*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: NORTH HERTS COUNCIL DIGITAL STRATEGY

REPORT OF: SERVICE DIRECTOR CUSTOMERS

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND IT

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST / SUSTAINABILITY

1.   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1   This report proposes a new Digital Strategy covering 2024-2027.

1.2   The strategy sets out our vision and aims for progressing our digital transformation journey and links our work in this area to other key corporate strategies including the Council Plan, the Customer Service strategy, and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

2.   RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1.   That Cabinet adopt the Digital Strategy (Appendix A)

2.2.   That Cabinet agree to delegate any minor changes (to include reference to Council priorities) in relation to the Digital Strategy to the Service Director – Customers in consultation with the Executive Member for the Finance and IT.

3.   REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1.   To ensure the Council has an approved digital strategy.

4.   ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1.   There are no alternatives, the strategy is required to set out the Councils digital vision and aims.

5.   CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1.   The strategy has been developed in consultation with the following:
- Senior Management Group
- Executive Member and Deputy Executive Member for Finance and IT

- Shadow Executive Member for Finance and IT
- A report went to the internal informal Political Liaison Board of the Executive and the Leadership team, on 16 January 2024.

5.2   The strategy has also been reviewed by the Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS) who acted as a critical friend to ensure it is in line with the councils' priorities and other relevant strategies. SIAS also considered this in line with the digital strategies of some other Councils.

6.   FORWARD PLAN

6.1   This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 18 December 2023

7.   BACKGROUND

7.1.   The Councils IT strategy required updating to ensure that it reflected the changes to how the council works, including changes that were brought about by the pandemic.

7.2.   On reviewing the strategy, it was decided to start from scratch and have more of a focus on the digital aims of the council which will be supported by an IT technical roadmap setting out out the more detailed work plan of the IT service.

7.3.   We recognised that the pandemic accelerated and changed aspects of our digital transformation journey and therefore it is important that we have an up-to-date strategy that reflects our current and future digital aims that will guide us through the next few years.

8.   RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

8.1.   The Council has been steadily transforming and evolving services, working towards a digital first approach for many years. Having already embraced homeworking and implemented collaboration tools and desktop mailing solutions we were well placed to deal with the challenges of the pandemic with minimal disruption to our customers.

8.2.   The legacy of the pandemic has seen a huge shift in consumer behaviours and expectations with the adoption of strong digital services being more in demand now than ever before.

8.3.   This strategy sets out our aims and priorities for the next three years, recognising that this strategy will be a living document that is regularly reviewed to reflect the rapid pace of change of modern technology.

8.4.   Page 5 of the strategy sets out some of the key projects that have been delivered over recent years while pages 10 and 11 detail the projects we intend to deliver to continue the evolution of our digital transformation journey.

8.5.   The work we do and how we prioritise will link to our guiding principles to ensure the 'golden thread' remains running through how we develop and deliver our digital services.

8.6. A core component of the strategy is that the council has adopted a low code digital platform which will enable us to build our own applications on a platform that does not require traditional development skills, thus freeing up time of our IT experts and giving design control to the services that have the customer and service delivery expertise.

8.7. An additional benefit of the platform is that through the council building its own applications we will be able to rationalise the overall number of disparate applications we have, leading to reduced support and licence costs and improved integration capabilities which in turn will provide better data to inform decision making.

8.8. The digital platform is widely used by other Councils and gives us the added benefit of learning from a large user community that freely and openly share ideas, experience and resources.

8.9. This strategy will be Council wide with the digital services team and IT services each playing a key role in delivering on the aims and projects set out. Once adopted the strategy will underpin the work we do and will provide a robust and secure foundation to build upon with a consistent approach, ensuring that we are able to achieve our aims and objectives.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1. Cabinets Terms of Reference include at 5.7.1. of the Constitution: 'to prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council'.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1. The strategy sets out the council's approach to digital transformation over the next three years, it is expected that the programme of works linked to the strategy will deliver efficiencies and savings over the medium to longer term. These will be monitored over time as the strategy is implemented and reported through budget monitoring reports and the annual budget setting process.

10.2 A small digital services team has been established to deliver the work linked to the digital platform, this has been achieved using existing resources and funding from the customer service centre.

10.3 The procurement of the digital platform was achieved using existing budgets, by using the platform initially to replace the Councils existing CRM system, and related software.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.

11.2. Whilst the Digital Strategy document itself does not have any specific risks, the associated programme of activities linked to the strategy will have risks that will continue to be considered and reviewed, these risks include the human resources impact referenced at 15.1 as well as risks relating to unexpected technology limitations.

11.3. There is a risk that, if not properly implemented, we will fail to take advantage of the huge benefits the low code platform will provide. The CRM implementation and subsequent move to the low code platform has been recorded on Ideagen Risk, and progress will be monitored as part of the Council Delivery Plan.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

12.2. The digital strategy whilst taking a digital first approach, references the need to continue to provide traditional contact methods for those who need them to ensure that we continue to be accessible to all.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

13.1. The Social Value Act and "go local" requirements do not apply to this report as this is not a procurement exercise or contract.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

14.1. To support the advancement of the digital strategy staff are equipped with the means to access new technology (predominantly through laptops to support home working, mobile working throughout the district and when at Council locations) Throughout the digital journey the tools that have been sourced to support staff have been assessed to ensure that they have a low impact on the environment.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 The Digital strategy and related work will lead to changes in how we work, including changes in processes and systems we use. A subgroup of the project team meets to consider the impact of changes on staff and customers and includes representation for Human Resources and Communications. A communications plan has been developed and includes regular updates to staff via a range of channels including staff briefings, the staff newsletter (Insight) and the Staff Consultation Forum.

15.2 Digital Champions across the Council will proactively champion new ways of working and help to ensure the successful delivery of the digital programme against the vision. Champions will seek ideas from service areas, support colleagues during go-live phases and with different ways of working, assist with less complex enquiries or issues and feedback to services areas on how the wider programme is progressing.

16. APPENDICES

16.1 Appendix A - Digital Strategy 2024-2027

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18.   BACKGROUND PAPERS

18.1   None