root cause of the digital divide at a macro level

With pandemic restrictions now lifted, the team is working on several avenues for engaging persons with lived experience and/or those who are impacted by the digital divide. It is important to ensure that they are involved with building solutions that address the multiple factors leading to digital inequity. Because Calgary's solution cannot be singular in approach nor addressed by any one organization, the Digital Equity Team will be continuing to connect and work with those who have expressed interest in collaborating on solutions.

Together we will build a community-based approach to meet the unique needs of Calgarians.

DEVICE / HARDWARE

introduce "recycle your devices" initiatives

INTERNET CONNECTION

low cost internet broader elgiblity

internet access is similar to the public libraries

free intenet as a social right of citizenship

introduce public service kiosks in additional locations (like in libraries today)

making internet subsidy programs more accessible

LITERACY

Cybersecurity awareness training

Application training and support

Skills

Widespread offer of workshops, short training sessions on digital literacy through library and other accessible locations

Utilize students (high school and university) as digital mentors to wide spectrum of citizens (meet them where they are in their language)

have local digital literacy events

Support digital literacy by matching people with similar skills (preventing ageist concerns)

Spend as much time as possible understanding the diversity of user. Digital literacy starts from the moment you are describing a service, not just from accessing it

Data sovereignty and privacy

Develop a platform (and offline equivalent) that makes it much easier to volunteer to help those that struggle with technology

REMINDERS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Recognition that hardware and internet access are just table stakes

I think the first step is to define and estimate the number of people needing this services and then place priorities

Who owns community infrastructure?

Maintain non-digital access options for all service access, giving people the time to build digital options. staffing and access seems to erode quickly.

Frame digital access to devices and connections as preventative and cost saving, across orders of government.

share clear ways to help services measure effectiveness

get real people from communities - (not stand-ins)

test in actual conditions/usage scenarios

Support

more public good than a market commodity

Endpoint protection

COMMUNITY INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS

Include a much more diverse group of citizens in the development of solutions and services (i.e. inclusive usability testing)

Support from trained community members who have a connection to the people being served

Develop service standards for digital services and communications for all orders of government.

Community hubs for support and authentication

help services open information up to other/ integrated usage

Access through common service providers e.g. Distress Centre, immigrant services, etc.

Multi-language and other cultural support

business incentives for accessibility / inclusion

social platforms that don't require membership.

have neighbourhood bandwidth sharing locations (i.e digital school houses/ day care")

let people mix & match services their own ways (i.e. ITTT)

Feb 9, 2022

DEVICE / HARDWARE

devices are not updated	any gov't training program provides students with devices
It is hard right now, but increased hardware availability Quality hardware	increased devices in lending libraries so many donations but devices are not usable

LITERACY

Debrief with Colleagues on Tech Tips

Encourage youth to help mentor

intergenerational programming

offer more classes on 'how to'

Culturally sensitive technical support that could be based in community or accessed remotely

courses offered as part of AB works, schools, ESL

understand youth needs - assumption is they know everything, but not always

help hotline

★ Informal Logic Course(s)

helpline for assistance navigating devices - through 311 maybe

take advantage of Cyber seniors

assumptions about clients abilities

worry about internet scams and are relcutant to try new porgrms

for older adults, training to use is needed, particularly for those who did not sue these devices when they were working

clear instructions when online- i.e. clear messages on how to access

Increased awareness of 'non-technical' Coding Programs

TRUST

INTERNET CONNECTION

Subsidized Internet	unstable or unreliable internet	subsidized internet plans for low-income families
increase number of access points	provide internet as a basic human right	
free public wifi across the city	making internet subsidy programs more accessible	

THOUGHTFUL REMINDERS

tie the digital equity conversation to all of the other equity issues being pursued by the City

create a community team and strategy with roles about who can do what

keep it simple- Like a car- you don't have to know how it works

HAL 9000

More options for people to connect with the City of Calgary. People with diabilities have challenges in digitizations.

