

Digital Strategy 2025 - 2029

Introduction

Our corporate plan, *A place for everyone – supporting our communities to thrive*, was launched in April 2023. It 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. When we start to think about what that means for us in digital terms, there are some clear areas and priorities which start to emerge. We will look at these in the context of our organisational values and behaviours to ensure our transformation journey is reflective of who we are and all we stand for.

The last Digital Strategy, focused on growing our digital potential, was launched in January 2020 with no idea of what was going to come just a few short months later. The pandemic had an unprecedented impact on people's lives, and during lockdown conditions, digital services bridged a gap and enabled some people to carry on working, attend lessons and keep in touch with the outside world. Moving forward it has had a lasting impact on the way we work and, in some cases, how our customers and communities now interact with us.

This strategy is about our organisation embracing the opportunities digital brings to change and think differently whilst building our skills and capacity, continuing to respond and adapt to our customer and community needs. We are a council that prides itself on delivering high quality services, using the best tools for the job 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 our priorities and objectives for the next four years. Delivering on these priorities and areas for growth and improvement will directly contribute to our corporate priorities. Digital is one piece of the puzzle as we strive towards delivering high quality services to all our communities and this strategy sets out how. We have brought these ambitions together into four key priorities, focusing on:

- *a customer centric approach to digital services,*
- *a digitally enabled workforce,*
- *effective and responsible use of data and*
- *digital inclusion and accessibility.*

When we think about our communities and service users and how they may access our services or want to collaborate with us in the future, we recognise that digital methods may not be everyone's first choice or be suitable in every situation. By making sure our digital services are easy to use and as straight forward as possible, we aim to provide a robust, fit for purpose option for those who do wish to interact with us in this way. This in turn will enable us to maintain face to face service channels for those that need them, delivering high quality services to all our communities in a way that respects their differences and needs as part of our commitment to inclusion.

Innovations and improvements in the context of digital will build on our organisational stability, making the most of our resources and maximising our investments, aligned with our sustainability priority. We will ensure decisions around new technologies consider our long-term plans and ambitions and are financially viable, making sure we continue to work in the most efficient ways.

A digital strategy action plan will be developed detailing specific projects which will deliver against the priorities within this strategy.

Priorities

Customer centric approach to digital services

Provide easy and fit for purpose digital access to our services and information.

Website and digital services

The ideas of building connections and being able to contribute in a meaningful way came through strongly from our communities as part of our corporate plan engagement and connection is one of our five strategic priorities. In this context, that means we will actively engage with our communities and seek feedback on the website and digital services, working collaboratively to provide regular improvements that are customer focused and make a real difference to those using them. This will be done by building on existing partnerships with relevant groups and organisations but also by creating opportunities for everyone to get involved through digital and in person engagement sessions.

Evidence shows us that our customers and residents are more likely to use our website and digital services if they are straight forward to use and they can find the information they need quickly. These services are also available 24/7 so can be used at a time convenient to them and are not tied to normal office working hours.

Our website has historically been built around our internal service structure and uses language and terms that mean something to us, not necessarily what people within our communities would look or search for. We are committed to a complete review of the website content and structure within the next 12 months, and crucially putting in place arrangements to maintain this on an ongoing basis.

Within the next 4 years we will create a digital service gateway that will allow customers to access all our services via our website. This will include the transactional services such as purchasing a garden waste subscription or applying for a discount but also other structured and helpful information such as volunteering, opportunities to get involved and give us feedback, events, and news.

Review of digital services, developed from the customers point of view

Getting something done, whether that be a request to join our garden waste scheme or make a planning application, does not usually start and end in one transaction whether that be online or via another channel such as a phone call or visit to our offices. To achieve real, significant change and improvement, we must look at the whole journey from start to finish. We will embed the concept of user centric service design within our teams and develop testing and feedback mechanisms for those who use our services.

We will create a programme of work to review our services end to end, focussed on both the customer journey and what happens in the back office. We will take a view of the entire process as one customer journey, regardless of where in the council it starts or ends. We will consider design and delivery principles aligned to the government digital service to ensure a consistent and smooth experience for residents. Service design will consider utilising automation and new technologies where appropriate as well as exploring the capabilities of systems we already have, maximising any investment already made.

Communication channels

Whilst the focus of this strategy is around digital, one of our core values is equity, diversity and inclusion and naturally digital inclusion, or indeed guarding against exclusion, is something of which we are also mindful. The work to improve our digital services and the use of other technologies will enable those that choose, or find it easier, to communicate with us in these ways. The aim is to enable fair and equal access to our services and information but also to provide this in a variety of ways which meets an individual's needs and expectations.

