

# Digital Strategy 2025 - 2029

Report of the Democracy and Governance Portfolio Holder

## Recommended:

**That the Digital Strategy, attached as an Annex to the report, be approved.**

### SUMMARY:

- This report sets out the proposed new digital strategy which will guide the Council's approach to the use of new technologies and reflects and responds to the changing needs of our residents and communities.
- Subject to approval of the strategy, a digital transformation programme of work will be established to enable delivery, drawing upon skills from across the Council. This will be underpinned by an action plan, which will set out the individual projects to be commissioned and the resources required to enable delivery.

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council's digital strategy sets out the aims and objectives around the use of digital technology. It also sets out the strategic approach to developing our digital skills to support the services we provide for our communities.
- 1.2 The current digital strategy was published in January 2020 and has now expired. The next digital strategy needs to reflect and respond to the changing needs of our residents and communities and address the organisational skills and capacity to deliver against these.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to outline the new digital strategy and the proposed areas of focus, priorities and outcomes. The strategy sets out a direction of travel and if approved, a detailed programme of work with associated resources required to deliver against this strategy will be prepared with updates on progress reported to Councillors.
- 1.4 The digital strategy is included as an Annex to this report.

## 2 Background

- 2.1 The Council's previous digital strategies ran from 2016 – 2019 and 2020 – 2023. They supported digital development to our online services and changes to the way we work when delivering services for our communities within a digital context. The current strategy was published in January 2020 and set out ambitions and plans to meet the following priorities.

- A user centred approach to service design
- Building our digital capacity
- Collaboration and partnership working
- Technology enabled not led

2.2 Projects completed during this time have included:

- Enhanced and additional online services via the My Test Valley application, expanding the number of self-serve processes available, enabling our communities to access to services how and when they want. An example is the garden waste service, with the system managing over 20,000 subscriptions and the renewal process.
- Introduction of digital newsletters, with 26,000 subscribers across six topics
- Enabling hybrid/working through technology such as laptops and MS Teams facilities

2.3 In developing the new digital strategy, officers have undertaken internal consultation, sought advice from a third party, and have reviewed the approach of other local authorities. This evidence-led approach will help to ensure the new digital strategy is realistic but ambitious and will achieve the desired outcomes against our corporate plan. The following principles have been established which have guided the development and focus of the new digital strategy:

- The importance of engagement with those who use and deliver services
- Digital innovation should be reflective of and be grounded in our corporate aims and objectives, with a clear line of sight to our corporate priorities
- Avoid a list of latest trends, focus on what we want to achieve and is achievable
- The strategy should be accompanied by a programme plan, demonstrating how we are going to deliver against the strategy with expected benefits identified.

2.4 Based on learning from service user feedback, Councillors and the partners that we work with, there is an ever-increasing expectation and need to move forward with digital innovation. This will enable the Council to meet current digital standards and be an organisation with the skills and capacity to provide excellent digital services for our communities and workforce.

2.5 The Local Government Association recently carried out a corporate peer challenge with the Council. The draft digital strategy was reviewed as part of that process. Whilst we await the final report to be published, we are aware from the initial feedback that the peer team reflected on the strategic aims and objectives and agreed with them in principle, citing them as a good starting position and emphasising the need to now move forward with implementation, at pace.

2.6 As a Council that continually strives to deliver high quality inclusive services that meets our community's needs, it is important to take a balanced and proportionate approach to digital that uses the appropriate tools which in some cases will be digital, and in others it will be something different. We recognise there is room for improvement in both our digital services and skills and this in part sets the priorities and objectives for the next four years.