COMMUNITY INTEGRATED IDEAS

pilot opportunities with Calgary Housing or other partner	support small businesses' digital equity needs	Solutions led by ppl with lived experience
Integrate D.E. conversation with literacy across the lifespan policies	Ensure barrier free access to programs (no means testing)	Multi-language/ plain language guides
volunteer programs	Promote the tools people can use.	Grant programs for organizations serving low income
ask seniors groups about their needs	Ensuring an EDI+ lens on digital equity policies	Context Setting: I always am motivated when I hear how 'low tech' people have been able to create high-tech solutions

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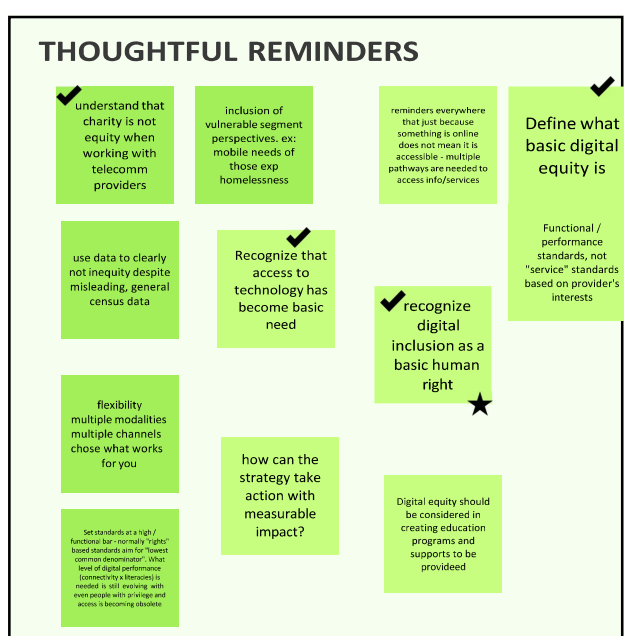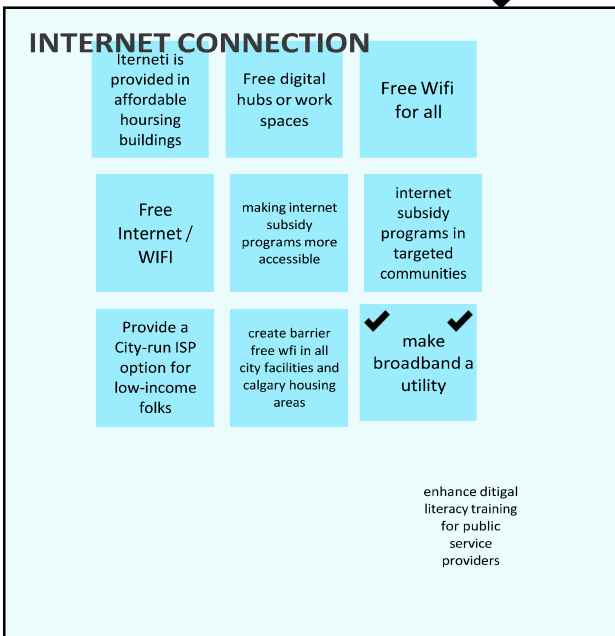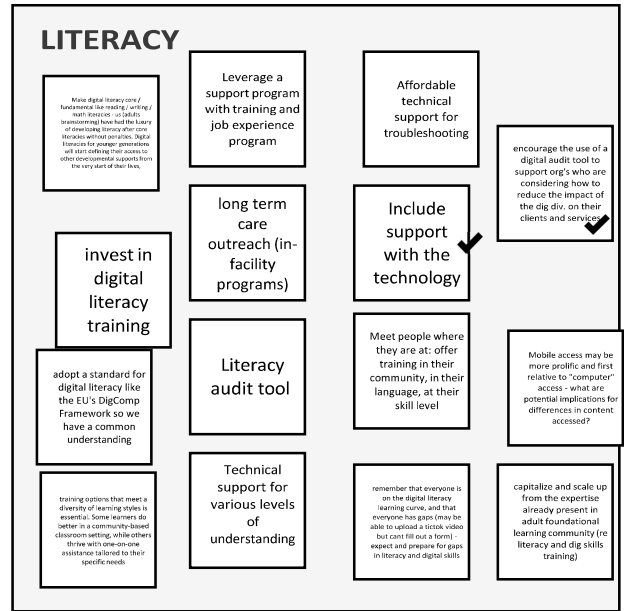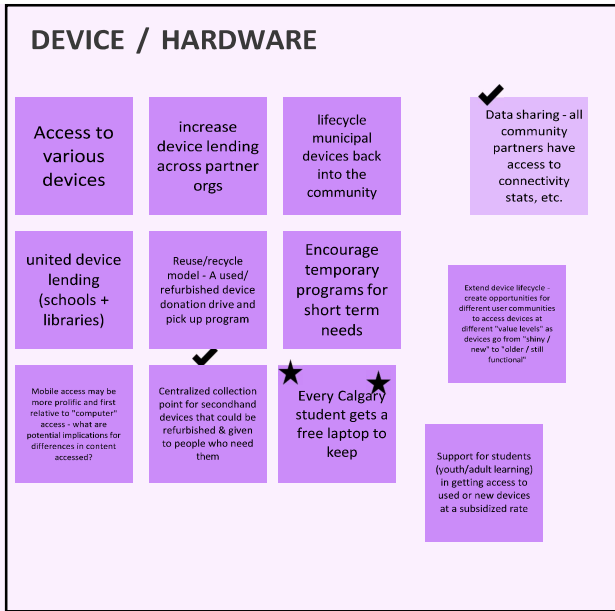|		
need maintence funds	Continuos updateing of our website.	How do you keep current and sustainable
advocacy to provincial government for funding/programs	Put resources into this area	market place education to raise awareness among users
ensuring accessible websites and web content conform to WCAG 3.0		

