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Digital Darlington Strategy 2025 - 2030



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Introduction

Providing council services online opens many opportunities for residents, businesses and the Council. The *Digital Darlington Strategy* aims to maximise the use of technology to help Darlington Borough Council achieve its key principle of *efficient and effective use of resources*, particularly in response to the growing financial pressures it faces. Running alongside the Customer Services Strategy it supports the Council's *Productivity Plan and Council Plan 2024-27* by exploring opportunities to exploit digital assets to create efficiencies and increase productivity, including online delivery.

Digital Darlington is delivered through a series of activities that focus on the provision of services online, maximising the benefits achievable through our corporate ICT systems and associated processes, and the exploitation of emerging technologies such as *artificial intelligence* where there are clear cost benefits.

We are taking a 'Digital First' approach towards access to council services wherever possible, but the scale and impact of digital exclusion and those affected by it will be continually monitored. We will continue to take action where possible to ensure no-one is prevented from accessing our services.

An ambition within the Council Plan is to have ***thriving places and connected communities***, and delivery of the Digital Darlington Strategy will play a role alongside other local, regional and national strategies and plans that help residents become digitally connected and benefit from opportunities offered online.



Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member for Resources

Our vision

Taking a 'digital first' approach to public services.

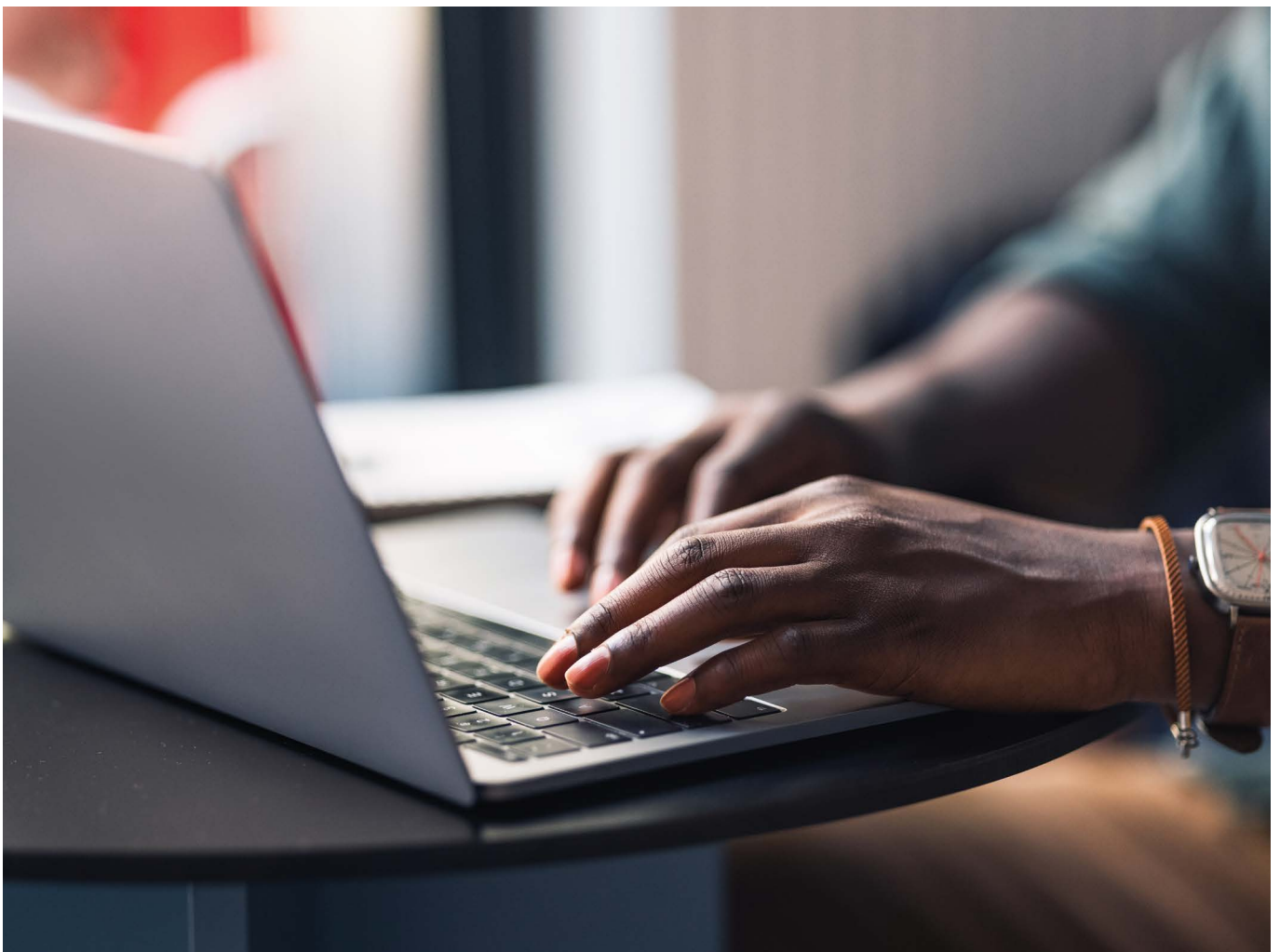
The Customer Services and Digital Strategy 2021-24 established a clear vision that “where possible, we will provide digital access to all our services” and “we will expect customers who can self-serve to do so, so that we can focus our resources on the people who need our help the most”.