### **3 Digital Strategy**

3.1 The new digital strategy has been developed using an evidence-led approach through engagement. To do this we have explored what digital means from the viewpoint of 3 types of 'users':

- Our residents/customers
- Our workforce and Councillors
- Our partners and wider communities

3.2 The following priorities form the basis of the new strategy. Further detail and expected outcomes are contained within the strategy itself which is attached as an annex to this report:

#### **3.2.1 Resident/customer centric approach to digital services: Provide easy and fit for purpose digital access to our services and information.**

- Website and digital services - Building connections, working with our communities and partners to gather feedback to improve our website and access to our digital services. Creating digital access to all our services, enabling customers and residents to access our services at a time convenient to them. Re shaping our website and reviewing our online services platform, currently My Council Services.
- Review of digital services, developed from the service-user point of view. Recognise that providing a service rarely starts and finishes in one transaction and involves multiple services. This should be as streamlined as possible. A commitment to reviewing services, end to end, focussed on the service-user journey. Utilise automation and new technology when appropriate. For example, this includes investment in a new waste management system, streamlining processes such as reporting a missed bin to the report being received by an operative in real time within the cab of the vehicle.
- Digital communication channels to enable people to communicate with the Council in a variety of ways, providing options to complement existing channels such as an online chat or assistant. A review of the telephony system and consideration of digital engagement platforms to assist with consultations and keep communities informed on news, topics and events that are of interest to them.

### 3.2.2 Digitally enabled workforce: Enabling our staff to work in a modern and efficient way, to respond to our communities needs and provide high quality services.

- Communication & collaboration - Build relationships and connections with our communities, partners and other organisations using technology, utilising the Microsoft 365 platform and leveraging its capabilities wherever possible. Embed the use of MS Teams but also move towards SharePoint Online which will allow us to share information securely, enabling collaboration beyond our own internal boundaries.
- Agile and hybrid working facilities - Investment into the IT infrastructure and hardware to support officers and Councillors to work where and how they need to. Enhancement of hybrid meeting facilities, utilising these to take advantage of virtual training sessions, webinars and partner meetings, allowing people to come together to collaborate whilst in some cases saving significant travelling time and expenses.
- Focus on skills, training and knowledge - Provide guidance and training on systems, fully utilising and maximising the investment in existing systems. Place an emphasis on user adoption and training when implementing new systems or ways of working. Ensure officers and Councillors are informed on changes in technology and best practices through workshops and engagement sessions.
- Document management and information sharing practices - Digitisation of records where possible, following best practice document management principles, enabling access to this data from any location. Implementation of tools and technology to effectively store and manage documents, applying document retention policies automatically.

### 3.2.3 Effective and responsible use of data

- Collection of data – As an organisation we are accountable for the data we collect and have a responsibility to only ask for data which is relevant and needed. Review the personal information collected via online services and the facility to create an account with us. Respect service users personal data and consider this when redesigning any processes.
- Storage and maintenance – Review the storage of data, identifying opportunities to bring together and share information across services to better understand service user needs. Move to modern document management systems with automated management tools. Maximise the use of facilities in core back office existing systems such as Idox for Planning or NEC document management for Revenues and Benefits.
- Data integrity and access - Review the security and access to data, making sure it is secure but does not hinder appropriate data sharing and collaborative working. Move to a position where sharing of data can be permitted and regulated using policies, including with people outside of the organisation. Create SharePoint sites which can be shared with Councillors and external organisations. Make changes to the way we store, manage and secure data, enabling us to harness tools to interrogate data and gather insights to inform future service design.

### 3.2.4 **Digital inclusion and accessibility: Support our communities and partners with digital skills and enable digital access to services**

- Digital skills, help and support – promoting digital inclusion by supporting communities to access wider digital services. Engage with Councillors, partners, and local businesses to find out how we can support and promote the skills training and development they offer.
- Access to hardware - Clarify the options already available to communities to access the internet outside of their own homes. Signpost established public locations where people can go, including Council buildings. Explore the grants and funding available to provide equipment to schools and other groups, offering surplus Council equipment to community groups before disposal.
- Accessibility - Work to understand what accessibility truly means when designing and providing services. Carry out an audit on existing systems to evaluate their accessibility and put in place improvements where needed. Raise awareness about the importance of digital accessibility, working with organisations and community groups to get feedback and facilitate continuous service improvement.