Feb 10, 2022

DEVICE / HARDWARE

- Access to various devices
- increase device lending across partner orgs
- lifecycle municipal devices back into the community
- ✔ Data sharing - all community partners have access to connectivity stats, etc.

- united device lending (schools + libraries)
- Reuse/recycle model - A used/ refurbished device donation drive and pick up program
- Encourage temporary programs for short term needs

Extend device lifecycle - create opportunities for different user communities to access devices at different "value levels" as devices go from "shiny / new" to "older / still functional"

- Mobile access may be more prolific and first relative to "computer" access - what are potential implications for differences in content accessed?
- ✔ Centralized collection point for secondhand devices that could be refurbished & given to people who need them
- ★ Every Calgary student gets a free laptop to keep ★

Support for students (youth/adult learning) in getting access to used or new devices at a subsidized rate

LITERACY

Make digital literacy core / fundamental like reading / writing / math literacies - us (adults brainstorming) have had the luxury of developing literacy after core literacies without penalties. Digital literacies for younger generations will start defining their access to other developmental supports from the very start of their lives.

- Leverage a support program with training and job experience program
- Affordable technical support for troubleshooting
- encourage the use of a digital audit tool to support org's who are considering how to reduce the impact of the dig div. on their clients and services ✔

- invest in digital literacy training
- long term care outreach (in-facility programs)
- ✔ Include support with the technology

- adopt a standard for digital literacy like the EU's DigComp Framework so we have a common understanding
- Literacy audit tool
- Meet people where they are at: offer training in their community, in their language, at their skill level
- Mobile access may be more prolific and first relative to "computer" access - what are potential implications for differences in content accessed?

- Technical support for various levels of understanding

- training options that meet a diversity of learning styles is essential. Some learners do better in a community-based classroom setting, while others thrive with one-on-one assistance tailored to their specific needs
- remember that everyone is on the digital literacy learning curve, and that everyone has gaps (may be able to upload a tictok video but cant fill out a form) - expect and prepare for gaps in literacy and digital skills
- capitalize and scale up from the expertise already present in adult foundational learning community (re literacy and dig skills training)

✔

INTERNET CONNECTION

- Iterneti is provided in affordable hoursing buildings
- Free digital hubs or work spaces
- Free Wifi for all

- Free Internet / WIFI
- making internet subsidy programs more accessible
- internet subsidy programs in targeted communities

- Provide a City-run ISP option for low-income folks
- create barrier free wfi in all city facilities and calgary housing areas
- ✔ make broadband a utility ✔

enhance ditigal literacy training for public service providers

THOUGHTFUL REMINDERS

- ✔ understand that charity is not equity when working with telecomm providers
- inclusion of vulnerable segment perspectives. ex: mobile needs of those exp homelessness
- reminders everywhere that just because something is online does not mean it is accessible - multiple pathways are needed to access info/services
- ✔ Define what basic digital equity is

