ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO AND DECISION OF THE CORPORATE SUPPORT COMMITTEE
ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2021

SUBJECT:

Update on progress with the Council's Digital Strategy.

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DATE: 27 August 2021

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PORTFOLIO AREA: Corporate Support

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Councils Five Year Digital Strategy was adopted by Full Council approximately 18 months ago and this report is an update on progress so far and provides insight into the next phase of the programme.

Since starting delivery of the programme, we have been faced by a worldwide pandemic and in response to the changing landscape have re-focused some areas of the programme.

This report is an information update and the Committee is being asked to note the progress of the programme and its future direction.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

    i.   The Corporate Support Committee is asked to endorse this report.

2. PROPOSAL(S):

Since starting delivery of the digital programme, we have been faced by a worldwide pandemic and in response to the changing landscape have re-focused some areas of the programme.

DIGITAL PROGRAMME PROGRESS

Pandemic work

As we started moving towards a pandemic situation, we recognised having a Council that could work remotely would be key to continue delivering services.

We had the technical infrastructure in place for homeworking however this was not designed to support everyone working at home at the same time.

The IT teams built and deployed additional homeworking capacity, made changes to the core technical infrastructure, and improved remote connectivity.

We accelerated a number of internal projects to provide collaboration facilities, video conferencing, a remote back-office and virtual Council meetings.

A few weeks before lockdown we were ready to meet the challenge of operating the Council with remote working Officers and Councillors.

During the pandemic the Council saw a significant increase in workloads for many staff including running new government schemes to support customers and businesses, we extended the supported IT operating window allowing staff to work longer hours.

A recent survey indicated 98% of staff working at home felt they were as effective as when office based and 85% of services are now using more digital channels.

Having proved we were able to operate differently and deliver more services digitally, a programme called "Future Ways of Working' is now looking at how we can take this forward and maximise opportunities.

Website

Our main website receives around 860,000 visits a year and was identified as a key area in the digital strategy requiring improvement.

The Technology and Digital Team have been working for the last 8-9 months on building a brand-new website and this went live in July.

The new site has been designed around how and why customers contact us, usage trends, best practice and working with service colleagues across the council.

Throughout the pandemic more and more of our residents have been accessing our services online and telling us that in this digital age having a good website is just as important to them as having council buildings, if not more.

The team have been rewriting content specifically for the web as people read very differently online.

The content has been rewritten to make sure things are easier to find, content is clear and simple to read, we promote transactional services and improve usability for mobile device users (about 50% of our visitors).

We have removed departmental silos and 'council speak' so that the content is more logically structured and easier to use without the need to understand council services or structures.

With at least 1 in 5 people in the UK having a long-term illness, impairment, or disability and many more with a temporary disability we saw making digital services available for 'everyone' really important.

We have made improvements to the site reducing usability and accessibility issues and a recent independent audit shows we have reduced these from around 15,000 (on the old site) to about 600, work is ongoing to improve this further.

To ensure consistent branding and style across all of our digital channels we have introduced a corporate design guide based on Government Digital Services (GDS) standards and best practice.

Work still continues to re-write some of the lower priority content, and this should be completed by the end of the year.

We are also actively looking at customer feedback and user journeys to further improve usability of the site and take-up of digital services.

Webchat

With the pandemic lockdown reducing the number of ways customers can communicate with us we wanted to offer new digital alternatives and so accelerated our webchat project.

Webchat is now available 24/7 and customers are able to chat with a 'live' adviser during office hours and use an automated bot at other times.

We have eleven service lines available and in the last six months had around 1,300 chats, about a third of these being out of office hours.

The contact centre continues to work on adding new services and also monitoring of the automated chat history so that the knowledge base can be fine-tuned and improved.

Transactional services

We have around 90 interactive e-forms along with a number of service specific web portals where customers can access transactional services.

To maintain our digital branding and keep it consistent with the new website we have been worked on re-writing these and changing over the brand.

As part of the analysis of customer journeys we identified a number of areas where digital services could help users of our services.

The inhouse development team have been building new transactional services based on Government Digital Services (GDS) shared technologies and open source code.

The first service to be implemented was a planning notification service where customers can find new planning applications based around a chosen geographical location and signup for personalised weekly alerts.

The inhouse development team have adopted Government Digital Services (GDS) shared technologies and open source code as their preferred development platform and will continue building transactional services in this way.

Digital newsletters

With the pandemic upon us we felt it important to keep customers informed with what was happening in the district and accelerated our project to introduce an email newsletter.

This was developed by our inhouse development team again using Government Digital Services (GDS) shared technologies and open source code.

Customers are able to sign up to receive regular electronic newsletters. These are not glossy newsletters but contain factual news snippets allowing a user to maximise their time and drill down on items of interest.

