

Cabinet – 16 March 2022

Digital Strategy 2022-2025

Portfolio: Councillor M Bird – Leader of the Council

Related portfolios: All

Service: Transformation & Digital

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

1.1 the aim of the Digital Strategy is to set the vision of how we will empower the Borough of Walsall to maximise its digital potential over the next 3 years. The strategy will provide a blueprint on how this can be achieved by splitting Digital into five themes:

- Digital Skills
- Digital Inclusion
- Digital Infrastructure
- Digital Business Development
- Digital Region

The overarching aim of this strategy is to boost social and economic benefits through the facilitation of digital enablement across the borough and wider West Midlands Region. Walsall will become a vehicle for positive change by further leveraging its Digital capabilities.

This strategy will influence and be influenced by other strategies that are being developed across the council. The outcomes of the Council Plan, helping residents and communities to fulfil their potential and to be resilient is embodied throughout the Digital Strategy.

2. Summary

2.1 This report should be read in conjunction with the Draft Digital Strategy – **Appendix A**.

2.2 The council has developed a Digital Strategy which conveys its digital aspirations for the borough over the next 3 years. The Digital Strategy is separated into five clear themes.

- 2.3 The Digital Strategy provides a framework of how the council can deliver against its digital aspirations; by leveraging partnerships, co-design, and collaboration.
- 2.4 The Digital Strategy has been developed after engagement with other services areas, to ensure alignment to their Service Transformation Plans.
- 2.5 The Digital Strategy will provide an accessible vision to those within the borough (Residents, community groups, businesses) and the wider region, allowing for better engagement and coordinated efforts. The Digital Strategy is aligned to the Council Plan whereby inequalities are reduced, and all potential is maximised.
- 2.6 The Digital Strategy is aligned to the delivery of the Proud Promises to:
- Improve Outcomes and Customer Experience;
 - Improve Employee Satisfaction and Engagement;
 - Improve Service Efficiency and Performance.
- 2.7 This report is a Key Decision as it is likely to have significant impact on two or more wards within the borough.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet approve the Digital Strategy 2022-2025 as set out in **Appendix A**.
- 3.2 That Cabinet delegates authority to make any minor amendments, if necessary, to the Digital Strategy before and after it is publication, to the Executive Director of Resources & Transformation in consultation with the Leader of the Council.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1 Since 2017 the council has undergone large scale technological and digital change. These changes were previously set out in ICT's 2017-2020 strategy.
- 4.2 The advent of the Proud Programme has provided a catalyst for transforming how the council interacts with its customers, specifically the Customer Access Management workstream.
- 4.3 It has been acknowledged that previous ICT strategies have been internally focused. The Digital Strategy is externally focused, supported by robust internal strategies and service transformation plans.
- 4.4 Covid-19 has significantly changed how the council delivers its services. The Digital Strategy will look to support the borough with challenges and changes catalysed by the pandemic.
- 4.5 This strategy acknowledges that to further leverage digital capabilities, the council's workforce needs to have the appropriate digital skills to match the needs of the customer. Exploiting technology and using automation alongside advanced digital processes will enable council officers to focus on adding value whilst

supporting the most vulnerable and providing additional assistance to those who need it.

- 4.6 Increasing the levels of Digital Inclusion across the borough have been highlighted as challenge when trying to increase digital capabilities and outputs. The causal factors for people not being Digital Included are vast, ranging from social-economic to individual's digital skillsets. An ambition of this strategy is to increase the number of digitally included people.
- 4.7 The West Midlands region has an adequate Digital Infrastructure, of which its rollout is being accelerated. However, Walsall acknowledges it could still improve its Digital Infrastructure regarding 5G coverage and Full Fibre capabilities.
- 4.8 Walsall has the potential to attract, retain and grow the number of Digital Businesses within the borough. This strategy will look to facilitate the growth of Digital Business in the borough and make the existing business more resilient.
- 4.9 The business insights gained through the appropriate analysis of data is an asset at the council's disposal. The council wants to share this data with partner agencies (where appropriate) to gain a better understanding of, and ultimately better outcomes for the borough (and wider region). The council budgets often see the council looking for new and innovative ways to deliver services. This strategy will facilitate this work by leveraging technology and digital capabilities.

Council Corporate Plan priorities

- 4.10 The Digital Strategy is an underpinning strategy that will feed into the Council Plan. It is cross cutting and will influence (at varying levels) all 5 Council Priorities and their associated outcomes. The Digital strategy has been created around the council's aim whereby inequalities are reduced, and all potential is maximised.

