

7 December 2022		ITEM: 12 Decision: 110630
Cabinet		
Digital and Customer Experience Strategy		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Councillor Jack Duffin, Cabinet Member for Central Services		
Accountable Assistant Directors: Tracie Heiser, Assistant Director - Customer Services Andy Best Strategic Lead - IT		
Accountable Directors: Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD and Transformation Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Engagement and Growth		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

Digital technology has moved on at an incredible pace and customer expectations continue to change, the local population is growing and changing, and in response the Council is increasingly required to adapt and strengthen the customer focus, use innovative technology, and build integrated service delivery models within the resources available.

The draft Digital and Customer Experience Strategy is intended to provide a strategic framework that sets out the Council's digital ambitions, the direction of travel and expected outcomes. The strategy is part of a wider strategic programme that brings together a programme of interventions designed to transform service delivery, ways of working and customer access channels. Once agreed the strategy will be supported by a prioritised delivery plan.

The strategy acknowledges that in order to deliver the standard of customer services that will meet the expectations of the Council's residents, staff and other stakeholders, the Council needs to address issues of people, process, technology, and organisation, managing our resources to optimum effect. It is acknowledged through the health and wellbeing study that not everyone has access to digital solutions. To succeed it will be necessary to create a culture supported by the right operational procedures and infrastructure that will deliver good quality customer

service, listening to the voice of the customer and employees, measuring satisfaction, embracing change and technology, and striving to continuously improve.

Throughout the strategy there is a strong emphasis that digital technology will enable 24/7 self-service for customers that are able to utilise these methods whilst recognising a mixture of methods are required to ensure inclusivity for all.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That Cabinet agree the Digital and Customer Experience Strategy at Appendix 1.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Council previously had a separate strategy for both Digital and Customer Services, both were developed in 2017 and have now expired. As part of the way we have changed and adapted how we work in the past two years, the Council has a number of digital projects and initiatives that are currently in delivery. This combined strategy is designed to build on the digital foundations that have already been implemented and to deliver fit for purpose technology that will enable the Council to deliver its services in an efficient way. The Customer services team have become increasingly reliant on digitally based solutions to enhance their offering and meet the changing demands of our customer base. In response to this and the financial challenges the council faces, it has been agreed that the development of an overarching combined Digital and Customer Experience strategy would be a beneficial way forward .

2.2 We are not at the start of our digital journey. The previous separate strategies achieved much but there is more that remains to be done and this is about continuing that journey, over the next three years. In publishing our first combined Digital and Customer Experience Strategy we will have a framework for how the whole council can work together with its partners and customers to reshape how we deliver services and how people request and use them. This strategy is about adapting to customer needs, not confining how people interact with us but finding the most effective way. This is about helping those who can to self-serve but being mindful that some residents will still need our help and assistance.

2.3 The outcome aims of the strategy are as follows:

- an improved customer journey, through a single access approach and user-centred design principles. These will be designed to get interactions with customers right first time
- an enabled workforce, using a modern resilient infrastructure, equipped with the technology they need to do their jobs more effectively – a reduction in manual processes, automation of repetitive tasks, and improving processes, this will enable services to focus on complex and specialised work, adding additional value

- a more sustainable financial model for the council, where we can improve service delivery while maintaining or reducing costs
- a positive impact on our climate commitment through a reduction in the use of paper and changes to our mailroom and processes. Where practical we can use digital technology to support us a more cohesive and joined-up council through the use of digital tools, increasing cross-functional project work, sharing budgets and goals and being more transparent
- to assist in delivering and improving services we will make training available to all staff and put in place public courses to assist our customers in become more digitally capable
- a better understanding of our customers through the smarter use of joined-up data. We will use data and analytics to inform decision making and gain insights into our customers to make more timely interventions and gain an overview of households, not just individuals
- a vibrant digital business sector that contributes to the economic growth of the borough and new developments will be designed with the use of digital technology to improve the public realm environment

2.4 Over the last three months colleagues in Thurrock have been consulted and engaged and their views have shaped the development of the combined strategy. Feedback was also received from Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in October 2022.

