North Somerset Council

Report to the Executive

Date of Meeting: 8 December 2021

Subject of Report: Digital Strategy

Town or Parish: All

Member Presenting: Cllr Ashley Cartman, Executive Member for Corporate Services

Key Decision: Yes

Reason:
This strategy has the potential to impact the whole community of North Somerset.

Recommendations
That the Executive endorses the principles, aims and activities of the council's Digital Strategy for the period 2021 – 2024 and approves the adoption of the strategy.

1.   Summary of Report

1.1.   This report seeks the approval of the council's Digital Strategy for 2021 - 2024 by the Executive.

1.2.   The report summarises the main developments in the strategy, it being our first digital strategy to be approved by the Executive.

1.3.   Given its significance approval of the strategy by the Executive is sought before any implementation plan is initiated

2.   Policy

The council's dependency on digital technology to deliver its services means that the Digital Strategy is directly associated with all of the aims and priorities shown in the Corporate Plan.

3.   Details

3.1.   The Digital Strategy will be effective for the period 2021 - 2024. It supports and enables the council's business transformation activities within the context of budget challenges. It clearly establishes the council's position and expectations in relation to

digital and its role in transformation, improving the services offered to our residents and customers and reducing the cost of delivering those services.

3.2. The Digital Strategy seeks to lay out the plans across the organisation and the area to work in a more digital way. The strategy was created jointly by officers across the council, representing their area of expertise.

3.3. Copies of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) strategy and the Information strategy are included in the appendices due to the synergy between the three strategies.

3.4. The strategy is broken down into four focus areas which collectively define the strategic direction for digital.

3.5. **Making North Somerset a more digital place** is about how we will maximise opportunities for digital design, data and technology in order to enhance economic growth, quality of life, sustainability, climate and individual opportunity in North Somerset. We will use technology to do things more effectively and to use resources more wisely.

3.6. **Improving the digital organisation** is about making it easy for many officers and members to work efficiently and seamlessly anywhere, reducing the need for office space and travel, whilst remaining accessible to residents, members and colleagues. It is also about harnessing new and emerging technologies to deliver efficient and good quality services.

3.7. **Developing digital communities** is about ensuring that we will have a digitally confident community who are able to maximise the internet, bringing benefits such as access to the jobs market and reduction in social isolation. We will work with communities to develop new technologies to support our health and wellbeing services. We will aim to transform the relationship between residents and the council by providing online services so good that most people choose to use them, giving us the capacity to help those who are more digitally excluded or vulnerable.

3.8. **Encouraging digital innovation** is about using innovative means to deliver better services for our residents and customers, maximising digital channels where appropriate and to use data and insight effectively to reduce duplication and improve our services.

3.9. Our challenge in implementing the Digital Strategy is to make best use of limited financial resources to deliver maximum benefit to our residents, customers, members and officers. In the current climate, the council's main priority is to be able to maintain services whilst closing the Medium Term funding gap and digital has a major role to play in this respect in creating efficiencies

3.10. The strategy is supported by an action plan which takes the desired outcomes and breaks them down into actions with associated dates applied.

3.11. The strategy is monitored through the council's annual business planning framework. It will be formally monitored and governed through the ICT Architecture Board.

4. Consultation

The Digital Strategy has been developed in collaboration with strategic and operational managers across the council. Whilst being influenced by the strategic direction being taken across both public and private sectors, the Digital Strategy is unique to our organisation.

The Digital Strategy has been shared and discussed with the Corporate Leadership Team and with the lead Executive Member.

The Strategy was reviewed at the informal Partnerships, Corporate Organisation and Overview Management Policy and Scrutiny Informal Panel Meeting. I.

It has also been through public consultation on the corporate website. The consultation ran for 6 weeks and 14 responses were received via the portal and two via email. Wherever possible the feedback has been included in the final version of the digital strategy.

