

AUDIT COMMITTEE
13 October 2025

ITEM NO.

ICT STRATEGY – IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS REPORT

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Extended Leadership Team (ELT) is required to report six-monthly to the Audit Committee on progress in relation to the implementation of the ICT Strategy.

Summary

2. The revised ICT Strategy focusses on three strategic priorities:
 - (a) ICT Governance and Service Development
 - (b) ICT Strategic Architecture
 - (c) Council Service Development and Transformation
3. This report summarises progress on the main activities within each of these priorities.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that progress on the implementation of the ICT Strategy be noted.

Reasons

5. The recommendation is supported to provide the Audit Committee with evidence to reflect on progress in delivery of the Council's ICT Strategy.

Andy Evans
Head of ICT Services – Xentrall Shared Services

Background Papers

Darlington ICT Strategy 2022

Andy Evans - Extension 528472

Council Plan	The ICT Strategy supports the business of the Council Plan by ensuring appropriate ICT systems are available, reliable and secure.
Addressing inequalities	There is no specific impact on addressing inequalities.
Tackling Climate Change	Initiatives contained within ICT Strategy will help contribute towards the carbon reduction commitments.
Efficient and effective use of resources	Efficiency savings will be generated through the implementation of the ICT Strategy. The introduction of new technology is key to the delivery of savings within Council services.
Health and Wellbeing	There is no specific Health and Wellbeing impact.
S17 Crime and Disorder	There is no specific crime and disorder impact.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected equally.
Groups Affected	All groups are affected equally.
Budget and Policy Framework	Financial implications will be considered in the Medium-Term Financial Plan. This report does not affect the policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

6. Progress on the three strategic themes of the ICT Strategy within the reporting period is described below.

ICT Governance and ICT Service Development

7. The Systems and Information Governance Group (which comprises of the Extended Leadership Team but chaired by the Executive Director - Resources and Governance) undertakes an ICT Strategy monitoring role as well as overseeing and approving the ICT Work Plan, which covers all service based and corporate ICT projects. As well as this forum, updates on major ICT projects are also given to the Executive Director - Resources and Governance and to the meetings of the Xentrall Executive Board on which she sits.
8. Darlington Council has been awarded PSN (Public Service Network) certification by the Cabinet Office for the financial year 25/26 and work is already under way to prepare the 26/27 submission. The external penetration test of the Darlington network by an approved assessor is already complete and ICT are working through a list of recommendations and technical remediation tasks in advance of formal submission. Whilst the future of this Government standard is under review, Xentrall ICT will continue to maintain compliance with it, until such a time as it is superseded.
9. As well as the external programmes of assessment, ICT continues to work closely with the Councils Internal Audit team. Several new audit controls have been reviewed during this reporting period including performance of the ICT Strategy, controls around the quarantine process for email and the network Firewall. All have been classified as "green" on a red/amber/green rating system.
10. In terms of ICT service development and related to the two ISO certifications and internal audits, all ICT service improvement activities are identified in the ICT Service Improvement Programme, and this continues to be managed and monitored by the ICT Management Team, supported by the ICT Security & Process Excellence Officer. This group reviews the progress and priorities of this extensive and continual programme which is resourced through a combination of business-as-usual activities and planned projects within ICT. As part of the annual review process, ICT have successfully retained both ISO 90001 (Quality Management Systems) and 27001 (Information Security Management) standards. Next year will see ICT undertake a full 3-year review of both standards and subsequent recertification.
11. A key achievement in service development has been the creation of a dedicated Cyber Security function within the wider Security and Assurance Team. Recruitment of roles is almost complete, and a dedicated programme of security actions and improvements has been developed with the aim of continuing to strengthen the Councils security posture as well as enabling ICT to respond more quickly to the ever-increasing cyber threat posed to local authorities.
12. ICT continue to work with the Information Governance Team to deliver regular Phishing email simulation exercises designed to educate and raise awareness of the dangers posed by malicious email campaigns. One further phishing exercise has been completed in this reporting period. The findings have been passed to Information Governance who will use

them to refine the approach to user education and communication. Security controls that filter malicious emails coming into the organisation continue to be reviewed and strengthened.