2.5 It is expected that the various programmes to support the strategy will be funded from existing approved capital budgets or from future programmes as identified subject to the Council's overall financial position following recent Government intervention. Any scheme that is likely to create additional pressures on operating budgets will be mitigated primarily through ensuring all business cases yield a positive return on investment through efficiency and transformational impact and are in line with our strategic priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 There are a number of challenges that the Council faces including:

- an increasing population, increasing demand - 11.6% population increase since 2011 and projected to continue to increase
- an ageing population, increasing demand on our care services - there has been an increase of 19.4% in people aged 65 years and over since 2011
- an ambitious growth agenda that will impact on our existing infrastructure
- a severe financial challenge following COVID and increased social care demand and investment shortfalls
- a new national focus on Levelling Up and a review of local government structure / functions
- meeting current service levels with fewer resources
- an expectation of excellence from our customers
- Increased scrutiny on spending and best value following intervention

- harnessing the improved digital skills and literacy that the pandemic has influenced within our customer base.
- 3.2 To meet the challenges ahead we have focused on 4 main themes and actions within these to support delivery, Digital Thurrock, Digital Customer, Digital office, and Digital Foundation.
- 3.3 The **Digital Foundation** will build a resilient and reliable infrastructure. On top of this sits the **Digital Office** layer which is about enhancing our efficiency and enabling people to work in the best way, so to ensure the best outcomes for key customers. The next layer is **Digital Customer** which is where we will create an environment that enables residents, businesses, and partners to interact with the council and access information and services easily when they need them, through the most appropriate channels, 24/7, and through various mediums. The final layer **Digital Thurrock** which is about enhancing the lives of residents and compliments the work being undertaken to develop Thurrock as a 'smartplace'.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Cabinet are asked to approve the Digital and Customer Experience Strategy at Appendix 1.
- 4.2 The strategy sets out how the technology will underpin the Council's future needs to drive efficiencies, deliver services and savings and how it delivers the future state of the services to our customers. If approved it will be supported by a full action plan which will be monitored via the cross-council Digital and Demand Board, jointly chaired by the Director of HR and OD and Strategy, Engagement and Growth.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Consultation and development of the strategy has taken place through the cross-council Digital and Demand Board, Directorate Management Teams , Leadership Group, and other internal customers including Directors Board. A full Communities and Equalities Impact Analysis will also be carried out as part of the process.
- 5.2 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 6 October 2022, has also commented on the strategy as part of the consultation process ahead of this final strategy being presented to Cabinet. The main feedback was to ensure that vulnerable and digitally excluded customers are fully considered, and reassurance was provided that this is high in focus as part of the strategy with recognition of the need to ensure digital inclusivity.
- 5.3 Financial implications within this document have also been revised in light of the recent intervention.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance, and community impact

6.1 Delivering the themes and actions along with adhering to the principles within this strategy will help us transform our customers' and employees experience. Our customers will have improved access to services, receive regular updates on service areas that are of interest to them and proactive contact to avoid them having to contact us at all were appropriate . We will have a workforce with the right skills and digital technology for the future and with the ability to guide our customers to the right services for them. We will be working closely with our communities to increase access and support and have strong partnerships in place that allow us to have local ambassadors to support local people.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Jonathan Wilson**
Interim Director of Finance

There is currently £7.9m allocated to support Digital activity and projects. £2.3m relates to essential infrastructure, equipment, security and compliance to keep key functionality operational and at a supported level. £2.1m is committed to existing projects which are in flight. The remaining £3.5m are capital bids which have been approved but have not yet been through the internal governance to release the funds, these are being reviewed and reprioritised in line with the strategy to ensure the projects which are approved provide an acceptable ROI.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **John Jones**
Director of Law and Governance, and
Monitoring Officer

There are no legal implications.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Smith**
Community Development & Equalities
Manager

As noted at 5.1 a full Community Equality Impact Assessment will be completed to inform the final strategy. This will consider the impact of the strategy proposals on communities and those with protected characteristics.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e., Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

- None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. **Appendices to the report**

- Appendix 1: Digital and Customer Experience Strategy

Report Author

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