

AUDIT COMMITTEE

13 October 2025

INFORMATION GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME PROGRESS REPORT

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Systems and Information Governance Group (SIGG) is required to report six monthly to the Audit Committee on progress and planned developments of the information governance programme.

Summary

2. Delivery of our information governance programme has provided the assurance required to reduce almost all of our information risks to an acceptable level.
3. Recent/Ongoing work includes:
 - (a) The Microsoft Office 365 Programme.
 - (b) Digital Darlington Strategy and Artificial Intelligence (AI).
 - (c) ICT work plan.
 - (d) Web Team work plan.
 - (e) Systems and Process Team work plan.
 - (f) Information Governance Team Work Plan.
 - (g) Work to achieve our target for the completion of on-line mandatory information governance training courses.
4. The area of highest priority in the information governance programme is:
 - (a) Digital Darlington Strategy and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Recommendation

5. It is recommended that progress on the implementation of the Information Governance Programme be noted.

Reasons

6. To provide the Audit Committee with a status report on the delivery of the Council's Information Governance Programme.

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Executive Director: Resources & Governance

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Background Papers

Council Plan	There is no specific relevance to the strategy beyond a reflection on the Council's governance arrangements.
Addressing inequalities	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. Therefore there are no issues in relation to Addressing inequalities.
Tackling Climate Change	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. Therefore there are no issues in relation to Carbon Impact and Climate Change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	Implementation of effective information governance systems and procedures has a positive impact on efficiency.
Health and Wellbeing	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. Therefore there are no issues in relation to Health and Well Being.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report is for information to members and requires no decision. Therefore there are no issues in relation to Crime and Disorder.
Wards Affected	All.
Groups Affected	All.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not have a direct impact on the Budget and Policy Framework.
Key Decision	This report does not constitute a Key Decision.
Urgent Decision	This report does not require an Urgent Decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	There is no specific impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Background

7. Delivery of our information governance programme has provided the assurance required to reduce almost all of our information risks to an acceptable level. While that is the case it must be recognised that the data processing activities of the Council and the cyber security landscape continually evolve and must be kept under review. The processes implemented by the Council include review mechanisms to ensure this takes place.

The Microsoft Office 365 Programme

8. The Microsoft Office 365 Programme Team is comprised of the Systems Strategy and Development Manager, the Complaints and Information Governance Manager, the ICT Solutions Architects and the ICT Security and Assurance Team Leader and the End User Engagement Team and reports to SIGG. We have also recently recruited a Systems and Process Officer (SPO) who will assist the above team in driving the Microsoft Office 365 Programme forward.
9. Following the successful migration of services who volunteered to migrate to Microsoft 365, we now have a significant number of teams who are fully operational through a Microsoft (MS) Teams interface. However, there remains a significant piece of work to do to and over the coming months we intend to migrate the rest of the Council's services to Microsoft 365.
10. In addition to the services now using MS Teams as their primary working area, there are several Functional and Project Teams being used to conduct business across the Local Authority, including with partners. We have recently decommissioned the secure file sharing system, Egress. We are now providing that functionality via MS Teams, saving on license costs. We are also now working with schools to look at how we can better manage the review process for Education Health Care Plans to make it less resource intensive and streamline the communication between partners
11. It is vital all Council services are migrated to Microsoft 365, to enable officers to collaborate remotely, work in innovative ways and utilise the plethora of applications within Microsoft 365 to improve productivity. The need to migrate services to Microsoft 365 is also becoming increasingly necessary from an information security perspective and as we continue to explore the use of Microsoft Copilot, Microsoft's Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool.

Digital Darlington Strategy and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

12. The Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 was approved by Cabinet on 4 March 2025, and progress with the strategy is reported to the Systems and Information Governance Groups (SIGG) on a quarterly basis. The strategy is based around 4 themes, with the web and systems updates throughout this report demonstrating progress against some of these themes.
13. In relation to digital exclusion (theme 2), the Council has submitted an application to the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology's (DSIT) Digital Innovation Fund. If successful, the money will be used to provide various types of equipment, connectivity, training, and support to local residents who are digital excluded for varying reasons, and who typically have lots of interactions with the Council.