As we head into 2025 this vision remains unchanged and it is being carried forward within the Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30. At a time when council finances are under greater pressure than ever before it is imperative that we explore and exploit new and emerging technologies for customer facing services and back office processes as they become more affordable, accessible, usable, and offer significant opportunities for the council to operate more efficiently.

With over 240 council functions already available online, more will be introduced where there are clear benefits in doing so. We have made significant investments in corporate ICT systems, infrastructure, and skills, and it is important that such investments maximise the benefits they can bring to our customers and the council.

Before providing services online, the impact on people who are digitally excluded will be considered, and interventions will be provided if needed so that no-one is left being unable to access our services.

Progress with the Digital Darlington Strategy will be reported every six months as part of the Council Plan performance reports.



Theme 1: Customer focused

Online services will be designed around the customer, with a primary focus being on ensuring they are easy to access, easy to use, and useful. For most of our customers, their preferred method of contact is online, particularly for our high volume transactions.

Ensuring our customers find our online information and services easily accessible, easy to use, and useful is essential if we are to be successful at getting them to do more online and help reduce our running costs. We are mindful that customer online habits can change, and we need to respond to this.

Our online content and functions are designed to meet statutory web accessibility standards, which can be subject to change, so monitoring is in place to ensure we remain compliant. Our web editors are trained to produce content in accessible formats. In 2022 a comprehensive review to ensure a significant majority of web pages were written in plain English was completed. This was complimented with plain English training that was delivered to around 90 staff, many of whom are web editors.

Over time there is a natural build up of web pages and functions therefore requiring a focused and comprehensive review every few years to ensure content remains up to date and accurate. This typically leads to a review of the website structure and key entry points such as the home page.

The system used to manage our websites is regularly updated for several reasons such as new functions, security patches, and in response to the changes with browsers such as Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge. Occasionally an update is so significant that it requires hundreds of bespoke functions to be rebuilt. There was an update of this type in 2024. Work on the update has started and will be completed in 2025 for the corporate website and 2026 for our microsites.

The **intended outcomes from this theme** are to make it **easier for our customers to access our services online**, and to reduce the **cost of service delivery for the council**. This will be achieved by ensuring our online channels are easy to access and use so they become the preferred method of contact for our customers, reducing demand on our more costly contact channels. To be successful our online services must be designed to meet the needs of our customers.



Theme 2: Digital exclusion

We will maintain a clear understanding of the barriers preventing our customers from accessing our services online and use this information to inform the development and roll out of our online services.

