

**ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
30 JANUARY 2025**

DIGITAL DARLINGTON STRATEGY 2025-2030

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members with details of the draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and to seek their views on it before submission to Cabinet for approval.

Summary

2. The Digital Darlington Strategy (2025-30) is aligned with the Customer Services Strategy (2025-30). The focus of the strategy is to maximise the productivity and efficiency that can be achieved from technology through customer access to services and via back office systems. The strategy adopts a 'digital first' approach when it comes accessing council services by those who can do so, allowing resources to be allocated to support those people who cannot.
3. Successful delivery of the strategy relies upon several factors. Having a clear understanding of digital exclusion and those affected by it enables us to explore potential interventions and ensure that no-one is left unable to access our services.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Members provide any views relating to the proposed strategy so they can be shared with Cabinet for consideration before the final strategy is approved.

**Neil Bowerbank
Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications**

Background Papers

1. Digital Darlington Strategy

Neil Bowerbank : Extension 6052

Council Plan	The strategy supports the core principle of effective and efficient use of resources.
Addressing inequalities	Considers digital exclusion and measures to be considered to address it.

Tackling Climate Change	Aims to encourage use of online services, therefore helping some people avoid the need to travel. Online forms reduce the need for printed materials.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The strategy supports the core principle of effective and efficient use of resources.
Health and Wellbeing	Provides easier access to services for some people, reducing the need to visit the town hall or other venues.
S17 Crime and Disorder	Some of the online services support the reporting, recording and analysis of crime and disorder.
Wards Affected	All wards.
Groups Affected	All residents.
Budget and Policy Framework	There is no impact on the Budget and Policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers, but the provision of some online services will be of benefit to these groups of people.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. Providing council services online opens many opportunities for residents, businesses and the Council. The Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 aims to maximise the use of technology to help Darlington Borough Council (DBC) achieve its core principle of efficient and effective use of resources, particularly in response to the growing financial pressures it faces. Running alongside the Customer Services Strategy it supports the Council's Productivity Plan and Council Plan 2024-27 by exploring opportunities to exploit digital assets to create efficiencies and increase productivity, including online delivery.
6. Digital Darlington is delivered through a series of activities that focus on the provision of services online, maximising the benefits achievable through our corporate ICT systems and associated processes, and the exploitation of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence where there are clear cost benefits.
7. It reinforces the pre-established principle of taking a 'Digital First' approach towards access to council services wherever possible. The scale and impact of digital exclusion, and those affected by it will be continually monitored and action will be taken to ensure no-one is prevented from accessing our services.
8. With over 240 council functions already available online, more will be introduced where there are clear benefits in doing so. We have made significant investments in corporate ICT systems, infrastructure, and skills, and it is important that such investments maximise the benefits they can bring to our customers and the council.

9. The Digital Darlington Strategy (2025-2030) pulls together several existing work strands and some new ones into a single strategy and action plan. It is based on four themes.
 - (a) **Customer focused** - Online services will be designed around the customer, with a primary focus being on ensuring they are easy to access, easy to use, and useful. For most of our customers, their preferred method of contact is online, particularly for our high volume transactions.
 - (b) **Digital exclusion** - We will maintain a clear understanding of the barriers preventing our customers from accessing our services online and use this information to inform the development and roll out of our online services.
 - (c) **Encourage adoption of digital channels** - We will raise awareness of the availability of DBC online services, build trust in their use, and encourage people to use them instead of other channels of contact.
 - (d) **Maximising the benefits of existing ICT system, and explore, assess, and implement emerging technologies** - We will maximise the benefits that can be achieved for our customer facing functions and back-office systems from new and emerging technologies.
10. The suite of actions that enable delivery of the Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 are clearly stated in the strategy's delivery plan. There are likely to be changes to customer habits and technology during this life of the strategy so the delivery plan will be reviewed annually.
11. A copy of the *draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-2030* is appended to this report.
12. The draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-2030 went out for public consultation from 2 December 2024 to 12 January 2025 alongside the Customer Services Strategy 2025-2030 as there are several interdependencies between the two. The consultation was promoted via the One Darlington magazine, social media, the corporate website (consultations section), and distributed to our partners in the voluntary and community sector. Paper copies of the strategy and feedback forms were made available within the customer services centre, and copies in alternative languages and formats were to be made available upon request. All councillors were asked to help raise awareness of the consultation via their available channels.
13. The aim is to seek Cabinet approval for the strategy on 4 March 2025 once all the consultation feedback, and feedback from this scrutiny committee has been gathered and analysed.

Neil Bowerbank
Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications