



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council



**Customer Services and  
Digital Strategy**  
2021 - 2024

# Our Vision

We want to deliver excellent customer services that are easy to use and provide value for money to all our residents.

Where possible, we will provide digital access to all our services.

We will expect customers who can self-serve to do so, so that we can focus our resources on the people who need our help the most.

We will use digital technology to help us put the customer at the heart of everything we do.



## Make it clear how customers can contact us

- We will provide an easy to use website with information on how customers can contact us. Digital channels, where available, will always be the first choice. But clear information on how customers can speak to staff will also be provided.
- We will make all of our written communications easy to understand and clear about how customers can contact the Council.
- We will provide information in ways to suit our customers and ensure we make use of assistive technologies to improve access for people with disabilities.
- We will provide telephone and face to face services for those who need it and ensure appointments are available to avoid customers queuing for services.

## Make it clear what we can help customers with and what we can't

- We will ensure all information about Council services is available on our website.
- We will be clear from the start about what services we charge for and those that we provide for free.
- We will explain how long we will take to deal with requests and keep customers updated with progress.
- We will expect customers who can use on-line services to do so.
- We will be clear about what help and support we can provide to those customers who cannot use on-line services.
- We will ensure staff are available in our Customer Contact Centre to provide support for our customers to access on-line services.

# Our Aims

## Provide excellent customer services

- We will provide excellent customer services through face to face, telephone or digital channels.
- We will minimise waiting times and ensure customers are connected to the right member of staff who can resolve their enquiry at the first point of contact.
- Our focus will be on quality, ensuring we get things right first time. By doing this we will reduce the need for customers to contact the Council repeated times to get their enquiry resolved.
- We will develop a clear set of customer performance standards and ensure we deliver all Council services to them.
- We will be helpful, compassionate and responsive to customers' needs by putting the customer at the heart of everything we do and ensuring a consistent and positive customer experience.

## Provide good quality, easy to use digital services

- We will deliver all of our services digitally, including on-line applications, service requests, enquiries and payments.
- Our digital services will be so easy to use that they become the natural place for our customers to go. Our services will be safe and reliable to use, so that customers will want to access information and services using that method again.
- Our website will provide digital access to services and allow customers to request and pay for services on-line. Customers will be able to get all the information they need about Council services from our website, without having to speak to a member of staff.
- Access to services will be available through various devices such as desktops, laptops or smartphones.
- We will ensure we handle all of our customer's data safely and securely.





## Listen to our customers and use this to improve services

- We will listen to our customers and use their feedback to improve services.
- We will ask our customers about the service they have received and in particular, what we could do to improve.
- We will use customer data to better understand what our customers need and whether our services meet those expectations.
- We will use complaints about our services to understand what has gone wrong and what we need to do to put things right.
- We will provide information on what we have done to improve services as a result of customer feedback.



## Deliver value for money

- We will make digital the first or only option for all high volume and transactional customer services, such as applying or paying for services.
- We will use our data to improve services for our customers and make them more efficient.
- We will use technology to automate as many repetitive activities as possible, so that we can focus our staff resources to help those people who need the most support.
- We will invest in new technology to make processes more efficient and ensure a joined-up approach from service request to service delivery.
- We will reduce the amount of paper we use by introducing on-line services, which will also help to reduce our carbon footprint.
- We will invest savings from digital efficiencies into providing extra support for our customers to use on-line services.

## Invest in our people

- We will help our own staff to get on-line so that they are in the best position to promote digital services to our customers.
- We will provide our staff with the right IT equipment and training to do their jobs efficiently and help our customers.
- We will ensure all front-line staff receive regular customer focussed training.
- We will be clear about our expectations for staff and recognise when they go the extra mile to help our customers.
- We will regularly ask our staff about how we can improve our services.
- We will keep our front-line staff safe and make this our first priority. We will make it clear to customers what behaviours are unacceptable and take action against those who verbally or physically abuse our staff.



# Digital Exclusion

Whilst we will promote the shift to digital channels as a way to deliver most services and communicate with residents, we also must ensure that no-one is left behind.

## The benefits of going online

Our aim is to get as many of our residents on-line, not just to access Council services, but to get the full advantage of using the internet including:

- Access to better utility deals, home insurance and cheaper credit, often only available on-line
- Access to welfare benefits and Government services, including information about health services and healthy living
- Access to employment, training and volunteering opportunities
- Avoiding social isolation by being able to contact friends and relatives. Finding out about local events and what's going on in the area
- Finding out information and advice using internet tools, video tutorials and 'live chat' support services.

## Why residents are digitally excluded

We recognise the reasons why some people don't use or can't use the internet that can limit their access to Council services. There are four main factors that create digital exclusion:

**Access:** People who can't physically access the internet or who do not have the financial means to go on-line, such as having computers, broadband or mobile phones.

**Motivation:** People who don't understand or appreciate the benefits of going on-line.

**Skills:** People who lack the digital skills to use the internet.

**Confidence:** People who are worried about fraud and on-line security.

## Community Survey

In the 2018 Darlington Community Survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents said they would be willing to contact the Council electronically. This percentage was higher amongst younger people and people in work, but lower for older age groups and those with disabilities.

The main reasons for respondents not willing to contact the Council electronically were:

- Not having any internet access
- Not being confident about using the internet
- Concerns about confidentiality and security.

## How we will assist and support customers who cannot access digital services?

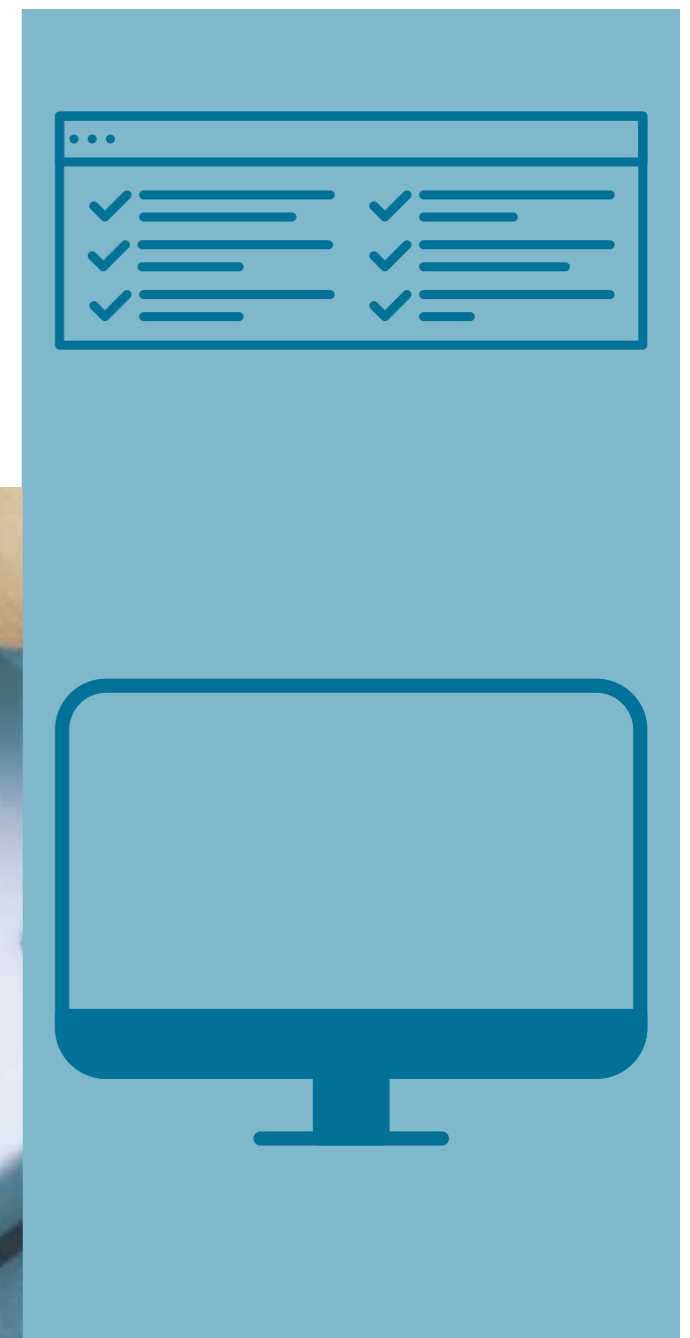
We recognise that if our customers are digitally excluded from our services, they will also be excluded from other services and the benefits of the internet as well. Therefore, our aim is to get more people on-line and connected to digital services, where we can.

For those who can use digital services, we will provide the right level of support for these customers.

For those who cannot use digital services, we will provide full support.

For those customers who cannot access the Council's digital services for whatever reason, we will always provide contact with a member of staff to assist.

For those customers who cannot physically access the internet or who do not have the financial means to go on-line, we will provide computer access to Council services in our Customer Contact Centre and other Council venues, free of charge.



# What we have done so far...

## Improved the Darlington Borough Council website

- Continued to make our on-line functions easy to use.
- Updated the website's layout, so mobile users can use the site as easily as desktop users.
- Continued to improve My Darlington, the resident account system, making it easier to use.
- Continued to enhance the security of My Darlington, so residents can be confident their personal information is safe.
- Registered over 16,000 people for My Darlington with over 3,600 visitors using the service each month.
- Updated the website coding to provide a better look, feel and easy, simple to use navigation.
- Developed and implemented a plan to ensure the Council's website is compliant with accessibility standards.

## Improved access to digital services

- Doubled the number of computers available in our Customer Contact Centre for customers to access Council digital services.
- Increased the number of floor walking staff to provide assistance and support for customers using Council computers.

- Installed free Wi-Fi access in our Customer Contact Centre and in Council sheltered housing schemes.
- Implemented a 'scan station' in our Customer Contact Centre to enable customers to scan their own documents, without having to queue.
- Implemented a 'my scan' solution which mirrors the scan station but allows customers to scan their own documents from home without having to visit the Customer Contact Centre.

## Increased the number of on-line services

- Implemented Council Tax and Business Rates on-line forms.
- Introduced an on-line portal for landlords to access their Housing Benefit payment schedules.
- Implemented Housing Benefits on-line forms.
- Implemented an on-line 'Citizens Access' and e-billing service allowing customers to log-in to their own Council Tax account to view details of payments and account balances and set up direct debits on-line.
- Implemented Darlington Home Online, a digital Housing portal for Council Tenants to view their rent account, make rent payments and report changes on-line.

- Implemented a Blue Badge parking permit on-line form with support for customers to access the digital service provided over the telephone or by face to face in our Customer Contact Centre.
- Implemented an on-line application for bulky waste collections.
- Updated the 'Contact the Council' page and ensured clear and up to date information about how to contact all Council services is available to customers.
- Implemented a facility to send reminder notifications about refuse collection days to users' web browsers and e-mail addresses.
- Implemented a reminder, renewal and subscription service for garden waste collections.
- Implemented an on-line ordering and payment system for replacement refuse equipment.
- Updated the on-line public access system for the submission and viewing of planning applications

## Improved Customer Services

- Replaced the existing telephony system, which has reduced customer waiting times and improved the ways customers can access Council services.
- Improved digital display boards in our Customer Contact Centre to give customers real-time information about current waiting times.





## What we are going to do...

### Further improve the Darlington Borough Council website

- Review and update all content on the Council's website to ensure information is easy to access and in Plain English.
- Replace all 'paper based' forms on the Council's website with digital forms.
- Improve search results by rewriting webpage content in the language used by customers to achieve more meaningful results.

### Further improve customer services

- Capture customer satisfaction information on a simple to use digital feedback device.
- Implement a webchat function available on the Council's website to allow easy and clear access to information and/or services.
- Implement an easy to use and self-serve booking system for customers to make appointments for interviews or using digital services at the Customer Contact Centre.

### Increase the number of on-line services

- Implement an on-line self-appointed repairs option for Council tenants, for some basic repairs through Darlington Home Online.
- Implement a text message based 'chat bot' to issue permits for vans to use the Household Waste Recycling Centre.
- Implement an on-line process for customers to report missed, lost or stolen bins.
- Replace the existing Choice Based Lettings system to improve the way customers can register and bid for social rented housing.
- Implement a facility to send reminder notifications about bulky waste collection days to users' e-mail addresses.
- Implement a 'report it portal' for customers to report highway defects easily on-line using an interactive map.



## How will we know if we have achieved our aims?

We will develop ways to monitor the benefits of our approach and use these to further improve services.

Improvements will include:

- More Council services being available on-line and more customers using them
- More computers and support for our customers in our Customer Contact Centre to access on-line services
- A reduction in digital exclusion, with more of our residents getting on-line and being able to take advantage of the full benefits of the internet
- More customers using the website to access information about Council services
- A reduction in face to face and telephone contacts
- A reduction in face to face and telephone waiting times
- Evidence that we are using our resources more efficiently and delivering value for money

- A reduction in customer demand caused by service failures
- Our staff will confirm they have the right tools and training to do their jobs
- A better understanding of our customer's current and future needs
- A better understanding of how we can further use technology to deliver those needs
- Improved customer satisfaction.





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