A key strategic project will be to review our telephony system and understand our customer expectations of this service. Consideration will be given to enhancing the offering with the addition of an artificial intelligence assistant and online chat assistant. We recognise that not everyone is comfortable speaking to us on the phone and would rather communicate online at a time and from a place which suits them. We will also investigate the opportunities and risks of expanding into other popular communication platforms, not to replace a phone call but to offer our communities the choice and convenience these additional technologies can bring. As an authority we are keen to embrace technology to enhance our services and meet our communities needs without sacrificing our high customer service standards.

We also want to use technology to encourage participation and engagement with us. We will investigate engagement platforms for consultations on your local areas, and to keep communities informed on the news, topics and events that interest them. Seeking views and enabling our communities to contribute in a variety of different and inclusive ways is another one of our strategic priorities which runs through all the work we do. Digital has a very practical part to play in bringing this to life. Any digital engagement methods will be designed to working alongside the existing democratic arrangements and we continue to work closely with our Councillors to make sure we hear all voices, and everyone is included.

Digitally enabled workforce

Enabling our staff to work in an efficient way within an agile working environment, to respond to our communities needs and provide high-quality services

Communication & collaboration

We as an organisation are committed to delivering positive outcomes for our communities and that means working with a variety of partners and organisations. We recognise that building relationships and connections with people is fundamental to joined up working and will enable better informed decision making and positive outcomes for everyone. Creating connections through technology platforms is even more important as we now work in different locations and collaborate with people and organisations across the country. We will utilise technology to effectively communicate and collaborate within our teams and services, but also with our communities and wider partners. Video calling goes some way to address this but there is more to be done. We are looking to explore and maximise our investment in the Microsoft 365 platform, leveraging its capabilities wherever possible. Over the next 2 years this will see us move fully to SharePoint Online and start to harness power apps such as Power BI. We will be able to share information securely with partners and external organisations to enable that collaboration beyond our own internal boundaries, working together for our communities.

We will encourage our staff to be curious and create opportunities for innovation in this area, learning from others and thinking about how things could be done differently.

Agile and hybrid working facilities.

As we move towards more agile/hybrid ways of working, our future IT infrastructure will need to support this model by utilising laptops, corporate Wi-Fi, and associated hardware such as docking stations. We will continue to invest in these technologies to support these ways of working and look for other opportunities to extend these out into the field, for example to support our site workers and waste operatives to remain connected when carrying out their duties.

Hybrid or remote meetings are now part of everyday life and whilst we have the basic infrastructure in place to support these, further work is needed to provide these facilities across our buildings. We have seen success in implementing dedicated Microsoft Teams rooms setups and will look to expand these in the future. The use of remote or hybrid meetings has led to efficiencies such as savings in time and carbon emissions from avoided travel. Facilitating virtual training sessions and webinars, partner meetings and team meetings on MS Teams means that people can come together without having to be in one location, in some cases saving significant travelling time and expenses. This is something we continue to promote and aligns with our Climate Emergency agenda.

Focus on skills, training and knowledge

Our working environment has changed significantly within the last 4 years, including the spaces in which we operate and the equipment we now use. Moving to a more agile or hybrid arrangement has seen a shift from desktop computers to laptops and the introduction of new technologies such as Microsoft Teams. Staff and Councillors have adapted well to these changes and have embraced the opportunities that they have brought, however we now need to focus on continued support and training to improve and maintain digital knowledge and skills.

We will continue to work with staff and councillors to understand how they want to work and where technology can help them be more efficient. We will keep them updated on changes in technology and best practices through workshops and engagement sessions. Work in this area will ensure they are confident in using the tools available to them and we fully utilise new tools and technologies. Equipping staff with digital skills and creating capacity for learning and improvement will make sure we deliver the best possible service to our communities.

Document management and information sharing practices.

How we store and manage our information in a digital age is paramount and with staff working out in our communities as well as in council buildings, digital access to data is ever more important. We will look to digitise paper records where possible and work to agreed, consistent and best practice document management principles. Using appropriate tools such as automatic document retention we will adhere to the general data protection principles and only keep data where we are entitled to. We will adopt a collaborative approach to storing and sharing information to better serve our communities, truly acting as one council where at all possible. Digitising data will not only allow staff to access information from wherever they need to, but also creates opportunities for us to be more transparent and accountable, publishing more information via our website as appropriate.

Effective and responsible use of data

Collection of data

As a Council, we collect vast amounts of data about our place, our communities, and individual residents in order to provide information and services. We have a responsibility and are accountable for collecting this data in a transparent way and will only ask for information that is relevant and needed. As part of the review of our digital services, and in line with our customer centric approach to processes, we will consider what data is being collected and for what purpose and make that clear at the point of collection. We offer the ability for individuals to create an account for our online services which then allows them to track their requests and saves time logging new ones, however in some cases this is not required. We will respect your personal data and consider this when redesigning any processes.

