EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION

REPORT OF:	Executive Member for Digital and Customer Services
LEAD OFFICERS:	Strategic Director of Resources (SIRO)
DATE:	Thursday, 8 December 2022

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED:	Digital and Customer Services
WARD/S AFFECTED:	(All Wards);
KEY DECISION:	N

SUBJECT: EB (Executive Board) Digital strategy update report

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2021 the Council's Executive Board approved an updated BwD Digital Strategy 2021-2024, which outlined a number of initiatives across 4 work streams;

- Digital First for our Services
- Enable Transformation for our Staff
- Data Driven Organisation
- Secure and Resilient Technology

Blackburn with Darwen has invested in the people, skills and infrastructure to provide 21st century public services, which has enabled the Council and its services to work in new ways. As the Council embarked on its latest vision for digital and technology it was doing so with strong foundations, albeit after a prolonged crisis with the Covid-19 pandemic in which the pace of technological change rapidly increased.

Much progress has been made in the first year of delivering the new strategy and the strategy remains dynamic to the changing requirements and priorities of the Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Board:

- Notes the activity to date
- Supports the continuation of delivery of the digital strategy

3. BACKGROUND

The following sections provide a summary of delivery across each of the digital strategy work streams.

Work Stream 1 - Digital First for our Services

The Council procured a Digital Customer Platform (DCP) in February 2020 as a replacement for the legacy, end of life customer contact portal. The legacy portal had been prone to issues of regular downtime for customers and was at the end of support and security, which was a major risk to the organisation. The initial project plan aimed to transfer existing services from autumn 2020. The Digital team as part of the pandemic response brought forward plans and began to launch online services through the platform from March 2020.

During the pandemic the Council used the new platform to deliver rapid 24/7 online services to businesses, individuals and families. The team developed over 30 different Covid related online forms including for business grants, Help Hub requests, HWRC bookings and SMART Covid testing. Between April 2020 and March 2021 the system processed over 96,000 Covid related requests and transactions across Help Hub, HWRCs and Grants & Support.

Without the new platform and a dedicated resource to develop forms, the Council would have had to recruit significantly more staff to process the volume of Covid related requests, as well as maintaining existing services.

Since its launch in 2020, the Digital Customer Platform has seen over 50 new services designed and delivered digitally alongside existing services migrated from the legacy customer portal. By April 2022 65,000 customers had signed up with an online account, compared to 29,000 on the legacy portal. At the time of writing there are 79,700 users signed up to the DCP. Over 160 digital forms remain live, covering 36 service areas.

New digital services have included areas such as School Transport Bus Passes, coordinated volunteer clean ups, Changing Futures and the Council's 'Wall of Shame' reporting.

During 2021/22 our existing digital first Blue Badge Service reduced processing time to an average of 19 days from 38 days in 2020/21. 94% of applicants self-served and the remainder were digitally assisted.

After redesigning and launching the Council's website in 2019 we have continually iterated the site to provide a more accessible experience. According to the independent Silktide Index for UK Council accessibility, the BwD website has consistently scored highly since 2020 with scores of 87/100 (March 2020) 90/100 (March 2021) and 91/100 (March 2022).

The BwD website was chosen at random in December 2021 for testing by the Cabinet Office's Central Digital Team as part of a nationwide programme measuring compliance against the newly adopted Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. In March 2022 the Cabinet Office confirmed compliance of our Website Accessibility Statement and were satisfied with our response around proposed improvement actions.

During 21/22 we have prepared an update to the Council's Website to deliver a consistent Gov.UK style, working as part of a national network of Councils. This will enable the Council to produce repeatable functionality across all website services in line with Government Digital Services standards. This will also save BwD time and money going forwards as we re-use developments made across the country for common Council online services, rather than extensive in-house development or commissioning 3rd parties.

During the pandemic there was an increased demand on the Council website, seeing on average 138,000 user sessions per month. During 21/22 as the pandemic eased the number had dropped to an average of 133,000 per month which still represents a 51% increase compared to 19/20, pre pandemic data.

During 2021/22 we introduced User Research roles to support development of our digital services. Our User Researchers have continued to develop a Customer Panel with our residents. A key change has been to work with specified cohorts of people as part of the panel so we can better target groups to help us design specific services.

The BwD Digital Inclusion Network was formed in 2021, creating a formal collaboration group between 3rd Sector, Council and partners. To date the group has mapped and coordinated activity and intelligence across the borough to support collaboration on initiatives to improve learning and access to digital across the borough. In May 2022 we added Digital Inclusion Strategy' to the Council's portfolio for Digital & Customer Services and we are developing policy approaches to be agreed in 2022/23.