We are also working on using this platform to provide SMS (text) messaging to service users and integrating it into some of our back-office systems.

This same technology has been used successful this year by the Elections Team to send out over 100,000 electronic annual canvas notifications, streamlining the process.

Surveys

Listening to our customers and understanding what they think is an important part of customer engagement, digital can offer new opportunities to widen that potential audience.

Until recently the council did not have a central survey package and relied upon individual services to source their own. We felt this extra step could create a barrier to undertaking more customer engagement and so have made available a corporate survey package.

This allows any service area to create their own electronic survey or poll quickly and easily then publish it to the web, send email links to it and use QR codes.

These are much easier for a customer to complete as they are able to access them via any web browser and then submit it back online. The results are stored in an electronic database making it easier and quicker for staff to carry out post survey analysis.

Video Conference Rooms

With new ways of working and the pandemic changing how we use our office space we needed to make sure our buildings were fit for the future and can be used more flexibly.

We have equipped a number of meetings rooms to enable multi-use and installed video conferencing facilities allowing them to be used for hybrid meetings, presentations, and webinars as well as still hosting normal roundtable meetings.

There are now ten multi-use meeting spaces and we are working on increasing these over the next few months.

Appointment bookings

Although our website aims to help as many customers as possible there will be occasions where they still need to talk to us or see someone.

During the pandemic we have seen a change across many sectors in service offerings with a reduction in drop-in services and an increase in electronic appoint booking.

We have also seen many sectors changing to video calling. Although this may not suite everyone there are segments of our customer base where this is preferable especially for those where travel may be difficult, have to isolate or they want to fit a meeting into their busy lives.

To make it as easy as possible for customers to book appoints, we have been working with the customer services team on an online booking system.

This will allow customers to book a video meeting, phone call or drop-in appointment online or through an officer brokered booking.

The project is still in the early stages and we hope to start offering online bookings in the near future.

A connected Arun

As part of a county wide government programme we have connect around twenty-five of our council buildings to new ultrafast gigabit capable fibre (very fast internet). We are now working on connecting over a hundred public assets across the district to the same ultrafast network.

We are also working with multiple telecom providers trying to encourage the rollout of ultrafast capable internet to more areas in the district.

Having ultrafast fibre across the district will help to future proof it for residents, businesses, and visitors. This could then open up new opportunities for things like the 'Internet of Things' (IoT), this is where you can connect physical objects such as smart devices to a network and providing real time information, monitoring and automation.

Work is underway to survey the district for mobile network connection strengths and to identify areas with poor connections or 'not spots', this information will be useful for potential utility providers when considering new capability in the district.

FUTURE DIRECTION & WORK

We need to finish off some of the things we have already started like the low priority web pages, flexible meeting spaces and online appointment bookings.

Having looked at user journeys and how customers access services we no longer feel a 'My Arun' central portal will deliver significant benefits to the customer. We know there is not a demand from customers for this, having run a 'My Arun' promotion on our website for almost 12 months we did not have a single person want to use that service.

In some respects, making a customer sign up for a 'My Arun' account before they can access services would add an extra hurdle, which is in conflict with our digital strategy that says we want to provide frictionless services to encourage greater take-up.

Developing a 'My Arun' would also involve significant expenditure and development time and so we are looking to drop this in favour of building more interactive 'frictionless' digital services using Government Digital Services (GDS) shared technologies and open source code.

To ensure we target our development resources to areas that can provide the biggest improvement for customers and allow them to do more online we will carry out further research and journey mapping before creating new services.

As our new website beds-in and we deliver more interactive services we will also undertake work to measure changes in digital take-up.

Some of our programme is dependent on third parties particularly telecom providers and we will actively work with them to encourage works to progress in these areas.

Outside of the digital programme we will continue to actively work with our internal service colleagues and encourage the adoption of new and improved digital services and ensure they fit with our overall digital vision.

Hopefully this update gives you a good feel for the progress being made with the digital strategy and how we have responded to the changing landscape of the pandemic and customer needs.

We are now looking to build on the work already completed by the Digital and Technology Team and our service colleagues and continue delivering improved digital offerings for our customers.

3. OPTIONS:

The Corporate Support Committee and being asked to note this report.

4. CONSULTATION:		
Has consultation been undertaken with:	**YES**	**NO**
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify)		
5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)	**YES**	**NO**
Financial		X
Legal		X
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		X
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		X
Sustainability		X
Asset Management/Property/Land		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		X

6. IMPLICATIONS:

None

7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:

The Corporate Support Committee and being asked to note this report.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Arun District Council Digital Strategy 2020 – 2025 – to view the strategy – please click on this link:

Digital Strategy