A picture containing logo, company name

Description automatically generated**Digital CONNECT**

background information

**Background to shmu**

Station House Media Unit (shmu) is one of the core cultural organisations in North East Scotland and is at the forefront of community media development in Scotland, supporting residents in the seven regeneration areas of Aberdeen in radio and video production, traditional and on-line publications, music production and digital inclusion. The organisation also supports other disadvantaged communities, both geographic and communities of interest, including an employability and training arm and a programme for offenders, both pre and post-release.

Established as a charity in 2003, with a turnover of £1m in 2020-21 and with 25 members of staff, shmu has a proven track record of securing, successfully managing and delivering programmes, service level agreements, contracts and grant-funded initiatives.

Successful initiatives have made the organisation a nationally recognised centre of excellence and created models of good practice in youth work; community development; digital inclusion; literacy and numeracy; community capacity building; personal and community development; employability skills; community justice, and the curriculum for excellence.

In March 2019, the £1.5m redevelopment of Station House Media Unit, with support from the Scottish Government Regeneration Capital Fund, was completed. This fantastic new purpose-built facility in the heart of the regeneration areas of Aberdeen includes a TV Studio, 2 new radio studios a training space and new office space.

Unfortunately for the last year, the building has largely sat empty due to the Covid-19 restrictions, however over this period, the organisation has grown from strength to strength, with a 50% increase in our projected turnover in the current financial year (from £1m to £1.5m). One area which has seen considerable growth is Digital, with the organisation playing a lead role in the Digital Inclusion strategies of both Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire local authorities.

**Digital Inclusion in Scotland**

The periods of lockdown have shown the importance of being digitally connected in supporting our personal and community wellbeing. These days, everything is online; from the ability to search for health information, applying for jobs, purchasing essential goods, remaining in contact with family and friends or performing work tasks, having access to the right technology has been a lifeline for Scottish people practicing social distancing.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published ‘[A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world](https://www.gov.scot/publications/a-changing-nation-how-scotland-will-thrive-in-a-digital-world/pages/summary/)’, a strategy which sets out the measures which will ensure Scotland will fulfil its potential in a constantly evolving digital world. It makes a commitment to ensuring that Scotland becomes a fully digitally inclusive nation in which the benefits of technology are available to all. It commits to ensure everyone can access services and that moving services online does not exclude the least advantaged in our society, and will do this by providing access to the connectivity, equipment and digital skills training to those in need.

**Digital Inclusion in Aberdeenshire**

The pandemic has shone a light on the fact that digital exclusion remains a significant issue. The temporary withdrawal of face-to-face services and the closure of many public buildings has added a further layer of disadvantage to many individuals and families who may already be struggling with limited opportunities, social exclusion and digital exclusion.

People may be digitally excluded for multiple reasons, including not having access to the required infrastructure and/or devices, lack of skills, or lack of motivation to use technology. The main factors that influence the digital divide include age, region, socioeconomic status and whether a person has a disability.

The impact of everything moving online, including vital services, has highlighted the digital divide and has resulted in an increase in inequalities.

*Strategic links in Aberdeenshire*

Aberdeenshire Council, Skills Development Scotland and Health & Social Care Partnership have all developed, or are in the process of developing, digital strategies to reduce the digital divide felt by communities and social economic groups.

Regeneration strategies and town centre plans all identify digital access and skills to be key in developing employability opportunities and supporting the local economy.

The Tackling Poverty & Inequalities Group was set up by Aberdeenshire’s Community Planning Partnership to coordinate strategic development across partners. The partnership groups that feed into the Tackling Poverty & Inequalities Group consist of delivery partners across Aberdeenshire. One of these groups is the Aberdeenshire Employability Partnership, who have made digital inclusion a priority area for the future and have commissioned the Digital CONNECT programme through its Young Person’s Guarantee Fund.

**Employment CONNECT**

The Aberdeenshire Employability Partnership (Aberdeenshire’s LEP) is branded as Employment Connect. Its mission is to provide a range of employment services and opportunities for people living throughout Aberdeenshire to ensure they can enter, sustain and progress in the labour market. The vision is to provide a joined up approach to providing a range of employment services and opportunities for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and individuals living in both urban and rural areas. To enable individuals to enter, sustain and progress in the labour market.

It does this by working in partnership with those in the public, private and third sector to; help individuals enter employment and ensure Aberdeenshire has a workforce equipped with the necessary skills employers require; ensure that Aberdeenshire’s workforce is equipped with the necessary skills that employers have said they require; and by creating a one stop resource link to help get people into work.

**The Young Person’s Guarantee**

Officially launched on 5th November 2020, The Young Person’s Guarantee (YPG) is a commitment to Scotland’s young people.  The Guarantee is not a new programme, but it provides additional investment to build on successful activity happening locally and nationally.  The Youth Guarantee is the over-arching pledge that will sit above all programmes for young people, and many organisations, including Local Authorities and Partners, will play their part in helping to make it a reality.

The Guarantee is about connecting young people to appropriate opportunities.  All unemployed 16 – 24 year olds in Aberdeenshire will be given the opportunity to access support to help them into work, to go to university or college, to take up an apprenticeship, take part in training or work experience, or take part in a formal volunteering programme.

