

**ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
6 FEBRUARY 2022**

CUSTOMER SERVICES AND DIGITAL STRATEGY

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider the draft Customer Services and Digital Strategy for 2021-24 at **Appendix 1**.

Summary

2. The Customer Services and Digital Strategy for 2021-24 sets out our vision for delivering excellent services to our customers and in particular, how more of these will be delivered through digital channels.
3. The strategy also provides the commitment to support those customers to access Council services who, for whatever reason, are unable to use our on-line services.
4. A public consultation and equality impact assessment screening undertaken on the strategy, together with planned actions to address issues raised are included in the main report.

Recommendations

5. It is recommended that Members:-
 - (a) Consider the contents of the report, and
 - (b) Recommend the Customer Services and Digital Strategy for 2021-24 for approval by Cabinet.

Reasons

6. The recommendations are supported by the following reason; implementation of the strategy will lead to improvements in our customer services, improvements to our digital services and actions taken to reduce digital exclusion in our community.

Anthony Sandys
Assistant Director – Housing and Revenues

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Anthony Sandys: Extension 6926

S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no issues
Health and Wellbeing	There is no impact in this report
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	The promotion of on-line digital services will help the Council to reduce its carbon impact
Diversity	The Customer Services and Digital Strategy will ensure that residents who are digitally excluded are provided with appropriate support
Wards Affected	All wards
Groups Affected	All groups
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no implications
Key Decision	This is a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan by involving Members in the plan to deliver the availability of Council services on-line
Efficiency	The increased use of on-line services will deliver efficiencies for the Council and its customers
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

7. The Customer Services and Digital Strategy for 2021-24 sets out our vision for delivering excellent services to our customers and in particular, how more of these will be delivered through digital channels. The strategy also provides the commitment to support those customers to access Council services who, for whatever reason, are unable to use our on-line services.
8. The strategy focusses on 7 key aims:
 - (a) **Provide excellent customer services** – delivering all services through face to face, telephone or digital channels to a clear set of performance standards. These standards will be developed in consultation with staff, Members and customers.
 - (b) **Provide good quality, easy to use digital services** – ensuring that we provide customers with safe and reliable digital access to all of our applications, service requests, enquiries and payments.
 - (c) **Make it clear how customers can contact us** – making digital the first choice for contacting the Council, but always providing customers with information about how they can speak to a member of staff.

- (d) **Make it clear what we can help customers with and what we can't** – expecting those customers who can use digital self-serve channels to do so, freeing up our staff to help and support those customers who cannot use our on-line services.
 - (e) **Deliver value for money** – using technology to improve services and deliver efficiencies, investing any savings into providing extra support for customers who need it.
 - (f) **Invest in our people** – ensuring our staff have the right skills and IT equipment to support our customers.
 - (g) **Listen to our customers and use this to improve services** – asking customers about the services they have received and using this feedback to make improvements, including complaints about our services.
9. The strategy also sets out our proposals to support those customers who are digitally excluded. This will range from providing assistance to use our on-line services to full support, where this is required.
10. The strategy also sets out what improvements we are planning to the Council's website, further improvements to our Customer Services Centre and our proposals to increase the number of Council services available on-line.
11. The outcomes we expect to achieve as a result of the proposed improvements are set out at the end of the document and these can be reported to members at future Scrutiny meetings.

Equalities Considerations

12. An equality impact assessment screening form is provided at **Appendix 2**. No amendments are recommended as a result of this assessment.

Consultation

13. Public consultation was undertaken on the proposed strategy between 1 October 2021 and 31 October 2021 with the following results:
- (a) 62 responses were received in total.
 - (b) 85% had accessed the Darlington Borough Council website in the last 12 months.
 - (c) 78% had used our on-line services to make a booking, make a payment, to check for information such as roadworks, or to report something.
 - (d) 44% reported that they found our website and/or on-line forms difficult to use. Most of these comments were about some of our more complex forms, such as our applications for benefits.

- (e) 11% reported that they couldn't find what they wanted on-line so phoned, e-mailed or contacted us in another way to get the information they needed.

14. Some of the improvements suggested by respondents included the following:

- (a) Making our website easier to use through our on-line "help" facility. Respondents also suggested "help" pop-up boxes on our on-line forms to assist with completion.
- (b) There were some concerns around security and the potential for fraud, so some reassurance is required to provide customers with the confidence that our digital services, particularly around payments, are safe and secure.
- (c) Providing a live "chat" support service.
- (d) Providing the ability to video call staff and have an on-line forum facility to contact Councillors directly.
- (e) Providing the facility for residents to remotely attend public meetings, such as planning, so working people or those with disabilities can attend easily.

Outcome of Consultation

15. As a result of the consultation, the following is recommended:

- (a) We need to continue to improve the Council's website and on-line forms making them easier to understand and easier to use. Currently, an exercise is being undertaken to put the whole website into "Plain English" and training for staff is being organised to ensure any new information for the website is written in "Plain English".
- (b) We also need to ensure that we continue to provide help and support to those residents who are unable to access our on-line services, particularly as services continue to open up after Covid restrictions. We therefore need to promote the help and support available to ensure those customers who need assistance have the confidence to return to using our face to face services and PCs at the Customer Services Centre.
- (c) There is a clear appetite for continued investment in digital services such as webchat, further on-line forms, improvements to the website app and virtual access to Council meetings, staff and Members. Work will therefore continue, to explore the best use of the technology available to improve digital access.
- (d) We need to provide reassurance to all of our customers that our on-line services are safe and secure to use.
- (e) More information is required to those residents who are digitally excluded and the barriers we need to overcome for our on-line services. These issues will be investigated through the proposed Community Survey for 2022.
- (f) Plans are already in development to enhance the Darlington Borough Council mobile phone app features, including improvements to the 'report it' function that will

enable people to track their cases, event notifications and reminders, and a biometric login option. Work on phase 2 is scheduled to start in the Spring once the Web Team has completed some business critical and time sensitive developments to the online refuse, recycling and garden waste collection system, in preparation for the launch of the 2022 garden waste collection service.