Changes suggested and incorporated are:
- The bulk of the comments were that there was no reference to the "how". We have included reference to a digital action plan which sits behind the strategy which outlines what will be delivered, when and by whom.
- We have added more focus on accessibility and ensuring that we are tackling digital exclusion. A project team has already been set up to look at this, so this is in train.
- There was reference to difficulties using different browsers on the website. The digital team will update the advice and guidance on the corporate website
- It was suggested that there was a missing piece around data security. A new section has been added to fully cover this.
- There was mention of hybrid council meetings. These are already happening.
- There was mention of updating the MyAccount portal. This has been done since the consultation took place.
- There was a request to improve usability testing. This was done for the MyAccount portal and the digital team have a plan to do more in future. This is covered in the strategy.
- There was a request to involve Age UK. We already work closely with other relevant agencies and engage with them through Equality Groups.
- It was suggested that It should be a requirement of all planning consents for new housing and commercial developments that high speed fibre broadband connections should be installed to every property. This is covered within the strategy.
- A request was made to make the strategy more accessible. This will be done.
- There was some feedback around the training and skills of Library staff. This has been updated in the strategy.

We engaged with the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire health community to share our digital strategies.

The draft was shared and discussed at the Digital Divide meeting, attended by Citizen's Advice Bureau, Voluntary Action North Somerset, Curo, Alliance Homes, Town and Parish councils, Big Worle and Age UK.

5.   Financial Implications
There are no direct financial implications arising from the Digital Strategy itself which merely provides the overall framework in which digital developments will be made in future years. Each of the projects that are delivered within the strategy framework will be subject to its own assessment of costs and benefits.

Costs
As above

Funding
As above

6.   Legal Powers and Implications

There are no legal powers or implications of the strategy. It is made up of individual activities and projects which sit in separation.

7.   Climate Change and Environmental Implications

Elements of the digital strategy cover climate change and environmental issues and these are noted within the strategy. For example, we use digital technologies to support renewable energy generation and carbon storage. The drive towards channel shift will also have a positive impact on the environment through developments such as going paperless, moving towards automation, improved technologies and less telephony and face to face contact. Improved connectivity across the region, whether by fibre to the home or 5G services, will encourage less travel and consolidate new practices of working from home.

Organisations like Ecobahn enable us to understand the impact of the channels that we use and therefore our future focus. For example, the carbon footprint of a letter on recycled paper and subsequently recycled is 140g, versus a standard email which is 4g, versus a text message which is 0.014g.

We have followed a cloud-first strategy for our ICT services since 2015 and most of our internal infrastructure is now cloud-based meaning that we consume far less energy locally. Data centres however now consume around 1% of the global demand for electricity and the IT industry as a whole accounts for around 3½% of the total global carbon footprint. Whilst we would like to have a greater influence over the attitudes of large data centre providers toward a more sustainable environment, we have to recognise that our abilities in this area are limited. What remains in our control however is the ability to reduce our consumption of energy in the data centre and we will adopt a policy in which we dynamically reduce our processing capacity to match the level of demand, meaning, for example, that we do not maintain a full IT estate throughout the night, at weekends and during holiday periods.

Whilst we will seek to select suppliers that share our values and priorities, particularly in relation to protecting the environment and valuing human rights, we are forced to recognise the challenges of the global IT supply chain. Most semi-conductor manufacturing takes place in the far east and equipment is distributed by large multi-national companies. We remain a largely Windows-based organisation which of course ties us to Microsoft and its data centres. To step outside of this model increases the risks associated with the sustainability and security of our IT infrastructure, something we are not prepared to do. We will however seek local suppliers where possible within the public sector procurement rules and we can point to our finance system and garden waste management system, both of which are supplied from firms based in North Somerset.

Digital processes do carry a carbon footprint, but it is much lower than traditional ways of working. Going digital will allow us to remove waste and build more sustainable business processes whilst allowing us to be more productive and deliver a better customer experience.

8.   Risk Management

There are few risks arising from the adoption of the Digital Strategy itself given that the strategy sets out a high-level approach to digital development across the council. Detailed risk assessments will be undertaken for all of the programmes and projects that arise from the Strategy.

9.   Equality Implications

Like all of the authority's strategies, the Digital Strategy has been subjected to an equalities impact assessment. As the strategy sets out a broad direction of travel it is more appropriate for equality impact assessments to be undertaken on individual implementation plans that arise directly as a result of the strategy.

10.   Corporate Implications

The Digital Strategy has the potential to affect every service team across the council. Appropriate governance mechanisms are in place to ensure that implementation of the strategy is carried out in a transparent manner.

11.   Options Considered

The Digital Strategy has been created by a large group of officers throughout the council. Options within the strategy have been discussed by the group and alternatives considered where appropriate. The final version has been agreed by the group as a collaborative effort.

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Appendices:

Digital Strategy
ICT Strategy
Information Strategy
Equalities Impact Assessment