

# ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

## REPORT TO AND DECISION OF CABINET ON 22 MARCH 2021

**SUBJECT: ARUN IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME – ANNUAL UPDATE**

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**DATE: 15 January 2021      EXTN: 37585**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The Arun Improvement Programme (AIP) considers proposals for new projects that enable process redesigns and service improvements typically using ICT capability to facilitate that change.

This report provides a high-level summary of the activities of the AIP over the last year.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Cabinet is requested to note the activities of the Arun Improvement Programme.

### **1. BACKGROUND:**

In 2001 Arun District Council introduced a corporate programme management approach for the way we deliver change using supporting technologies. Governance for this programme is provided by a board known as the Arun Improvement Programme Board, which was introduced by the current Chief Executive in 2012.

Its purpose is to ensure that corporately we invest in the right projects, resource is allocated on a priority need basis, outcomes are delivered, and an environment is maintained to support successful delivery.

The Board meets quarterly and consists of the Head of Technology & Digital, ICT & Digital Manager, Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Technical Services (with responsibility for digital).

The group report progress to Cabinet annually and this report is to update Cabinet on the activities of the programme.

## **Covid Projects**

This has been a very busy period for the Technology & Digital Team with resources being re-prioritised to focus on technical projects that enabled the authority to continue delivering key services during the pandemic.

Listed below are just a few examples of how the team mobilised and delivered new capability during the pandemic to support staff, members and customers:

### *Homeworking*

One of our first priorities was to get staff working safely from home and within weeks we had built and delivered around 100 laptops to allow staff that did not already have a homeworking setup to work from home; we also provided additional home office equipment across our userbase to maximise home working effectiveness and productivity.

### *Central Infrastructure*

As the underlying technical infrastructure was not designed to support 'all' staff working from home changes were made adding additional processing capacity to support the increased number of remote connections.

### *Website*

There was a lot of extra work for the web team to create new content and update existing service pages. The pandemic information pages have been designed to help customers stay up to date with the impact on council services, provide guidance on keeping safe and explaining where they can get help and support.

### *Communications & Collaboration*

With communicating and collaborating being key to an effective homeworking userbase we rolled out new software and functionality to provide different ways of working to all staff and members such as video conferencing.

### *Business Grants*

The Government introduced two new business grant schemes that needed to be up and running quickly. The team worked with the Revenues Team to automate the correspondence process to get invitations and reminders out to eligible businesses as quickly as possible and to make it easier for businesses to apply, the team also built a set of interactive forms for the website so businesses could do it online.

### *Financial Questionnaire for Council Tax Non-Payment*

The contact centre started receiving lots of calls from customers struggling to pay their Council Tax (due to being placed on furlough or losing employment) and were unable to send paper forms to everyone. To cope with the volume and speed up the process the team built an interactive form so that those in difficulty could complete it online and not have to wait in a phone queue.

Even in these difficult and busy times the team have managed to deliver (or start) a number of major AIP projects too:

### **Revenues & Benefits System**

A project has been completed to move the revenues and benefits system to the cloud, this was much more than a 'lift and shift' project and at the same time added additional functionality.

The system has provided resource efficiencies through:

- automation of tasks
- reduced double handling of information
- improved fraud detection using risk-based verification
- providing more options to residents, businesses and landlords through new self-service digital channels
- reduced paper and postage costs usage via electronic billing; so far over 5,000 customers have signed up for e-billing saving £5,000 annually (and much greener)

During the pandemic the service has seen a 100% increase in emails and 30% increase in benefit claims, the efficiencies from the new system have allowed the service to keep on top of these, along with absorbing some of the additional work related to track & trace payments and business grants.

Once the effects of the pandemic reduce and things start moving back to normality the service will be undertaking a review looking at how these efficiencies may be realised as cost savings.

### **Legal Case Management System**

Technology & Digital had been working with Legal Services to evaluate and procure a new modern case management system to replace the ageing system which was starting to fail, cause operational difficulties and reduce the efficiency of the team. Having reviewed various systems a preferred supplier was chosen, and an implementation date agreed, then the pandemic struck.

