Digital Strategy
2022 – 2025

Walsall Council

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Foreword

Technology has always been fascinating and full of potential, but the world has changed at a pace that we couldn't have imagined two years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to change the way in which we work, and we've already come a long way in a shot amount of time. We know we need to continue to look at different ways of communicating with the public, and we want to embrace technology to enable residents and local businesses to access high quality services 24 hours a day. Our Proud transformation already focuses on changing our ways of thinking, changing our behaviours, and changing how we get things done; so in line with this we want to reap further benefits from digital possibilities - improving community engagement, customer experience, staff satisfaction and service efficiency.

We need to continue along this path of change because there is tremendous value in turning data into intelligence - it gives us the ability to make informed decisions, achieve our ambitions and meet the increased demand and expectations from our residents and the business community.

This does not mean that pockets within our community may be left behind, as with new and innovative ways of delivering Council services we can use our workforce and support networks more effectively to bolster digital services by adding additional value through human interaction where appropriate. We want to increase the digital capabilities and confidence of our communities to help them effectively use not only Walsall Council services, but to take advantage of all facets of digital life and realise wider quality of life improvements. We will achieve this by embracing digital opportunities locally, regionally and nationally.

I want Walsall to remain a place to be proud of, and so I am pleased to introduce a Digital Strategy that complements our Proud journey and Council Plan. It outlines our approach to a transformational change that reduces inequalities and ensures all potential is maximised, but this is only the start of an exciting journey!

Councillor Mike Bird
Leader of Walsall Council

Introduction

About Walsall

Walsall is a culturally diverse metropolitan borough consisting of a mix of urban, suburban and semi-rural communities. Covering 40 square miles, it is located to the north-west of Birmingham, and is one of the four local authorities that make up the Black Country sub-region (with Dudley, Sandwell and Wolverhampton).

Walsall's economy has an annual output of £4.77 billion and provides around 120,000 jobs[1]. The local economy supports a steadily increasing resident population of 286,716[2], which is expected to reach 290,200 in 2024. Three in every five people are of working age, but only two thirds of the working age residents are in employment, and for those in work, earnings are below the national average.

Despite decreasing funding and increasing demand, Walsall Council strives to serve the people and communities of Walsall by representing and working with them to protect and improve the quality of life for all, particularly the most vulnerable.

Defining Digital

The term 'digital' is no longer just a name for a type of tool, it has become a culture that embodies modern life. It's a mindset of constant innovation and integration that has transformed the way that people interact with each other, the way that people transact with service providers and it has transformed our resident's expectations of council services. Our definition of digital must therefore reflect both the means and the end of improving the quality, speed and efficiency of Walsall Council's service delivery, and it must acknowledge internal and external perspectives.

Digital from the customer's perspective:

The fast pace of technological change means that customers are familiar with 24/7 digital self-serve pathways that afford increased autonomy in managing requests and transactions. This culminates into the following key elements:

- Services within Walsall Council must develop in line with consumer services to ensure that we remain current, competitive and effective.
- Advancements in digital technologies also provide opportunities to improve accessibility and allow the organisation to expand the reach of our services.
- Walsall Council need to be passionate and dedicated to providing excellent value for money to the tax-payer.

Digital from the organisation's perspective:

Like many authorities, Walsall Council faces ongoing challenges to cut costs whilst providing excellent value for money services. Digital transformation programmes allow us to cultivate a strong foundation of technical capability, digital leadership and collaborative learning to ensure that the organisation can be flexible and adaptable in meeting the future needs of employees, residents and local businesses. Walsall Council must embrace digital tools to drive productivity and breakdown barriers, constantly aiming to innovate the ways we work and deliver genuine change to members of our community.