Digital exclusion comes in several forms. Some people don't have access to a good infrastructure to enable them to go online due to where they live, or barriers could be around the cost of equipment and broadband or data packages needed to get online. Emerging technology and various initiatives at national and regional levels are helping to address infrastructure issues. Locally, we provide free Internet access in our libraries and our Customer Services Centre for people trying to use the Council's online services. During the past few years, we have led and supported several pilot initiatives to help people overcome the financial challenges, such as the refurbishment and free distribution of old equipment and the provision of data packages. These were short term projects with varying degrees of success, but learning from them was shared within the council and with key partners, and some elements are now part of mainstream service delivery.

Having the right skills, and the confidence to apply those skills can be a challenge for some people. The Council's learning and skills service provides courses to help people develop the skills to get online, and staff are available in several council venues including the Customer Services Centre to provide support when needed, and this is reflected in the Customer Services Strategy. Some of our front line staff who regularly engage with our customers out in the community are developing the skills to be able to offer some basic support and advice where opportunities allow.

There are some fantastic organisations within the non-profit and the voluntary and community sectors that are helping people to overcome their digital barriers and we will help to promote these initiatives where possible. We will continue to identify and promote the different initiatives available to help people develop their online skills.

Some people do not trust technology and avoid using online services. People are right to be vigilant and we have a role to reinforce that message, but we also need to reassure people that online council services are safe and secure.

Some people do not understand the potential benefits of doing things online and therefore do not want to spend time overcoming any digital barriers they might face. It is important that we raise awareness of the potential benefits, not just in relation to council services, but for the wider opportunities such as reducing the costs of household bills.

There are limited statistics available regarding the scale of digital exclusion, particularly at local levels, but there is anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that COVID restrictions were a catalyst for many people to overcome some of the barriers. Sadly, the recent cost of living crisis may have introduced some barriers to people getting online. We will continue to gather, analyse, and report on the available data and potential interventions available to inform our decisions about the types of services we will provide online, based on the different people who will use them. Our work to make our online services easy to access and use aims to encourage more people to adopt this method of contact.

The **intended outcome from this theme** is to **maximise the use of and benefits available from** our current ICT systems and online services, and technology we may adopt in the future. This will be achieved by having a good understanding of our customers to inform the current and potential use of our online services. We will be able to make informed decisions about our investments in technologies, and where interventions may be required to enable people to use them.

Theme 3: Encourage adoption of digital channels

We will raise awareness of the availability of DBC online services, build trust in their use, and encourage people to use them instead of other channels of contact.

We have been successful in raising awareness of the online channels available to our customers for several years, and for many people online access to services is their default preference. As more services become available online and the challenges of digital exclusion continue to be addressed, there is a need for us to continue with these campaigns.

Our campaigns will be informed by our learning around digital exclusion. In addition to promoting the online services that are available, the campaigns will raise awareness of the support available to people that will help them to overcome some of the digital exclusion barriers they may face.

Encouraging people to use online services will have wider benefits for them, not only making some tasks more convenient to do, but also opening up opportunities to reduce household costs by finding cheaper deals for the products and services they might need.

The success of the campaigns will be measured by monitoring how people access our services, with the aim of having more people access our services online where they are available as opposed to other channels of contact.

The **intended outcomes from this theme** are to **provide a more convenient service that is cheaper for our customers to access**, for example removing the need to travel to the Town Hall, and to **reduce the cost of service delivery**. This will be achieved by raising awareness of the information and services available online, the benefits they bring, and encouraging people to use our online channels in place of existing more costly contact methods.



Theme 4: Maximise benefits of existing ICT systems, and explore, assess, and implement emerging technologies

We will maximise the benefits that can be achieved for our customer facing functions and back-office systems from new and emerging technologies.

We are committed to looking for new and emerging technologies that can bring efficiencies, improve productivity, and provide better experiences for our customers.

As part of our web development plan, recent actions to improve public facing services have included the creation of a Darlington Borough Council mobile phone app, enhancements to the MyDarlington account system, with work ongoing in preparation for the roll out of a suite of Alexa skills. We are continually working with our ICT system suppliers to develop more self-service options for our customer.