The council had not implemented a new system of this scale before where all staff and suppliers were working remotely, and we knew it would present challenges. Both teams rose to the task and with the technical team burning a lot of midnight oil to balance other high priorities the system went live as planned; although not ideal having a completely remote project team it did show us it was possible to do with the right tools and mindset.

Some of the benefits from implementing the new system are:

- cloud based, reducing reliance on ICT
- improved business continuity and disaster recovery
- stable system with no increase in annual costs

- templates, workflow and automation helping turn work around quicker
- allows performance management and resource monitoring

### **Remote Contact Centre System**

The Council's contact centre system is built around on-premise telephony technology and the systems cannot be used through our current remote working solution.

To allow the Contact Centre to quickly re-locate and become homeworkers during the pandemic the ICT Team built a temporary work-around system utilising the main Council's telephone network. Although this works and the customer sees very little difference it does not provide all of the functionality the service needs.

We are currently working with the service to implement a fully functioned remote contact centre solution that will support them fully working from home.

### **Geographical Information Systems**

The team have completed a major upgrade to the corporate Geographical Information Systems (GIS) which also saw us move the infrastructure and data to the cloud.

The new system makes it quicker for staff and customers to access electronic maps and related spatial information; enhancements have also been made to the self-service elements and customers can now find even more information including listed building status and parish & ward boundaries.

### **Digital News**

The Technology and Digital Team were asked to look at how the organisation could send regular news updates to customers. Having looked at various options some of which were very expensive and others not mobile friendly the Digital Team decided on something called 'Gov Notify'.

Gov Notify is a 'free' central government development and delivery platform provided by Government Digital Services (GDS) and designed to be secure, trusted, mobile friendly and accessible.

The inhouse development team created a solution which includes a news editor, delivery engine and self-service subscription manager (avoiding manual administration).

[www.arun.gov.uk/register-news-updates](http://www.arun.gov.uk/register-news-updates)

So far around 1,700 people have signed up for this service and we have sent over 20,000 electronic bulletins. Unlike some other systems in the marketplace there is no delivery costs associated with sending a news bulletin.

The solution is targeted at customers whose time is precious and want punchy, to the point communications that allow them to drill down further if interested. It has been designed to scale on mobile devices and provide personalised communications too, this is a cost effective (free) delivery method and we have been in discussions with other service areas about how it can be used.

## **Webchat**

Ownership of the council's website was passed to the Technology & Digital Team in 2020 and we have been working closely with Customer Services on providing complimentary services to support the Customer Service Strategy and our Digital Strategy.

During the pandemic we expedited a project to provide an additional contact option for customers by introducing webchat to our website where customers are able to communicate directly with an adviser using live chat.

The benefits of web chat are:

- adds an additional access channel for customers that want to talk, but want to do it digitally
- an adviser is able to handle three live chats simultaneously, which is estimated to be around 60% cheaper than a phone call
- includes automated knowledge bot that runs 24/7 and uses custom built intelligence to answer questions without the need for a human adviser being present
- the knowledge bot adds to our always-on digital channels allowing customers to transact with us at a time and place that is convenient to them
- the knowledge bot is cost-effective, if satisfying 30 automated chats a day the average transaction cost is around £0.11 compared to £2.83 for a phone call

The pilot went live with three service lines and Customer Service are continually adding new ones and improving the knowledge bot answers. Revenue & Benefits is being added and will be ready for annual billing.

Although web chat is not suitable for all types of customer contact it is starting to prove a popular channel and in the first 4 months following launch received around 1,800 chat requests.

## **Website Redesign**

Our website provides the digital shop window for the council and is one of the first places people come to access self-service.

The website was redesigned in 2015 and ownership recently passed to Technology & Digital who have been reviewing its effectiveness and how it can be improved to better support customers and encourage more self-service.

A review and gap analysis between the contact centre access channels and our website has been completed along with a study of website user behaviour, navigation routes and service demand.

We have spent a lot of time looking at design best practice, user research, consumer trends, reviewing content, understanding accessibility issues and talking to other councils.