14. In relation to *Maximising the benefits of existing ICT systems and explore, assess, and implement emerging technologies* (theme 4), we have established our *Artificial Intelligence Strategy & Ethics Group*. The group includes people with expertise beyond corporate systems and data, and includes representatives with in-depth knowledge around human resources, communications, climate change, equality & diversity, and finance. Three members of staff who are about to conclude their apprenticeships in the application of AI technologies within local government are also part of the group. Collectively, the group provides the right set of knowledge and skills to objectively assess AI tools before they are adopted by the Council, and during its inaugural meeting made recommendations about the roll out of Microsoft CoPilot to the workforce. This has subsequently been agreed by SIGG, with the intention of it being rolled out before Christmas.
15. The Council has concluded its role in testing an AI *meeting transcription and summary tool* called Minute, which was produced by the *Incubator for Artificial Intelligence* (i.ai) and sits in Government Digital Service (GDS) which is part of DSIT. Our involvement in this pilot has helped the Council to develop its thinking around AI technologies and the governance and training that needs to be in place for us to use it securely and effectively. Recognising that all AI tools have their limitations, our experience with Minute has been positive and, and has presented opportunities for some Council activities to be conducted more efficiently. i.AI is still considering how to roll Minute out more widely to the local government sector but given that Darlington was one of only 25 local authorities that were part of the pilot, the Council has been given permission to continue using the tool and can increase the number of staff who can use it. Costs for using the tool are still be worked out by i.AI, but early indications suggest it will be far cheaper than some alternative commercial products.
16. Since the previous update to the Audit Committee, several services within the People directorate have been trialling a commercial AI meeting transcription and summary tool called Magic Notes. This is different to Minute as it has bespoke templates that meet the needs of specific statutory meetings which take place in different settings. It is a product that it increasingly used by children's and adult social services across the country. Feedback from staff testing the product has been overwhelmingly positive so the trail has been extended to ensure the benefits are sufficiently captured before a decision is made about its continued use.

ICT work plan

17. SIGG also oversees the Council's ICT work programme, a summary of which is contained in the ICT Strategy - Implementation Progress report to Audit Committee.

Web Team work plan

18. The upgraded version of darlington.gov.uk is now live and at feature parity apart from consultation subscription emails which are awaiting patching, completing phase 1. Phase 2 which looks at the backend features used by the Web Team for maintenance will start in 2026 once the next long term support version of Umbraco is available to develop against.
19. Work on the new Darlington Hippodrome website is now not expected to start until February 2026 as the designs have been delayed as the project has expanded to a wider refresh of the whole branding.

20. Phase 1 of the Early Years and Early Years Pupil Premium checker replacements for the new DfE system are now in user acceptance testing. Phase 2 for the provider portal is expected to start in early October.
21. Preliminary scoping to handle the changes required to the website, bin reminder services and Street Scene Portal for food waste collections have been completed. Development work is scheduled to start late 2025/early 2026 for the April 2026 start.

Systems and Process Team work plan

22. The Systems and Process Team are the custodians of the large corporate applications that administer the Council's business across Social Care, Education, Customer Services, all online payments, Waste Management, Building Services, Street Cleansing, Planning, Anti-Social Behaviour, Building Control, Trading Standards and Licensing. The work plan covers all major upgrades to these systems (including the intensive testing regime needed to support this).
23. The team are working in Adult Services to align the Transformation Team Programme with the System Programme, a new program of works has been drawn up and we are working through each item. Ongoing work also includes looking at a system to digitalise care records within the reablement team and Holicote. Grants have been received to fund 50% of the cost within the first year. We are also carrying out research into portals which are available to the service to enable more streamlined delivery of services between us and 3rd parties.
24. Children's Services work continues with the primary focus now being on the Families First reform programme which is being introduced next year. The team are working closely with the transformation programme manager and the relevant services to implement a new, more streamlined processes.
25. The Education system is now part of a much wider programme that will see it wholly replaced in 2025. Stage one of the Education system is now live alongside two out of four portals – Admissions and Establishment. The 3rd portal which will enable parents to apply for an Education Health Care Plan for their child was due to soft launch with four school/nurseries in September 2024, however this has been delayed due to a system issue. The issues were resolved and we entered into the pilot with 4 education establishments, however the official launch due to be September 2025 has been postponed again. Stage two was due to commence in 2025, however, this has been rescheduled to 2026 due to System C re-designing their finance module. This is an integral part of this stage and is yet to be released to customers, meaning there could be further delays. This is being monitored and factored in. School admission applications opened for the third time using the new system in September 2025 and saw a large influx of applications on its first day of opening.
26. The development of the Customer Strategy is supported by the Verint work programme (Verint is the Council's CRM System) where forms are developed to allow a seamless digital interaction for the customer and a safe and secure payment option. Additional services will continue to come on board with an online form offering, this is a project where we continue to work with those that want to offer an online form option as well as continuous promotion of existing forms to increase a higher digital presence. Verint underwent a major upgrade in April which has brought us up to date and in line with their upgrade path.

27. Over the coming months, we will be updating our mapping programme and tools, this is a large-scale project which will see the Systems Team working with services to ensure the layers used are updated and migrated over to the new platform successfully prior to us moving over to the pro version of the product.