Storage and maintenance

All the data we collect is stored and managed in a variety of ways. The vast majority is held digitally across multiple systems which at this time do not integrate, making it quite challenging for information to be reviewed, collated, and utilised. We also still have some historic paper records which need to be reviewed. Some of our systems have the capability to manage data automatically, applying retention and removing data when it is no longer needed, but others need to be maintained manually.

Over the next four years we will implement a corporate document management system using SharePoint Online and apply retention policies and version control abilities. We will review our network storage areas and rationalise these, removing old and unneeded data as appropriate and where possible move data into the SharePoint Online repository. Other back-office systems will be assessed for their retention abilities and automated improvements implemented where possible.

Data integrity and access

Access to our data is controlled using access roles and logon permissions. This keeps our data safe and prevents unauthorised access, however using strict control methods in this way can also prevent appropriate data sharing and collaborative working. We will move to a position where the sharing of data can be permitted and regulated using policies, which help to reduce the risk of data loss or a breach. In this way, sharing of data with people outside the organisation can also be done safely and securely.

Utilising the technologies we have available to us, we will create opportunities to share documents and information with partners and stakeholders and be able to work on these together. The efficiencies this will bring are significant and will enable groups of people to work collectively and focus on the delivery of services and better outcomes for our communities.

Making changes to the way we store, manage and secure data will enable us to harness tools to interrogate that data and gather insights to inform our future service design. Keeping this data concise and relevant will enable us to check our data integrity, reducing the risk of data errors or conflicting data and will ensure our analysis is as accurate as it can be. We will explore the possibilities and options around maximising the use of our data, including a focus on reporting, business intelligence and decision making. We will grow our data analytic capabilities and create interactive dashboards to show performance and identify areas for review.

Digital inclusion and accessibility

Support our communities and partners with digital skills and enable digital access to services

Digital skills, help and support

We also have a role to play in enabling our communities to build connections with others and access not just the services we provide, but other online systems for services provided by different organisations. To do this, people need access to the technology and hardware but also may need support with knowledge and skills.

There are really positive schemes already happening within the borough. As part of our community leadership role and aligned with our prosperity strategic priority, we will look to engage with Councillors, partners, and local businesses to find out how we can support and promote the skills training and development they offer. We will explore the possibility of facilitating or promoting a volunteer network to teach and support individuals with digital skills.

Access to hardware

Access to equipment will also be key and we will establish and signpost locations and facilities where people can go to access the internet via computers or tablets, which includes in our Council buildings. We will explore as part of community leadership role and aligned with our priorities of connection and inclusion, the grants

and funding available to provide equipment to schools and other groups which would benefit from this to have access in fixed locations or to operate a loan scheme.

When we have surplus equipment which is no longer used or required, we will seek to offer these to community groups before disposal.

Accessibility

We are accountable for making sure that we meet the needs of all our communities. To be fully inclusive we must consider accessibility when designing and providing our services. We will continue to put time and thought into what accessibility truly means in all contexts and work to identify any barriers to our services that currently exist. Initially, we will carry out an audit on our existing digital platforms to evaluate their accessibility and put in plans to make improvements as needed. This will include identifying gaps and areas for improvement across our websites, mobile apps, online forms, and published documents.

We will establish clear accessibility guidelines ensuring we comply with and meet the accessibility standards required of us. This means meeting the WCAG 2.2 AA accessibility standard and aiming towards, and exploring options to deliver, aspects of the WCAG 3 accessibility standards where feasible. We will then provide training and resources for staff involved in the creation of content and digital services to make sure these guidelines are adhered to. We will strive to make all digital content accessible to everyone, but this is in addition to our vital in person and place-based services, not to replace them.

Raising awareness about the importance of digital accessibility amongst staff, councillors and the wider community in an authentic and kind way is key, and we will work with organisations and community groups to get feedback on our services to facilitate continuous service improvement.

Conclusion

In summary, this strategy will support us to achieve the following outcomes:

- Improved digital access to our services, which have been designed from the user's point of view, leading to better engagement and our communities interacting with us in a way and at a time that suits them.
- A workforce which is equipped and able to utilise technology to provide high quality services across our communities, with the skills and capacity to respond to changing needs and priorities.
- Information management is defined, clear and transparent to all inside and outside of the organisation. Assurance is given to those that entrust us with their personal details, we will use data responsibly to deliver the best service we can to them.
- Our digital services are accessible to all. They are designed to be inclusive and meet everyone's needs, access to equipment is provided for those that need it, providing a fair and equal access to our services.

The priorities and ambitions outlined in this strategy have been considered in the context of our corporate plan priorities and as a result of feedback and engagement with both staff and our communities. They seek to be ambitious but realistic, building on a solid digital foundation whilst pursuing different technologies and the opportunities they bring. They will help us to deliver high quality services across all communities by enhancing our services and responding to changing customer needs. They reflect a more agile operating model, which means we can and will respond to any planned and more importantly unplanned events and changes in service demand, supporting all our communities to thrive.