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[1] https://www.walsallintelligence.org.uk/home/economy/
[2] Estimates of the population for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

Vision and Themes

Walsall Council's Digital Strategy 2022 - 2025 aims to boost benefits for our communities and customers through the strategic use of Information and Communications Technology. It is a cross cutting initiative that will support and supplement neighbouring internal, regional and national strategies whilst delivering our wider Council Plan and aligning with our Proud transformation. The Proud promise is to improve outcomes and customer experience, improve employee satisfaction and engagement, and improve service efficiency and performance. The promises are aligned with our vision for inequalities to be reduced, and that we create an environment that provides opportunities for all individuals and communities to fulfil their potential.

The Council Plan is the golden thread which runs through everything we do. Our corporate values highlight how the Council works with local communities and influences choice and behaviours through Professionalism, Leadership, Accountability, Transparency and Ethical working (PLATE).

The Council's values and behaviours are central to everything the Council delivers through a culture of continuous improvement. The Council Plan sets out our five EPICC priorities - Economic Growth (E), People (P), Internal Focus (I), Children (Ch) and Communities (Co) which continue to be our focus and are underpinned by resident focused outcomes. We strive to increase performance, efficiency and champion the design of services to meet the needs of our communities. The Council is committed to creating an environment that provides opportunities for all residents and communities to fulfil their potential and deliver resilient communities.

Walsall Council has formulated a Digital Strategy which will help the borough to achieve its digital ambitions. The Digital Strategy will drive change across five themes:

1. Digital Skills
2. Digital Inclusion
3. Digital Infrastructure
4. Digital Business Development
5. Digital Region

These themes boost our digital culture by removing barriers for access, cultivate blended social learning, reach a balance between digital pathways and operational capacity, and create a strong, secure and flexible technical foundation to support 24/7 digital processes.

Due to the ever-changing nature of technology and the environment in which we live, this strategy will provide a blueprint for delivery over the next three years. A three-year plan allows enough time to expedite our current initiatives and work towards creating an increasingly resilient and digitally capable conurbation. Through co-design, collaboration, and facilitation Walsall Council can act as a vehicle for positive digital change across the borough.

1. Digital Skills

There is a clear trend that an increasing number of job roles require a digital element and therefore through strong Digital Leadership, Walsall Council will empower its staff with these skills to meet the needs of the borough.

We want to retain and attract a diverse, flexible and digitally capable workforce within Walsall. We will cultivate blended social learning to improve collaboration, shared learning and maximise both organisational and leadership capability. This includes understanding our internal workforce characteristics and emphasising the value of human skills, experience and technology to reach a balance between digital pathways and operational capacity. The Council will also continue to lead on our Endless Possibilities programme, using the Apprenticeship Levy and the Enterprise Act to upskill employees through digital pathways and deliver on the workforce needs of their respective service areas. We will continue to work closely with neighbouring councils and the West Midlands Combined Authority to share best practice and intelligence.

No resident should be left behind, and although Walsall Council aims to help the most excluded groups (including, but not limited to, homeless people, people with disabilities and people with mental health problems), we also acknowledge that some groups will need additional support on their digital journey. The resources freed up by technical developments such as process digitisation and automation can be used as a digital support workforce to assist those who can't join the wider digital journey.

Beyond consideration of internal resources, Walsall Council will play a strategic role in looking at the skills needed across the wider workforce in the borough. As we embrace this fourth industrial revolution[3], new and dynamic roles will emerge whilst existing roles will be transformed, meaning our residents will need digital skills to match. 92% of businesses already state that having digital skills is a key attribute that employees need[4], and so Walsall Council intends to digitally upskill the residents of Walsall to become upwardly mobile and have the best chance at gaining employment.

[3] West Midlands Digital Roadmap 2021
[4] Worldskills UK, 2021

2. Digital Inclusion

Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)[5]. This includes 5 elements:

- Affordable, robust broadband internet service.
- Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user.
- Access to digital literacy training.
- Quality technical support.
- Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.

These barriers prevent residents from fully participating in our community, as they become excluded from activities such as job hunting, working from home and accessing vital public services and support.

Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances, working to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology. But we'll need help to do this, and we want to promote 'Digital Kindness' as a way to promote mental health benefits[6] and bring together our network of volunteers and community associates to reduce isolation and create relationships that boost Digital Inclusion. This includes further engagement with digital communities via social media, which research[7] indicates will provide Walsall Council with an opportunity to act as a conduit by signposting residents to community and partnership offerings.

This will ensure that the residents of Walsall can access digital services in a safe and secure way, allowing them to make more informed lifestyle decisions. For example, it is estimated that 2.5 million people are behind on their broadband bills[8], but that people who are digitally savvy pay around £228 per year on average less on utility bills[9]. Furthermore, Walsall Council can actively work with the WMCA to investigate the ethical off-loading of mobile data to those that need it and also explore opportunities for residents to leverage cheaper broadband tariffs, with an overarching aim to reduce the digital divide.

[5] Definitions - National Digital Inclusion Alliance
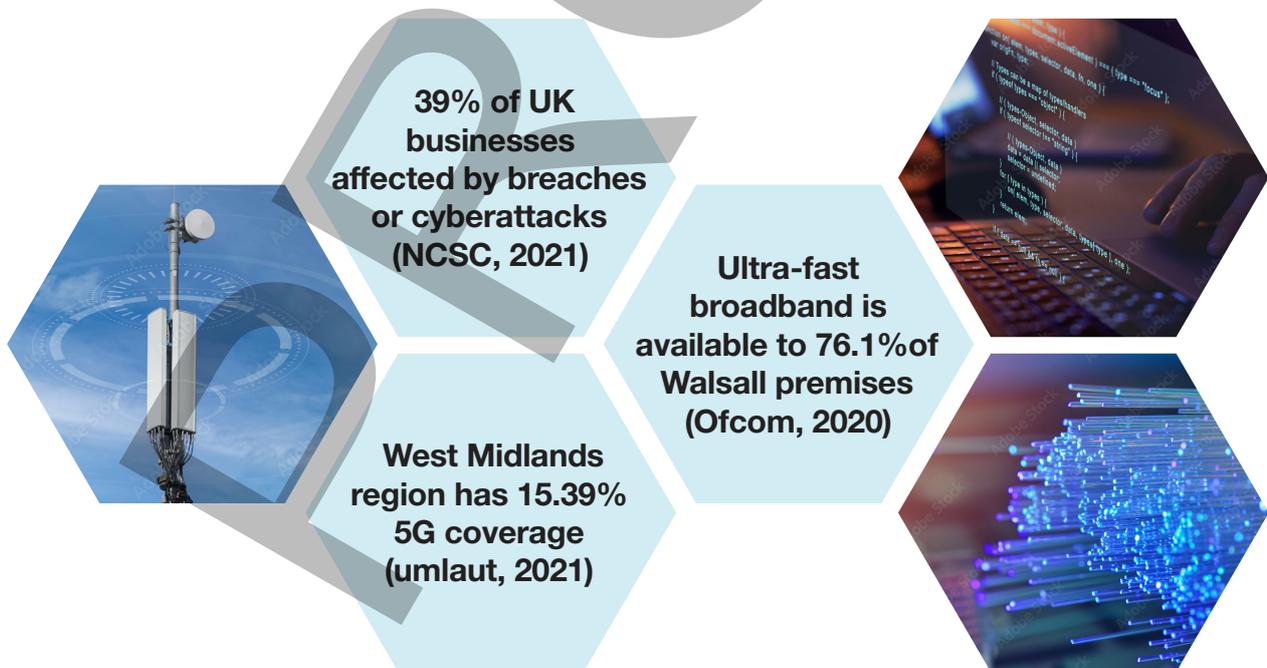[6] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/doing-good-does-you-good/health-benefits-altruism
[7] https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Local-2.0-How-digital-technology-empowers-local-communities-May-2012.pdf

3. Digital Infrastructure

Digital Infrastructure reflects the physical infrastructure that creates the digital world and enables access[8]. Greater internet speeds and higher levels of access allow more people to access our digital tools and services, whereas poor connectivity and infrastructure has an understandably detrimental effect on the borough's digital ambitions. Therefore, Digital Infrastructure is intrinsic to supporting our communities with their digital growth.