Information Governance Team Work Plan

28. The Council's Complaints and Information Governance Team/The Data Protection Officer continues to provide advice to officers on a range of data protection and information rights matters and ensures information rights requests are handled in accordance with UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR); The Data Protection Act 2018; The Freedom of Information Act 2000; and The Environmental Information Regulations 2014.
29. The team manages all data breaches in compliance with UK GDPR. In collaboration with Xentrall, regular phishing exercises have been conducted to help officers and Members become more vigilant against phishing threats. Additionally, the team has delivered a series of communications to raise awareness of phishing scams and provide guidance on identifying suspicious activity. Most recently, bespoke messages were issued to officers and Members to enhance the Council's overall preparedness for a potential cyber-attack.
30. Since the last report to Audit Committee the team has also updated the Employees Guide to Information Security and associated mandatory training to include a section on Phishing and in preparation for the roll out of Microsoft Copilot to the workforce. The updated version is to be approved by SIGG and rolled out to staff prior to making Microsoft Copilot more widely available.
31. The team has also advised on a number of contracts including, Homeswapper, CORE+ Access Group – YOS, Services Provided by Durham County Council and Civica ModGov; a number of data protection impact assessments (DPIAs) including, Department of Science, Industry and Technology's (DSIT) Minute AI and Microsoft Co-Pilot AI; and a number of data sharing agreements including, Office of Health Improvements and Disparities – National Dental Epidemiology Programme, Minute AI and North East Childrens Complex Care Diagnostic.

Training and awareness

32. The revised table in Appendix 1 shows the position on 24 September 2025 regarding the completion of the mandatory on-line information governance courses for Academy 10 and where applicable, non-IT users. Completion rates of over 95% remains the Council's target and represents an acceptable level of take up which must be achieved.
33. The overall completion rate for the Employee's Guide to Information Security currently stands at 86%, an increase from 82% reported to April's Audit Committee. This course is subject to a two year renewal, the course is not applicable to non-IT users.
34. In relation to the Social Media Module, completion rates currently stand at 82% overall, 91% for Academy 10 users and 48% for non-IT users. This compares to the 78% reported to April's Audit Committee.
35. In relation to the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, overall completion rates are at 82%, 90% for Academy 10 users and 52% for non-IT users. An increase from a 78% overall completion rate, reported to April's Audit Committee.
36. While a significant number of officers have undertaken this training previously, following the introduction of two year expiry period to all three modules, they are now required to complete it again. As notifications are sent to those officers who need to refresh their training we anticipate a

continued upturn in completion rates. This is done directly via reminder e-mails sent from Academy 10 and the weekly staff Briefing. With regards to completion rates for non-IT users, the simplified tool box talk style modules are still being used for Social Media and Data Protection. These modules are also subject to the 2 year renewals, but have been designed for managers to be able to deliver the sessions faster, while still imparting all the key information with reinforced learning at the end of the sessions. We will continue to promote the use of Academy 10 in these areas.

Conclusion

37. The Council's information governance programme continues to address emerging issues, support compliance with data protection legislation and manage the Council's information risks.

Outcome of Consultation

38. No formal consultation was undertaken in production of this report.

24/09/2025	Staff included	% Completion Rate		
		Employee Guide to Information Security not applicable to hard copy	Social Media Version 3	Data Protection 2018
Council Total	2202	86	82	82
% Difference compared to 19/05/25		0	0	1
Academy 10 Total	1748	86	91	90
Hard Copy Total	454	N/A	48	52
Darlington Partnership	3	100	100	100
Economy & Public Protection	75	85	95	93
Environment, Highways and Community Services	876	89	66	67
Culture & Heritage Total	167	79	62	62
Culture & Heritage	140	79	74	74
Culture & Heritage (Hard copy)	27	N/A	0	0
Environmental Services & Community Safe Total	277	84	58	71
Environmental Services & Community Safe	79	84	92	87
Environmental Services & Community Safe (Hard	198	N/A	45	65
Highways & Capital Projects Total	210	93	74	74
Highways & Capital Projects	129	93	87	84
Highways & Capital Projects (Hard copy)	81	N/A	53	57
Leisure Total	221	94	70	58
Leisure	73	94	92	90
Leisure (Hard copy)	148	N/A	59	42
People Group	787	81	91	89
Adult Social Care	210	88	95	90
Children's Services	318	86	89	86
Commissioning Performance&Transformation	105	91	98	95
Education	138	76	84	87
Public Health	16	88	100	94
Resources & Governance	458	94	97	98
Housing and Revenues	282	96	98	98
Law & Governance	74	86	95	95
Resources	65	95	98	100
Strategy Performance and Communications	36	92	100	100