Contacts to Customer Services have reduced by 10% between 2018/19 and 21/22. During the pandemic, demand did increase and was met with additional Covid resources, however this was the exception against an ongoing trend of reducing incoming contact. The decrease in overall contact can be attributed to the rise in self-service on the Council's website and systems, more users signed up to the Digital Customer Portal and improved contact centre technology (such as call-back options). Face to face visits have reduced by 60% compared to 2018/19 (averaging 54 visits per day in 21/22) and telephone calls have reduced by 17% in the same period. Replacing traditional methods of contact, online web chat messaging has increased almost tenfold, proving popular with customers and a more efficient way of delivering services.

On the telephones, during 21/22 BwD Customer Services answered 68% of calls within 60 seconds compared to 54% in 18/19 and the number of abandoned calls by customers has more than halved. This demonstrates a clear improvement in our local customer response. By channel shifting and reducing traditional demand, evidence shows that we can provide an improved service to those that need to telephone the Council.

Work Stream 2 - Enable Transformation for our Staff

During 2021/22 work took place to plan and develop a BwD online Digital Skills Hub for staff, which launched in May 2022. The hub will enable higher levels of digital confidence for staff, enabling them to increase effectiveness using digital tools. There are now 59 digital champions in place across the Council.

The organisation has continued to take advantage of the Council's investment in Office 365, including Microsoft Teams and Teams Rooms video conferencing. Services and staff have an increased level of flexibility in working locations and patterns. Travel to and from office locations is reduced and we can now approach estates strategy in new ways to reduce costs. 82% of users are actively using Microsoft Teams in the organisation, making collaboration easier.

Through the introduction of the Digital Customer Portal into service workflows we have increased mobile working and transformed services. These include street cleansing, bin deliveries and bulky collections where customers now submit online requests and jobs are automatically picked up on mobile devices by officers. There is no printing of jobs or returning to base to receive allocated work and customers are notified of the completion of jobs automatically online. In the Changing Futures

service, officers in the field across Lancashire use the Digital Customer Portal to log cases on tablet computers and digitally triage and refer people into relevant services.

We have made improvements to the IT Service Desk and Support Service leading to a halving of the time taken to deliver new requests for service, such as a new IT device, software, account or change. This supports improved productivity for teams and Council staff who can now more quickly access enablers through IT.

Demand into the IT Service Desk has reduced by 28% compared to pre-pandemic figures. A reduced number of faults being logged can be attributed to improved systems and devices and more self-service, for instance self-service password reset. By reducing IT faults, productive working time for staff across the Council is increased.

By introducing video streaming technology to the Council Chamber, Council meetings are now routinely live streamed and are accessible to watch back on-line. This enables increased transparency and supports open democracy. Introducing 'Teams Rooms' video conferencing into meeting rooms has also enabled Councillors to take part in training and some meetings virtually, improving flexibility and reducing travel.

Work Stream 3 - Data Driven Organisation

A new data infrastructure has been introduced to the Council based on the Microsoft Power BI platform. We have worked with 3rd party partners to assist in the configuration and build. The platform provides us with the ability to integrate, process and visualise key data for Officers and Councillors. The infrastructure is scalable and is designed to grow with an increasing need for data in the delivery of future public services. Currently there are approximately 30 Power BI data dashboards in use across Council departments, including Highways, Environment, Children's Services, Help Hub and Customer Services.

A new centralised Data and Insights team was established in 2020, achieved through redeploying existing IT roles who have since developed the infrastructure and data governance. The team has since expanded through the merger of other existing data and performance roles across the Council in 2021.

A key activity as part of the strategy has been to integrate back end systems to enable a joined up view of data, whether that's around a person or a service. The team have successfully integrated the Power BI system with the Council's customer contact centre system 'Netcall' and the Digital Customer Portal, which will enable a single view of customer channel data.

Preparatory work has taken place across Children's and Education systems around data matching to support proactive decision making and interventions. We are also in discussions with Lancashire County Council around data approaches to support Family Hub models. We have improved elements of Children's Services reporting, to automate and reduce the time it takes to generate key reporting on statutory services.

Work has continued to develop integration between our Adult Social Care case management system and the Lancashire & South Cumbria Integrated Digital Care Record, known as LPRES. We are in the process of migrating our Mosaic system to an Enterprise (off-site) hosted platform with our supplier who will then upgrade the system to the latest version, enabling us to build the integration and exchange digital messaging and workflow with the wider NHS system in 2023. The upgrade will also provide an up to date platform for us to build in necessary Care Act changes in 2023.

These integration activities support our expected outcome set out in the digital strategy to develop 'master data for our most common data sets to remove duplication'.

A Data Strategy has been developed and will be approved during 22/23. The strategy sets out how we will integrate, govern, protect and leverage Council data.

We committed to increase data skills as part of our digital strategy and we have built a peer network of staff throughout the Council. The network shares learning and increases consistency around data design. In addition the central data team are now part of wider networks both regionally and nationally to learn and share best practice.