13. It is well documented that “threat actors” target Councils when staff are least likely to be working, increasing their odds of success. To address the threat of a cyber-attack occurring outside of traditional core office hours or during weekends and bank holidays, Xentrall ICT have developed a Security Operations Centre service. This SOC will provide additional monitoring during these times, alerting and acting upon suspicious activity.
14. As part of the assessment of the current ICT landscape as well as the development of Council strategies such as Digital, the Xentrall ICT Strategy 2020 -2024 is currently under review. A new version which will support the business objectives of the Council over the next few years will be published by March 2026.

ICT Strategic Architecture

15. ICT continues to work at pace to ensure high levels of system availability, reliability, and security through the delivery of major project work. Notable deliverables include:
 - (a) Following on from the upgrade of the Wide Area in 2024 the next stage of network refresh, the replacement of all network switches and Wi-Fi access points is well under way. Work is currently ongoing to upgrade equipment within the Town Hall and once complete staff will enjoy the ability to work more flexibility through increased wireless coverage and network performance. This “wireless first” approach will be replicated across all the Councils satellite offices from the Depot to the Dolphin Centre. The Town Hall work is expected to be complete by December 2025 with the wider rollout complete later in 2026.
 - (b) During this reporting period ICT have worked at pace to refresh and replace key technology platforms adopting new anti-virus tools across the physical and virtual server estate, introducing tools which better manage the security and patching of desktop applications such as Adobe Reader. ICT have also introduced new tools to counter the use of “Shadow IT”. This is a name given to non-approved applications such as third-party AI tools which are difficult to detect and pose a risk to the security of the Councils data. Through the implementation of these tools, ICT gains enhanced visibility into user activities and greater control over their access permissions.
 - (c) To ensure the core ICT infrastructure within the Darlington Data Centre remains highly available and reliable, ICT have commenced a project to upgrade the environmental systems such as air conditioning, the fire suppression system and the alerting and monitoring systems which automatically inform ICT staff of changes in temperature or humidity as well as the threat of fire. By taking advantage of innovations in new technology this work also creates the opportunity for ICT to reduce power consumption by downsizing critical infrastructure, reducing power consumption and our overall carbon footprint. This work is expected to be complete by Spring 2026.

Council Service Development and Transformation

16. The service-based Information & Systems Strategies including the recently launched Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 inform the ICT Work Plan, this in turn drives customer projects within the ICT service. As well as the management and monitoring of individual projects, the overall ICT Work Plan is monitored at the Systems and Information Governance Group (SIGG is described in paragraph 7 above). These ICT projects underpin many of the Council's business change activities. SIGG also reviews the Web Team Workplan and the Systems and Process Team Workplan and thereby has a whole view of ICT-related activities across the Council.
17. As well as some of the central ICT architecture projects listed above, three additional Darlington specific projects have been completed since the last progress report to this committee including the completion and closure of the Hopetown Darlington ICT project. Other examples of projects and major milestones include:
 - a) The contract renewal and continual upgrades of the Netcall Contact Centre solution.
 - b) The introduction of the new cloud based online payment management system (CivicaPay) that will help streamline online payment collection and management as well as maintaining payment Industry compliance for the Council.
18. Xentrall ICT continue to work closely with The System Strategy and Development Team to support the roll out of Microsoft Teams across all Services. Most recently data relating to the Health and Safety department has been moved into Teams and planning is underway on future data migrations such as the Special Educational Needs (SEND) Department. Once the data is in Teams there are additional benefits the Council can leverage in terms of Data Governance and Security.
19. Regarding the Councils Digital Strategy, ICT continue to support the evaluation of AI transcription tools such as Minute and Magic Notes. ICT are also working with the Systems Team on how the Council can take advantage of approved AI tools such as Microsoft Copilot AI assistant in a secure and controlled way.

Outcome of Consultation

20. There has been no formal consultation in the preparation of this report.