Work has started on a complete redesign of the website both in terms of look and feel and how the content is written (or readability) and we will be engaging with customers to check we have got it right.

The new design-blueprint focuses on prioritising content based on customer demand, providing information in a simple and easy to read format, making content groupings more logical for customers to find information, improve the experience for mobile users and offer as many digital opportunities as possible for customers to self-serve.

An accessible website can help people with disabilities participate more actively, improve their life experience and promote greater inclusion. We are making the new site accessible for as many customers as possible including those with vision, hearing, motor and cognitive issues.

The project team are working with the individual service areas to rewrite content specially for a web audience and first phase of the new site will be launched in June / July 2021.

### **Planning Application Viewer & Notifications**

One of the first new digital applications the inhouse development team have built is an online planning application search and notification service; similar commercial products cost around £7,500 annually.

[www.arun.gov.uk/planning-application-finder](http://www.arun.gov.uk/planning-application-finder)

The team worked closely with Planning Services developing a customer storyboard and from this a number of requirements were agreed.

The first development sprint saw the team deliver a digital service that allows customers to enter a postcode and search by radius, then see related applications on a list / map and drill down deeper into specific planning history and documents.

The second development sprint has added a notification service. This allows customers to sign-up and register to receive an email when new applications are submitted within their selected postcode area.

Since its 'soft launch' three months ago it has seen around 1,400 users a month.

### **Video Conferencing**

The speed of take up in using video conferencing by staff and members during lockdown has been phenomenal and is proving to be a very effective communicating tool.

When we start moving back to more normality, we see video conferencing continuing to be a great tool that can support 'future ways of working' and provide benefits beyond just communications such as becoming a greener Arun.

We have setup three video conference rooms and are working on two more. Once we start returning to the offices these rooms will support mixed physical and virtual meetings whereby some participants will be seated around a desk and others join from a computer with everyone able to see and hear each other.

## **Gigabit Full Fibre**

The rollout of gigabit 'ultra-fast' full fibre internet is progressing with phase 1 almost complete and new fibre now connects approximately 20 council buildings providing internet speed capability of up to 1,000 Mbps.

Work on phase 2 (connecting 100 public assets) has not progressed as quickly as we had hoped. Part of this is down to the pandemic slowing CityFibre from securing suitable digital exchange sites, however they are now close to securing suitable sites.

As part of the work with West Sussex County Council we are working with Biffa to install surveying technology onto refuse lorries. This is so that a survey can be carried out across the district analysing mobile telecommunications availability and where there are areas with poor availability (not-spots) it will help with planning future telecommunications opportunities.

## **What's Next**

Many of the digital changes we have made to support staff, members and customers during the pandemic already formed part of our Digital Strategy.

Our vision is to provide as many digital opportunities as possible to make dealing with us easier through frictionless digital services and offering an improved customer experience.

The outputs from these changes along with the additional work undertaken during the pandemic will act as key building blocks for other council initiatives such as those found in the Customer Service Strategy and Future Ways of Working Programme.

Partly through necessity and partly through pre-planned changes we have seen a rapid shift in digital working practices and customer behaviours. We have proved that applying digital technologies can make services easier to access, desirable to use and more efficient - we need to keep that momentum going.

We will continue moving forward with our plans and build digital options that services can adopt and offer as digital choices to their customers and at the same time look to improve the processes that sit behind that.

## **2. PROPOSAL(S):**

Cabinet is requested to note the activities of the Arun Improvement Programme.

## **2. OPTIONS:**

N/A

## **4. CONSULTATION:**

Has consultation been undertaken with:

**YES**

**NO**

Relevant Town/Parish Council		✓
Relevant District Ward Councillors		✓
Other groups/persons (please specify)		✓
<b>5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Financial		✓
Legal		✓
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		✓
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		✓
Sustainability		✓
Asset Management/Property/Land		✓
Technology		✓
Safeguarding		✓
Other (please explain)		✓
<b>6. IMPLICATIONS:</b> Not applicable		

**7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:**

It is a constitutional requirement to annually report the work of the Board to Cabinet.

**8. EFFECTIVE DATE OF THE DECISION: 31 March 2021**

**9. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

None