  Functional / performance standards, not "service" standards based on provider's interests

- use data to clearly not inequity despite misleading, general census data
- ✔ Recognize that access to technology has become basic need
- ✔ recognize digital inclusion as a basic human right ★

- flexibility multiple modalities multiple channels chose what works for you
- how can the strategy take action with measurable impact?
- Digital equity should be considered in creating education programs and supports to be provideed

- Set standards at a high / functional bar - normally "rights" based standards aim for "lowest common denominator". What level of digital performance (connectivity x literacies) is needed is still evolving with even people with privilege and access is becoming obsolete

COMMUNITY INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS

- public awareness on what digital inequity is
- united advocacy with telecom providers
- Provide guidelines for eligibility

- Public access to sites like rec facilities for WIFI or even devices
- ✔ creation of Calgary coalition to address DE
- unique outreach and supports for nearby Indigenous communities
- coordinate data with school boards

- Map the digital equity services in Calgary and make that easily accessible online and off
- Working with local internet service providers (e.g. Moby) for a subsidized internet service. Can be delivered in conjunction with Basic need funds & programs
- Personalized roadmap leading an individual through various services
- Tech soup concept for individuals and families

- build from what is already working - understand what are communities area already doing or using and align with that.
- Centralize and maintain list of supports (in progress)
- ✔ Clearer channels of communication with 211 about available service to support community knowledge about available services & programs

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- City staff with lived experience integrate understanding of barriers within their daily work. Focus on accessibility in all work units, not just folks 'assigned' to look at the issue. (we're starting to do that, but can always do better)
- ✔ mobile-first web design always!
- ✔ The library is already lending laptops - support this with more funding

- ✔ The City needs to be a convener for all the community partners working in this space
- Better regulation to support competition in mobility market space - plans are expensive
- how can we understand how many kids are accessing school via mobile device?

- How does this relate to provincial priorities? Ext of rural work / ideas?

Appendix 2 – solution prioritization

Digital Equity Strategy: What do you prioritize?

Solution	Value
Subsidized Internet	33
Free Wi-Fi	26
Recycle Municipal Devices	24
Digital Literacy Standards	23
Telecom Advocacy	21
Digital Literacy Mentorship Platform	20
Device Donation	19
Rights Advocacy	19
Digital Literacy Events	19
One Window	16
Digital Literacy Workshops	16
Business Incentives	14
Lending Programs	11
Digital Service Standard Advocacy	10
Grant Programs	10
Bandwidth Sharing	8
Public Service Kiosks	3

Digital Equity Strategy: What do you prioritize?

Highest Cost/Effort
- Free Wi-Fi — 26
- Digital Literacy Mentorship Platform — 20
- One Window — 16
- Grant Programs — 10

Medium Cost/Effort
- Subsidized Internet — 33
- Recycle Municipal Devices — 24
- Telecom Advocacy — 21
- Device Donation — 19
- Digital Literacy Workshops — 16
- Lending Programs — 11
- Bandwidth Sharing — 8
- Public Service Kiosks — 3

Lowest Cost/Effort
- Digital Literacy Standards — 23
- Rights Advocacy — 19
- Digital Literacy Events — 19
- Business Incentives — 14
- Digital Service Standard Advocacy — 10