The borough demonstrates excellent 4G indoor and outdoor coverage of 99.57%[9], but has room for improvement with the rollout of 5G, with limited suppliers providing patchy coverage across the borough. Likewise, broadband connectivity shows a need for development, as 22.5% of premises receive up to 300Mbit/s download speeds and ultra-fast broadband is available to only 76.1% of premises[10]. Walsall Council will undertake collaborative horizon scanning exercises with a view to harness infrastructure opportunities for the residents of Walsall. This includes collaborating with partners such as West Midlands 5G and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to accelerate the rollout of 5G and full fibre broadband connectivity across the borough though schemes such as 5PRING and the Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator. The Council will also work in partnership with tech companies and innovation schemes to encourage pilot initiatives and provide practical solutions to the challenges that we currently face.

From an internal perceptive, Walsall Council will supply robust and resilience technology strategies to meet the needs of its workforce and customers. This will initially be led by our existing Enabling Technology roadmap, with longer term development being mapped by our architectural function. We will create new reference architectures for business, data, applications and technology to drive efficiencies and influence innovative solution development that adheres to principles such as Digital by Design. The council is dedicated to providing best of breed cybersecurity initiatives to ensure that confidentiality, integrity and availability is at the focus of all our technological endeavours. To this end there has been an investment in a stronger cyber security function in the service as part of the service redesign.

39% of UK businesses affected by breaches or cyberattacks (NCSC, 2021)

Ultra-fast broadband is available to 76.1%of Walsall premises (Ofcom, 2020)

West Midlands region has 15.39% 5G coverage (umlaut, 2021)

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[8] What is Local Digital Capital and why is it important? (techuk.org)
[9] Ofcom Connected Nations 2020 (Fixed local and unitary authority)
[10] Ofcom Connected Nations 2020 (Mobile local and unitary authority)

4. Digital Business Development

Micro to small businesses are considerably more likely to face digital exclusion. They tend to be less financially resilient than larger corporations and are less likely to have an eCommerce presence. We will work collaboratively with external partners such as WM5G to facilitate hubs for technology partners and neighbouring authorities to respond to the challenges presented by our local businesses. Local businesses are also customers of Walsall Council, and their access to council services will be slick and easy to navigate in line with improvements for residents.

Walsall has always had industry as part of its identity, with industrial origins being based in ironworks and the manufacturing of leather. The industrial landscape has changed significantly since the height of manufacturing, but Walsall is now in the process of adding to its identity. We plan to make a vibrant tech ecosystem, leveraging other themes within this strategy such as Digital Skills and Digital Infrastructure to support this ambition.

To ensure that Walsall remains attractive for investment it will work with partners to increase full fibre broadband and 5G connectivity across the borough. Walsall wants local businesses to have every advantage to be competitive and flourish.

By leveraging its ties to higher education and partner agencies, Walsall is committed to providing a local workforce who have the skillset to work across transitioning sectors. Walsall Council will look to attract funding streams such as the Town Deal Fund and Funding for Digital Skills Training to support the demand of a digitally literate workforce.

5. Digital Region

Walsall Council recognises that data is an asset at a local, regional and national level. By developing a mature Business Insights function, Walsall Council will unlock data at a local level through cultivating a holistic view of council data and focussing effort on priorities to achieve better outcomes for customers through intelligent, timely decision making and efficient service planning and delivery. The council will increase the quality of quantitative and qualitative data, affording the organisation a fuller, more complete picture of the environment in which it operates.

Walsall pledge to ethically share data with its partners cross the West Midlands region where appropriate, taking a pragmatic approach to 'bust barriers'. Walsall Council will explore simple, practical digital integrations with partner agencies and work to remove legacy silos. Furthermore, when we create strategic partnerships or look to procure new suppliers, we will assess Social Value factors to secure additional benefits and avoid any negative impacts for Walsall. We expect that suppliers can commit to improvements towards the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities through alignment with our digital themes.