Risk Management

- 4.11 Although the council currently does not have a Digital Strategy there is the potential that it will lack a coordinated strategic direction when it comes to "Digital," without the implementation of a strategy.
- 4.12 Without clear strategic (digital) direction the council may fail to realise the benefits from leveraging the available digital capabilities across the borough, or the benefits could be realised at a slower rate.
- 4.13 Without the implementation of a clear digital strategy, the council may not contribute to or benefit from the digital advancements taking place across the wider West Midlands region.

Financial implications

- 4.14 There are no specific financial implications associated with the publication of this strategy. Any programme, project or work that is undertaken in the "Digital arena" will need to identify its own funding stream and define its own benefits. Any financial commitment will be subject to the council's contract rules.

Legal Implications

- 4.15 The strategy is not a statutory requirement. Any actions described in the Strategy that may have legal implications would be the subject of separate reports to Cabinet where necessary.

Procurement Implications / Social Value

- 4.16 There are no direct procurement implications arising from this report. Advice will be sought from procurement if such a situation was to arise.

Property Implications

- 4.17 Any actions described in the strategy that would have significant property implications would be the subject of separate reports to Cabinet where necessary.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

- 4.18 There are complex links between, service users accessing council services and that of our partner agencies. The correlating factors include service users who are vulnerable and more likely to experience health problems, high unemployment, and low incomes. Considerations to the health-related aspects of service users and wellbeing for the residents of Walsall is important and will be considered through effective service delivery.
- 4.19 Through upskilling, signposting and facilitation this strategy has the potential to assist in reducing inequalities. Specific to health and wellbeing, increasing residents' digital capabilities could allow council and health care services to reach a greater audience. The leveraging of community groups has the potential to increase "Digital kindness" reducing isolation and loneliness within the community.
- 4.20 If any new technology is deployed to council staff as part of this strategy an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be undertaken.

Staffing Implications

- 4.21 There are no direct staffing implications from the strategy itself, however subsequent action plans may change the way in which staff work. This could range from digital upskilling to the way in which services are delivered. Any such changes would be subject to the council's internal and external consultation processes.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.22 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is attached in **Appendix B**, this document shows that there will be a need to monitor and evaluate the impact of the Digital Strategy as it develops. It is acknowledged in the EqIA that unforeseen circumstances may arise which may not have been accounted for.

Climate Change

- 4.23 The Council has an ambition of being a net zero carbon authority by 2050. Although this strategy is facilitative in nature, the Council's technological building blocks and future digital direction support the net zero carbon ambitions. The Council's strategic direction is to reduce its reliance on its in-house datacentre, subsequently reducing power consumption. The technology which supports the Customer Experience Strategy, will allow more processes to be fully online and digitised. When looking at our own workforce this strategy promotes being agile and flexible from a people and technology perspective, further removing print and paper quantities. Through digital upskilling and inclusivity, there is potential for residents to access information and funding regarding initiatives such as green homes and other associated home improvement schemes. This strategy will support the use of technology and partnerships to help monitor priority environmental areas such as air and road quality.

Consultation

- 4.24 To develop this strategy several customer facing and internal services were consulted with. Consultation with stakeholders allowed them to voice their opinion around the council's current "Digital offering", and what they believed the council's "Digital aspiration" should be. The qualitative and quantitative data that was shared in these meetings has been used during the development of this strategy. The meetings held with different service areas also saw the sharing of public consultation information used by the Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2026.

5. Decide

- 5.1 Cabinet are being requested to approve the Digital Strategy (**Appendix A**) and delegate authority for minor alterations, set out in section 3 of this report.

6. Respond

- 6.1 If the requests in section 3 of this report are agreed to, the council will publish the Digital Strategy. The council will develop an action plan in conjunction with its partners, stating how it will help the borough realise the ambitions set out in the strategy (do nothing, signpost, deliver, regulate).

7. Review

- 7.1 This strategy will be owned by Transformation & Digital and will be subject to its internal governance processes and procedures. It is envisaged that this strategy will be cross cutting and will require Directors to report on progress under the "Digital Strategy" banner. This reporting information will be collated by Digital Transformation & Digital.

Background papers

None.

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16 March 2022

Appendix A –Digital Strategy 2022-2025
Appendix B – Equality Impact Assessment



Councillor M Bird
Leader of the Council

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