We have over 15 back office systems. Some are developed in house but most are provided commercially. Commercial systems are continually being enhanced and, in many cases, the new features offer opportunities to improve productivity and generate more efficient processes. We are closely monitoring supplier road maps to identify such opportunities, but they need to be carefully considered as they usually come with increased financial costs. Implementation of these benefits are being delivered through several work programmes at corporate and service levels. There is limited competition in many of the ICT system supplier markets so ensuring value for money is an ongoing challenge.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has gained a high profile across most sectors, with opportunities for improvements to productivity emerging within local government. Our approach to the adoption of AI is being developed but we need to be mindful of the pace at which this technology is evolving, and picking the right time to adopt it is important. Being an early adopter can bring quick wins, but it can also be costly, time consuming, resource intensive, and may not lead to a sufficient return on investment. Legislation around AI continues to evolve and can affect the way in which it needs to be governed. Customer perceptions of AI are evolving too and may change at short notice which could affect trust in and therefore use of this technology.

Developing or adopting new and emerging technologies can require a significant investment in the ICT solution and the specialist ICT skills required for its implementation and ongoing support. It is imperative these factors are carefully considered in advance of any decisions around implementation.

There is a need to ensure there are sufficient generic ICT skills within the workforce. This will help to gain maximum productivity from our commonly used ICT applications, and it will enable some of our customer facing staff to support some of our digitally excluded service users.

Being a small local authority with significant budget pressures, being an early adopter of emerging technologies that don't have proven benefits may be too much of a risk to carry unless we are able to secure external funding for the activity that can offset some of the financial risk.

The **intended outcomes from this theme** are to **reduce the cost of service delivery and increase productivity**. This will be achieved by maximising the benefits such as process efficiencies and increased productivity that can be accomplished using our existing back office and customer facing systems. It will also be achieved through the adoption of emerging technology where there is a clear business case to do so.

Delivery Plan

The suite of actions that enable delivery of the Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 are listed in the following table. There are likely to be changes to customer habits and technology during this life of the strategy so the delivery plan will be reviewed annually.

Key: Focused work ☒ Ongoing activity ●

Action	Theme	Key priorities for 2025-30	2025/6	2026/7	2027/8	2028/9	2029/30
1	1	Comprehensive review of the corporate website content and structure to ensure it is easy to use, understand, and is accessible.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●
2	1	Comprehensive review of existing website functions to ensure they remain user friendly and accessible.	●	●	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3	1	Enable single sign on for Customer relationship managements systems (CRMs) where technology and costs allow.	●	●	●	●	●
4	1	Continue to push systems suppliers for improvements to automated case progress updates for customers who have reported issues via our website.	●	●	●	●	●
5	1	Ensure the software underpinning the corporate website remains up to date.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	●	●
6	1	Ensure the software underpinning corporate microsites remains up to date.	●	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●
7	2	Monitor and report on digital exclusion, with a focus on access to council services.	●	●	●	●	●
8	2	Advise on interventions to be considered to address digital exclusion, and provide interventions when resources allow.	●	●	●	●	●
9	2 & 3	Promote interventions that are delivered by the council and key partners that help address digital exclusion.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	●	●
10	3	Campaign(s) to raise awareness of online services and encourage use of them (reviewed annually).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	●	●
11	3	Monitor and report on the ways people access our high volume services, primarily associated with the customer services contact centre.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	●	●
12	4	Identify, assess and where appropriate implement new and emerging technologies that will improve customer access to council services, create efficiencies, and improve productivity within the council.	●	●	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
13	4	Develop a plan for the assessment and adoption of artificial intelligence. Delivery of the plan to commence in 2025 but actions reviewed annually due to the rapid changes in this technology.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	●	●	●	●

Action	Theme	Key priorities for 2025-30	2025/6	2026/7	2027/8	2028/9	2029/30
14	4	Identify, assess and where appropriate implement new and emerging technologies that will improve back office processes, create efficiencies, and improve productivity within the council.	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
15	4	Comprehensive review of the Corporate Intranet.	●	●	☑	☑	●
16	4	Ensure we have a digitally skilled workforce capable of maximising the benefits from the available technology.	☑	●	●	●	●





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