It is noted that the Digital Infrastructure for the West Midlands region is ranked 2nd nationally, but the level of Digital Adoption does not match the infrastructure at its disposal[11]. Walsall Council will champion Digital Adoption across the borough, whilst improving its position within the Digital Region by fostering excellent working relationships with the West Midlands Combined Authority, neighbouring authorities and companies such as West Midlands 5G. As a borough we are keen to become more involved in Smart City initiatives and are already engaging on initiatives such as Road Condition Monitoring and an Advanced Electric Vehicle Technology Centre. We will explore Assistive Technology capabilities, participating in proof of concepts and priming ourselves if they develop into real-life workable solutions .

Digital Outcomes

Theme	Outcome	Activities	Link to Council Priorities (EPICC)	Primary Lever
Digital Skills	Up-skilling of workforce to meet the needs of our citizens.	Cultivate blended social learning to improve collaboration and shared learning.	E	Workforce Strategy
		Maximise both organisational and leadership capability.	I, P	Workforce Strategy
	Create an efficient hybrid model combining technology and people.	Uplift employees to apply creativity, interpersonal skills, judgment, intuition, and problem solving in conjunction with technology.	I, P	Customer Experience Strategy
		Use the perspective of our enthusiastic and experienced workforce to influence upskilling of communities.	I, P, Co	Customer Experience Strategy
Digital Inclusion	Address digital poverty and provide access to basic services.	Develop community resources to give people access to new and emerging digital technology through the provision of computers, free WiFi and other technologies.	E, P, I, Ch, Co	Resilient Communities
		Facilitate the development of a Digital Citizen who can leverage technology in a safe and secure way.	P, Ch, Co	Proud (Resilient Communities)
	Develop Walsall's social network to encourage Digital Kindness	Leverage community associates and a network of volunteers to assist those excluded by traditional digital avenues.	P, Co	Resilient Communities
		Improve the confidence and capability of our digital citizens, working with partners to develop digital skills.	P, Co	Communications Strategy

Digital Infrastructure	Increase Walsall Council's technical capability.	Develop a strong, secure but flexible foundation that can support new and/or enhanced technical initiatives.	E, P, I, Ch, Co	Enabling Technology
		Design solutions which exploit technology and data to reduce waste, and challenge where existing manual workarounds can be digitised.	I, P	Enabling Technology
	Improve connectivity.	Support the rollout of telecommunications equipment to improve 5G coverage.	E, P, I	West Midland Digital Roadmap
		Achieve maximum coverage for residents and businesses to leverage full fibre opportunity zone (FFOZ).	E, P, I	West Midland Digital Roadmap
Digital Business Development	Deliver a digital boost to local businesses.	Launch local innovation hubs to tackle urgent problems/ challenges.	E, I, Co	Resilient Communities
		Use digital to accelerate local growth opportunities; including assisting businesses, creating/ safeguarding jobs and invest in the borough.	E, P, I	Regeneration and Investment
	Leverage commercial data and telemetry.	Understand current market activity to fulfil an enabling role and align backend processes.	E, I, Co	Income Generation
		Improve corporate asset utilisation beyond 60%.	E, I	Income Generation
Digital Region	Work closely with other public and private sector partners across the region.	Work together to strengthen local digital capital, embracing new technology and making our services more effective and efficient.	E	West Midland Digital Roadmap
		Emphasize social value during procurement pieces, promoting community benefits from commercial contracts/ partnerships.	E, P, Ch, Co	Social Value Policy
	Effective, easy, and appropriate data sharing.	Increase usage of BI tools to monitor, design, deliver and transform our services.	E, P, I, Ch, Co	The Hub
		Facilitate the sharing of data where appropriate, at both an organisational and cross agency level, removing barriers and identifying key trends.	E, P, I, Ch, Co	The Hub

Related Strategies

The Digital Strategy aims to supplement and support our Proud journey, the Council Plan and wider strategies from within Walsall Council and beyond. It will have a particularly close relationship to the following:

West Midlands Digital Roadmap 2021 – 2026

The West Midlands Digital Roadmap sets out a regional vision for increased digital connectivity, promoted as the golden thread that links numerous industries including construction, transport, healthcare and public services. This roadmap sets out 5 missions to ensure that all of our citizens are equipped to play a full part in, and benefit from this transformation. It emphasises a strong, collaborative effort across the region so that the West Midlands can lead the way in the "fourth industrial revolution".

