

CABINET
4 MARCH 2025

DIGITAL DARLINGTON STRATEGY 2025-30

**Responsible Cabinet Member –
Councillor Mandy Porter, Resources Portfolio**

**Responsible Director - Elizabeth Davison,
Executive Director – Resources and Governance**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek Cabinet approval for the Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and associated action plan.

Summary

2. The Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 (**Appendix 1**) 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.
4. The strategy draws together several existing work strands together with some new ones into a single strategy and action plan. It is based on four themes.
 - (a) Customer focused
 - (b) Digital exclusion
 - (c) Encourage adoption of digital channels
 - (d) Maximising the benefits of existing ICT systems, and explore, assess, and implement emerging technologies
5. The associated action plan sets out the key actions and deliverables to be achieved during the five year life of the strategy. Advancements in technologies can happen rapidly, so the

plan has been designed in an agile way to enable to the council to consider and respond to these opportunities when they emerge.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Cabinet approves the Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and associated action plan.

Reasons

7. The recommendation is supported by the following reasons :-
 - (a) This will provide the council with a structured approach to the consideration and adoption emerging technology.
 - (b) There will be a clear understanding of digital exclusion locally, and this knowledge will be used to inform the development of online services, and to signpost people to support so they can develop skills and access services digitally.
 - (c) Supports the Council's drive for improved efficiency and productivity.

Executive Director – Resources and Governance
Elizabeth Davison

Background Papers

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

Neil Bowerbank : Extension 4025

Council Plan	The strategy supports the Council Plan 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	The strategy encourages the 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

8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.

12. 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.
13. 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.
14. A copy of the *draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-2030* is appended to this report.

Financial Implications

15. Much of the strategy and action plan draws together existing workstreams that are already resourced. Throughout the life of the strategy, consideration will need to be given to additional actions and interventions such as the purchase of *Artificial Intelligence (AI)* solutions as the benefits of such technology become clearer. We may also need to review the suite of interventions available that help more people get online. Given the pace of change in technology, changing consumer trends, and the evolving Government approach to AI, the strategy and action plan will be reviewed annually.

Legal Implications

16. Our systems and processes are already tightly governed by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but AI within the UK is yet to be subjected to dedicated UK legislation (February 2024). At present, existing legislation, such as GDPR, is used to govern the use of this technology. It will be necessary throughout the life of the strategy to maintain an oversight of new or changes to existing legislation.

HR Implications

17. The Council will need to continually invest in skills development if it is to maximise the benefits of the technology it uses. Comprehensive training and support is already provided to staff who are using the corporate systems, but it is likely that more training and support will be needed if the Council wishes to benefit from emerging technologies such as AI.

Consultation

18. 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.
19. Despite a range of channels being used and a prolonged consultation period to encourage feedback from local people and organisations, a total of seven responses were received that are specific to the Digital Darlington strategy. While the responses do not provide a representative set of views for the population of the Borough, they have provided some helpful insights.
20. On the 30 January 2025 the strategy was presented to the Economy and Resources Scrutiny committee to seek their views.

Outcome of Consultation

21. The profile of the responders to the public consultation who provided personal information was:
 - (a) All live in within a Darlington post code.
 - (b) All are aged between 60-75.
 - (c) All identified as *White Includes British, Northern Irish, Irish, Gypsy, Irish Traveller, Roma or any other White background.*
 - (d) 66% considered themselves to have any long-standing illness, disability or infirmity.
 - (e) None were claiming benefits.
 - (f) There was an equal split between people identifying as male or female.
22. Within the public consultation several questions were asked about issues relating to digital exclusion:

Question	Response
Do you have access to the Internet at home or at work?	[4 people answered the question] Yes = 50% No = 25% Prefer not to say = 25%
Do you feel you have the skills and confidence to use the Internet to report issues and purchase things online?	[4 people answered the question] Yes = 25% No = 50% Prefer not to say = 25%
Would you need assistance to access council services online?	[4 people answered the question] Yes = 25% No = 50% Prefer not to say = 25%

23. Three comments were received as part of the public consultation. Two of the comments highlighted concerns about people not having the necessary equipment or the skills to access the Internet. This reinforces the importance of the Digital Exclusion strand within the strategy.
24. The third comment made several points: *“It mentions training staff and creating in-house expertise but doesn't mention taking on apprentices, which would be cost effective and improve opportunities for inexperienced staff. Agree its best not to be in forefront of new technology - it often results in costly cul-de-sac sand increases risk. Using established technology and software may not give the perfect result but if you can get a good result at a much lower cost. Focus on metrics that matter, stability and useability is more important than having a response in 2 seconds rather than 3. Basically a good idea in principle but how it is implemented will have a huge impact on how effective it is and there must be an alternative available for people who can't do it online. Need to make sure the language used avoids jargon and has explanatory notes. If possible set up target user groups to give feedback on usability of mock ups before actually building the software. Make sure it is readable by having medium to large fonts in contrasting colour and preferably allowing zoom options. have a feedback option on each page so any issues can be identified and dealt with early. As the online pages are updated standardise page layouts, language and options where possible. Action feedback and respond to queries. Where people already have an online account, populate any new forms with existing information and ask them to confirm. Consider having planned user sessions at the library”*
25. All the points within this comprehensive response are aligned with the ambitions within the strategy and action plan. The suggestion about user sessions is aligned with best practice and we will explore this further.
26. The Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee considered the proposed strategy and action plan on 30 January 2025. There was substantial debate during the committee meeting, but nothing emerged to suggest any changes are needed to the strategy. The points made were aligned with the actions already identified within the strategy's delivery plan.

Suggestion	Response
More useable search function on the website.	This is aligned with action 1 in the delivery plan
Consider user / focus groups to inform website usability.	This is aligned with best practice and will be explored further. It is aligned with actions 1 & 2
Integration of systems to create a single point of access	This is an established ambition and aligned with action 12, but there are technical barriers to overcome, significant costs to consider, and constraints around General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to be understood.
Consider opening up ChatGPT to staff to enable service efficiencies.	This is aligned with action 13.
Explore collaboration opportunities to tackle digital exclusion.	This is aligned with actions 8 & 9.
Collate and analyse data / stats to help inform service decisions, and understand the impact of technology.	This is aligned with action 11.
Raise awareness with Government about issues with system supplier dominance.	We are already doing this through various channels and will continue to do so.

Equalities considerations

27. An equality impact assessment (EIA) for the strategy has been completed (**Appendix 2**). It identifies more positive than negative impacts of the strategy. The negative impacts are associated with factors linked to digital exclusion, but there are dedicated work streams within the strategy that aim to help address this.