## **4 Delivery against the strategy**

- 4.1 A digital transformation programme of work will be established to enable delivery, drawing upon skills from across the Council. This will be underpinned by an action plan, which will set out clearly the individual projects to be commissioned with the associated resources and budgetary implications required to enable delivery.
- 4.2 There will inevitably be changes needed to some of our current systems, technology and processes to realise the ambitions of the strategy. To understand the timeline and opportunities to do this, we will review at an early stage of the programme some of the major contracts and systems due to expire within the next 2 – 3 years. Our telephony system, online digital services and financials system will be prioritised and procurement commenced within the next 12 months.
- 4.3 Running in parallel with existing system reviews, the programme will be looking to deliver improvement projects to meet our digital ambitions such as SharePoint Online (document management), an intranet site for Councillors and other aspects of Microsoft 365. It is anticipated that these will form the first phase of projects under the programme, to be delivered within the first 12 months.

## **5 Corporate Objectives and Priorities**

- 5.1 The Corporate Plan, *A place for everyone – supporting our communities to thrive*, gives a clear focus and commitment to just that, recognising the differences within our communities and the different approaches that might be needed to support them all to thrive.
- 5.2 The Digital Strategy reflects this approach and will directly contribute to our corporate priorities with a particular focus on connection, inclusion and sustainability.

### **5.3 Consultations/Communications**

- 5.4 The Digital Strategy has been developed in an evidence-led way engaging with service-users, officers and Councillors.
- 5.5 Initial engagement with service-users was undertaken as part of a deliberative focus group in 2024 which explored how people like to communicate and access information from the Council. More detailed and specific engagement work will be undertaken as part of the implementation of the digital strategy, as there is a commitment to adopt a more user-led approach to the design of digital services.
- 5.6 Engagement with officers from across the Council was undertaken via a series of workshops in 2024. Exploring the role of digital in the context of the way they work and deliver services, to identify future opportunities for transformation. This also provided officers with an opportunity to reflect on insight gained from feedback received by service users, through mechanisms such as surveys, complaints and compliments.
- 5.7 The outcomes of the communications review, undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2023 identified a number of areas where the Council could improve its digital offer which has informed the development of the digital strategy.
- 5.8 The draft digital strategy was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 November 2024. A report of the Head of Strategy and Innovation recommended that (1) the draft Digital Strategy is noted and endorsed and (2) that the draft Digital Strategy be recommended to Cabinet. The Committee recognised the relevance and focus of the proposed priorities set out in the strategy. The Committee commented however, that they would like to see the action plan, setting out specific projects, timelines and resources at the earliest opportunity in order to gain a fuller understanding of how the strategy will deliver over the coming years.
- 5.9 On being moved and put to the vote, the recommendations that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee note, endorse and recommend the draft Digital Strategy to Cabinet fell. It was confirmed to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that their feedback on the draft Digital Strategy would be shared with Cabinet. A copy of the minute of the item is attached to this report at Annex 2.

## **6 Resource implications**

- 6.1 Approval of the strategy itself does not result in any direct resource implications at this stage.
- 6.2 Subject to approval of the strategy, work will be undertaken by officers in early 2025 to establish a detailed programme of work which will include an assessment of resources and investment required to deliver the projects. Any resource and budgetary implications will be considered by the appropriate decision-making body.

## 7 Equality Issues

- 7.1 Consideration has been given to any equality issues at this stage and no issues have been identified with the digital strategy itself. However, individual equality impact assessments will be created and completed for each project commissioned under the programme to ensure any equality issues are considered and factored into decisions which affect the way we deliver services aligned with our duties under the Equality Act and our Corporate Equality Objectives.

## 8 Risk Management

- 8.1 An evaluation of the risks indicates that the existing controls in place mean that no significant risks have been identified at this time.
- 8.2 An ongoing assessment of risk will be undertaken for each of the projects that form the programme of work for the digital strategy.

## 9 Legal Implications

- 9.1 There are no legal implications resulting from this report.

## 10 Conclusion

- 10.1 The digital strategy will guide the Council's approach to the use of new technologies and reflects and responds to the changing needs of our residents and communities.
- 10.2 If approved, work will begin at pace to develop the underpinning programme of work to deliver against the strategy and the Council's strategic digital priorities. Further details on the programme plan, resources required, and progress made will be provided over the next three months.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	2	File Ref:	N/A
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Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	15 January 2025