Customer Experience Strategy 2021 – 2026

The Customer Experience Strategy 2021 – 2026 highlights how Walsall Council is committed to providing services which are easy to use, simple and effective. It aims to provide tailored support where needed and how we may need to provide services in a different way, depending on the needs and preferences of our customers. It supports residents to become more self-sufficient by allowing them to access services via new 24/7 digital self-serve pathways, whilst also recognising the need to support our most vulnerable residents, through a trusted network of community and voluntary sector partners.

Workforce Strategy 2022 – 2025

The Workforce Strategy 2022 – 2025 outlines our PLATE values as a set of core behavioural and managerial behaviours which define 'how' we are expected to approach our work and sits alongside 'what' we do, as outlined in each of our job descriptions. It is fed by the Operational Development strategy to outline the shared values of what we believe in, and how we apply this to corporate strategy, structure and systems; as well attracting/retaining high quality staff and maintain productive cultures.

Approach

During the next 12 months we will be:

- Ensuring that our key policies and strategies are integrated with our digital ambition and principles. The use of digital must be designed with the customer at the heart and is not an end in itself.
- Developing the digital skills and confidence of our workforce so they are equipped to apply technology productively and proactively to find better ways of delivering public services. We need to continue to develop specialist skills and capabilities through insight and business intelligence to enable us to achieve our ambitions. This also includes skills of influencing and working collaboratively with partners to achieve outcomes through different means.
- Influencing the development of digital skills and solutions within our communities through partners (including voluntary organisations), schools, colleges and universities, so they are engaged, not excluded from the revolution.
- Engaging with residents digitally so that we reinvigorate democracy across communities.
- Changing the way we design, procure and build digital systems so that the customer journey is at the heart of how new systems operate and work whilst promoting cyber security, protecting privacy and data, delivering robust information, investing in delivering digital resilience so that our online services can be trusted to be safe and reliable.
- Aligning our digital services with industry and sector standards, policies and procedures. Suppliers will be challenged to offer functionality rich digital systems with a focus on the customer experience, data quality, integration and adaptability.
- Improving efficiency and accessibility to Council services for disabled and vulnerable groups by harnessing advances in technology including improved accessibility, translation services, customer focussed system design, video conferencing, etc.
- Empowering citizens by increasing resilience within communities by making more people aware of resources within their community. Developing their own solutions by pooling existing community resources and matching volunteers to areas of need.
- Collaborating across our partners, including the voluntary sector to create new, innovative and efficient methods of service delivery.

Within 3 years we will aspire to:

- See a clear shift in the way our customers engage with the Council. As the uptake and usage of digital services increase, customers will expect a seamless multi-channel experience, mirroring their experiences across wider sectors.
- Be advanced in our digital solutions - the way we store, manage and analyse data, will enable the Council to be clearer about which services are required, when these should be delivered and who they should be delivered to.

Working with suppliers and partners we aspire to:

- Enabling all customers and businesses to have access to high quality internet access and be more confident in realising its potential.
- Enabling customers to have access to equipment and support to access digital services in a wider range of public and non-public buildings.
- Having high coverage of full-fibre broadband connectivity and 5G capability across the borough.

How will we measure success?