Tell us why – verbatim responses

- Definitely some great ideas and opportunities. I appreciate the ideas that are really giving people the access to the internet and devices, which during the pandemic we saw was a huge gap in both the schools and workplaces.
- I chose larger, more wrap-around solutions. I also diversified by choices to reflect needs in accessing internet, devices and knowledge/digital literacy. While I think that the smaller and potentially "bigger bang for your buck" options are helpful in moving this work forwards, I think that these are happening already through smaller organizations and initiatives. What would really take digital accessibility to the next level is to coordinate supports so that everyone has every piece that is necessary to access the digital world. I also chose advocacy towards regulations on telecommunications companies because this type of policy change would be the most wide reaching for the population.
- Priorities need to balance device accessibility, internet access, and capacity building for non profits to offer services digitally
- As a municipality we have a responsibility to ensure equity to services to all Calgarians. In this increasingly digital world, we need to ensure this!
- One-off events may be less effective than broad policies that are in place longer.
- I prioritized those that are more likely to be sustainable and get at the root cause.
- Free internet and subsidised internet will give more opportunity to citizen to adopt new advancement.
- See the divide amongst seniors and those who cannot afford devices/internet services. Need to advocate for fee, subsidized internet as it is becoming a basic human right. As more services and programs move online need to support people to gain access. Like the idea of mentorship program so people still have a human connection as well as learn skills to be able to better navigate their devices.
- I have prioritized the issues that create the greatest sources of marginalization. Rather than investing in one-off's that do not address why the issue exists, I believe policy change and change at macro levels is essential to addressing barriers to digital literacy.
- Digital access is a fundamental right. Why not change the system that keeps some in the margins. Also, If everyone has adequate income, there will be no need to have a strategy for access to food, housing, and all other barriers. The charity model is not sustainable and over the long run it cost more.
- My priorities were chosen based on what I seem to find most challenging in my own internet use.
- Advocacy actions are important because the affordability of Internet is a major barrier for vulnerable individuals. Also, connecting individuals with technology and teaching them how to use it is also very important because many vulnerable individuals usually lack the required knowledge on how to navigate these systems. All of this overall can isolate individuals who are most often already isolated for a variety of other reasons.
- Access to the digital world (use, awareness, technology, ether) should be considered a public good as opposed to a market-based commodity; a good to support the development of the commons for collective wellbeing, inclusion and harmony.

- I feel a priority in this work should be focus on education, stewardship and citizenship among young people.
- for calgary housing company, we have clients that range in age from young to older. At each end of the spectrum, they need help in applying digitally for housing, especially during COVID. This means digital literacy and having a device with affordable internet. Once they are tenants, we have a digital portal for asking for maintenance, building announcements, etc.
- I prioritized the digital literacy aspect wherever I could because, quite frankly, given everything that's happening in our city, province, and the world at large, it's clear that not enough people have the skills or knowledge to safely and responsibly navigate what's out there.
- I believe the most significant divide is in the access to technology, be it devices or internet access. Also that this is the root or the foundation upon which the literacy and skills work can be built. Even though the "access to technology" divide, in my opinion, affects fewer individuals, proceeding without addressing it would leave those individuals even further behind.
- I think there are many aspects that contribute to a healthier digital equity ecosystem in Calgary. One solution will not fix the problem, so I chose the solutions that I thought would have the most direct impact and support for individuals.
- Mentors for example can give high school/college students to demonstrate their skills and earn volunteer points for doing that. Collecting and redistributing refurbished items would save money. I am looking for the most economical method to accomplish the greatest transformations.

Appendix 3 – Business perspective panel survey results

Among respondents, a minority report clients/customers having had challenges contacting their business or using their online services in the past year and fewer than one-half consider the impacts of digital gaps when planning their online services.

- One-in-five respondents (21%) say their clients/customers had challenges contacting their business or using their online services in the past year.

- Challenges included lack of access to the Internet, knowledge of how to access the Internet, difficulty navigating the online services, language barriers, and inability to use the online services due to a disability.

- Fewer than one-half (38%) consider the impacts of digital gaps when planning their online services.

There is a lack of consensus among respondents about whether The City should be working with businesses to help address digital gaps.

- When asked if The City should be working with businesses to address digital gaps, three-in-ten respondents (29%) say "yes," 43% say "no," 13% think "it depends," and 16% "don't know."

- Suggestions for how The City could help businesses to address digital gaps include providing training/education and/or advice about digital gaps and how to address them and provide funding.

Among the sizeable minority of respondents who changed the way they deliver online services due to the COVID-19 pandemic and/or related restrictions, most plan to continue with the changes now that restrictions have been lifted.

- Fewer than one-half (43%) of respondents say the pandemic and/or restrictions changed the way they deliver online services.

- Among those who changed the way they deliver services, the most common changes were offering delivery services they didn't have prior to the pandemic (38%), optimizing their website for smartphones/to be mobile-friendly (38%), changing their website ordering and/or payment processes (33%), and adopting a new online sales platform (29%).

- Most (88%) of those who say their business changed the way they deliver online services plan to continue with the changes they made even though pandemic restrictions have been lifted.