Within Aberdeenshire a wide range of Providers have come together to offer a wide range of support to Young People including the commissioning of Digital CONNECT

**Digital CONNECT**

Managed and delivered by shmu, Digital CONNECT is a pilot Digital Inclusion project, targeting those who have limited or no access to the Internet, digital devices and the digital skills they require to make the successful transition into sustained employment.

The programme will inform and populate Aberdeenshire’s evolving Digital Inclusion Strategy, by delivering a needs-led operational programme of support and training focused on developing the employability skills of young people in Aberdeenshire and assisting those with barriers to digital engagement.

Digital CONNECT will work with a range of partners and stakeholders to put in place a series of digital interventions that will provide digital connectivity, provide access to digital kit, and develop and enhance digital skills.

Partners will be Aberdeenshire wide and include those involved  in the Digital Inclusion and Tackling Poverty workstreams. We will establish a Digital CONNECT subgroup, which will comprise of representatives of the key partners of Employment CONNECT and the Financial Inclusion Partnership. This subgroup will be chaired by shmu’s CEO and supported by the Digital CONNECT Coordinator and the DC Team.

The first phase of this project will be to work with Aberdeenshire’s Tackling Poverty workstream, alongside the Employment CONNECT LEP to identify the key Digital Inclusion employability priorities across the local authority.

This initial scoping will identify the priority for the pilot programme and ensure that the work is embedded within the developing Digital Inclusion Strategy, while meeting the needs of service users and partners across the local authority.  This could lead to a range of targeted interventions in specific geographic areas, or could focus on specific communities of interest, or could be packages of support offered across the local authority area.

Although the specific individuals who will benefit from this project have yet to be identified, it is highly likely that they are amongst the most vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals who live in Aberdeenshire. Our target groups are 16-25 year olds who are most at risk of digital exclusion; this will become more clearly defined during the scoping exercise in the first phase of the project. By working with these individuals to improved digital access and skills these young people will become more ‘connected’ both digitally and in real terms as they will have increased direct access to the services that the rest of the population takes for granted, while developing the confidence and skills to fully benefit from those connections.

The key outcomes for this project will be

* Increased participation by young people in design of services
* Increased access to online employability support service and opportunities
* Increased access to appropriate digital devices
* Improved digital skills (accredited and non-accredited)

Secondary outcomes will include;

* Increased educational/learning opportunities through direct access to on-line materials and courses
* Increased access to online employability advice & opportunities
* Increased access to video/audio communication platforms
* Increased access to online applications related to Universal Credit/welfare services
* Increased digital literacy
* Increased access to online knowledge banks to optimise lifelong learning potential
* Increased community engagement and active citizenship
* Smarter remote/home working

Digital CONNECT will do this by focussing on three main workstreams

* Digital access – infrastructure and kit
* Digital access – affordability
* Digital confidence – developing skills and opportunities

**Digital CONNECT Team**

*Digital CONNECT Coordinator*

The Digital CONNECT programme will be led by the Digital CONNECT Coordinator. The DC Coordinator will be responsible for developing an overall plan for the Digital Connect initiative, ensuring that it links overtly to the emerging strategy for Digital Inclusion in Aberdeenshire. The first phase of this project will be to work with partners , including engagement young people from the target group, to identify the key Digital Inclusion employability priorities across the local authority.   The postholder will lead the implementation of the Digital Connect project, working closely with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that there is a mutual understanding of the Digital Connect project and an effective collaborative approach to its delivery. The postholder will also be responsible for reporting on the project, providing support to the Digital CONNECT Sub Group of Employment CONNECT and will also provide line-management support to the Digital Connect Development Worker and administrative support team.

*Digital CONNECT Development Worker*

The Digital CONNECT Development Worker will support the operational elements of the Digital Connect initiative. The postholder will build and disseminate a catalogue of digital resources and training materials that will be made available to all Employment CONNECT partners, and through the Digital CONNECT pages on the Employment CONNECT website, which they will populate. They will work with partners to identify and train a team of Digital Champions who will provide digital skills support to service users across the local authority area. The postholder will contribute to the sustainability of the initiative by working with the Coordinator to gather evidence, evaluation and case studies to show the value and impact of the work.

*Digital CONNECT Administration Team*

The Digital CONNECT initiative will be supported by two Administrators who will be recruited through the Scottish Government’s Kickstart scheme.

**Future**

We recognise that the Digital Inclusion challenges in Aberdeenshire will not be resolved in one year through this pilot project, however we are confident that by gathering evidence through evaluation, case studies and reports, we will show the value and impact of the Digital CONNECT programme, which will make a strong case for further resources to continue this vital area of work.

We expect that the remit of Digital CONNECT will grow beyond the focus on those under that age of 25 in phase 1 to supporting a broader digital inclusion agenda across the remit of the wider Employment CONNECT partnership and beyond. It is envisioned that phase 2 resources will be secured through mainstream provision, however in the short to medium term YPG funding will continue to be used to help embed these practices and provision throughout Aberdeenshire.