Work Stream 4 - Secure & Resilient Technology

During 2022 we have recruited an experienced Head of IT and appointed other senior IT roles in the team, within existing budgets. Competition in the IT skills market is high and we continue with our strategy of 'growing our own' through offering internal opportunities and career development. The service director works closely with Blackburn College, championing IT / digital skills and sits on the governing board.

We have supported the development of a number of team members through management and technical training paths. We have been successful in accessing government funding for Cyber Security training for specialists in the team. The team also have access to an industry standard, specialist online IT training platform.

We have continued to work towards moving critical systems to Cloud and Enterprise computing. In November 2021 The Executive Board approved funding for the Council to transition critical back-end infrastructure to the Cloud. Early work preparing the platforms and further consultation with suppliers took place between November and April. With the new IT leadership team now in place for 2022/23 the project will be profiled for delivery.

In July 2021 the Executive Board approved funding for the Council to implement a new Unified Communications system. The original target date for implementation reported at the time was June 2022. Due to recruitment challenges and complexities with planning the project has been delayed. A new project plan is currently being developed and we expect to implement the system in spring 2023. The delay hasn't resulted in any adverse financial impact and has provided the benefit of more mature technology now being available in the market.

A new Enterprise (off-site) hosted HR & Payroll system went live in November 2021 and we have continued to work closely with the supplier during 2022. This work follows on from the migration of our financial systems to off site hosting in 2020/21. These migrations have increased the resilience of key functions of the Council.

As part of implementing the new HR & Payroll system in 2021 we rolled out Multi Factor Authentication (MFA) on the BwD network. This introduces additional levels of user authentication, improving security and integrity of BwD systems and information.

Regular audits and exercises continue to take place to inform our improvement plans within IT to ensure the integrity of networks and systems. Members of the Council's Audit Committee were briefed on the Council's approach to Cyber Security in June 2022.

Next steps

We will continue to deliver planned work with existing investment across the four work streams and work in accordance with the six principles set out in the strategy;

- Customer Centred Design
- Secure by Design
- Cost and Quality Effective
- Digital First and Inclusive
- Data driven
- Open, flexible and Cloud First

We will improve and strengthen IT Services and infrastructure, particularly in relation to the increasing international threat around Cyber Security. Over the next 12 months we will complete key digital and IT projects including Unified Communications, Cloud, Core Network Replacement, Corporate Website upgrade and the HR and Payroll system implementation.

Our Service Design, Customer and Business Operations teams will increasingly collaborate to deliver continuous service improvement and drive further channel shift. A number of services to customers will be proposed to move to digital first, to further reduce demand on services. Work already started to digitise Pest Control, Taxi Licensing and integration of Highways requesting / DCP will be completed. We will introduce a Councillor portal as part of the DCP for Councillors to log, track and monitor case work across their wards.

We will re-develop measures for success and Council KPIs for digital as part of the wider performance management review for the 2023/24 municipal year.

Our Collaboration with departments across the Council, in particular with People's Services, will continue to increase. This will mean alignment of some digital staff to important transformation areas and closer working with our technical leadership. We will co-develop digital plans in these areas aligned to the strategic work streams set out as part of the Council's medium term financial plans.

4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

Continued delivery of the digital strategy will enable the transformation needed across the Council over the coming years. Given the budget challenges the Council faces there is a risk to delivery in the medium term, if existing revenue and programme funding is limited or scaled back.

The risk of Cyber Attack for public institutions is serious, with a number of high profile attacks against Local Authorities, NHS Trusts and Universities in recent years. The impact and likelihood of Cyber Attack will increase for the Council if we do not continue to adequately invest in work stream 4 activities.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

With increasing digitisation and digital first approaches, policy and service design will need to be increasingly collaborative across the council and with residents and service users. We will need to balance the needs of those who are digitally excluded with the requirement to deliver services at a lower cost in the future.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Planned delivery is currently funded through existing revenue and capital budgets, alongside government grants. Elements of future strategy delivery that require funding will be subject to the Council's usual financial processes including capital allocation.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Any further procurement activity to deliver the outcomes of the strategy will require procurement team support which may require legal advice.

As we increase the use of data across the council we must continue to carefully protect Council and personal data, working within relevant legal frameworks.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional resource implications as a result of this report. Delivery of the strategy is dependent on maintaining current budgeted resources across the areas of Digital and IT in particular.

9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS
Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.

Option 1 ☒ Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 ☐ In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA link here)*

Option 3 ☐ In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA attachment)*

10. CONSULTATIONS
Consultation on the original strategy was undertaken across the council, partners and a small number of residents. A customer panel of approximately 120 people regularly inform the co-design and improvement of digital services.

11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE
The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

VERSION:	**1**

CONTACT OFFICER:	**Paul Fleming**
DATE:	10th November 2022
BACKGROUND PAPER:	Blackburn with Darwen Digital Strategy Overview 2021 - 2024