Delivery of our Digital Strategy fits within our Proud Journey and our vision will have been realised when it is evident that economic growth and improving the wellbeing of Walsall residents has been achieved and we can demonstrate that we have improved:

- Outcomes and customer experience.
- Employee satisfaction and engagement.
- Service efficiency & performance.
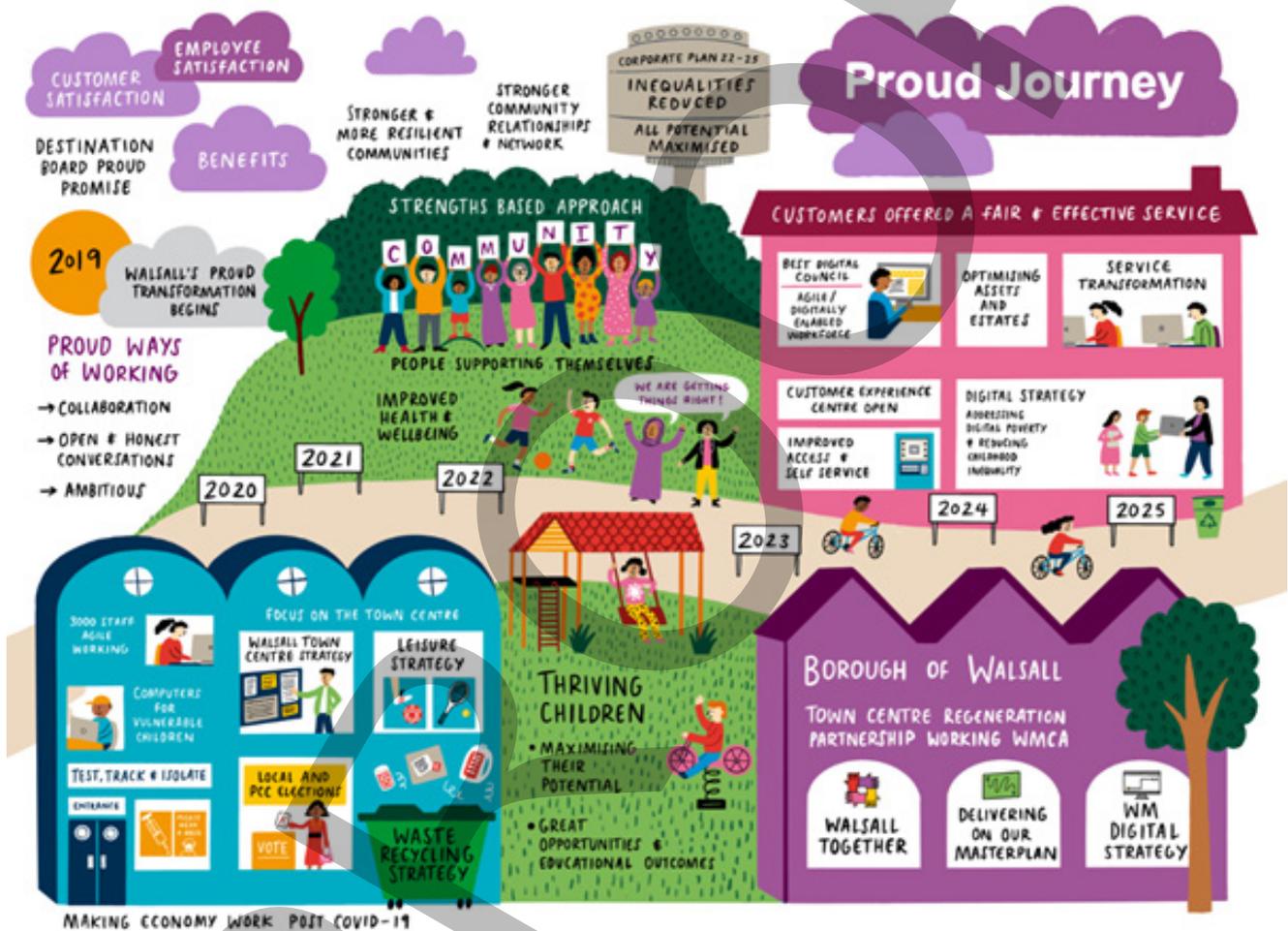
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