

## OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

### PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

#### **TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: Digital Transformation Update**

INFORMATION NOTE OF THE CUSTOMER & DIGITAL SERVICES MANAGER

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: COUNCILLOR SEAN NOLAN

PRIORITY: ACCESSIBLE SERVICES

#### **1. SUMMARY**

1.1 This information note is to provide an update on the Council's digital transformation programme.

#### **2. STEPS TO DATE**

2.1 In 2023, the Council embarked on a new chapter of its digital transformation ambitions. We selected a low-code solution from Netcall as our CRM replacement which offered much greater capability as well as the flexibility and efficiency we needed, allowing us to begin significantly accelerating the Council's digital transformation.

2.2 We developed a comprehensive digital strategy approved by Cabinet in January 2024. The strategy is not just about integrating new technologies; it's about transforming our operations to better meet the needs of those we serve. It's a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation in our service delivery.

2.3 In January 2026, a revised version of the strategy was shared with the Overview and Scrutiny committee following a mid-point review. Wording throughout the strategy was updated to reflect our current position and relevant updates surrounding digital inclusion.

2.4 In anticipation of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), the team's work has shifted from designing and building full applications, to comprehensive business process mapping and analysis. This approach supports immediate service improvements while providing a clear foundation for efficient, well-designed processes within a future authority.

2.5 This information note will provide an overview of the last 12 months since our last update at Overview and Scrutiny in February 2025. The committee has asked several questions which will be answered below.

#### **3. INFORMATION TO NOTE**

3.1 Digital transformation is a key enabler of delivery of the Council Plan, supporting accessible services, strong governance and efficient use of resources. By providing a

clear and consistent digital front door, the Council improves the visibility of its services and enables residents to understand what is available, how to engage and what outcomes to expect.

Increased use of digital access across core services supports inclusion by offering greater flexibility and convenience as customers can self-serve at times that work for them with clear and simple processes, while maintaining non-digital routes and targeted support for residents who are digitally excluded, or require additional support or expertise.

Our digital systems enhance transparency and accountability by improving access to information, enabling residents to track service requests, and supporting open decision making through the publication of data, performance information, and committee documentation.

Digital transformation strengthens the Council's organisational resilience by reducing manual processes, improving productivity, and protecting capacity for complex and specialist work in a time when caseload is more complex, and budgets and resources are continuing to be stretched.

3.2 Following a successful bid for grant funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), £29.8K of revenue funding, and £10k of capital funding was allocated to North Herts CVS to support an expansion of their digital inclusion programme entitled 'Staying Connected'. Staying Connected is a community-led programme designed to improve digital skills, safety and online access for residents across North Hertfordshire. Objectives for this programme are:

- To help at least 300 residents to develop essential digital skills
- Provide secure, configured devices to support at least 40 households experiencing digital poverty
- Recruit and train 10+ volunteer Digital Champions and at least 5+ Council staff to deliver advice beyond the funding term
- Deliver joint workshops with Hertfordshire Constabulary to raise awareness of scams and online fraud among 200 older or vulnerable residents

Between October and December 2025, the project supported 136 residents across Compassionate Neighbours Hubs, Garden House Hospice Hubs, weekly Hitchin sessions, Police Cybercrime events, and one-to-one home visits. During this period, 20 devices were distributed (12 in October, 6 in November, and 2 in December).

4 new Digital Champions were recruited, bringing the total to 10 active volunteers, with further inductions underway. NH CVS is also supporting five Council employees through Digital Champion training, with more employees due to receive training information by the end of Q4 2026.

3.3 With the remaining funding, a new temporary six-month role has been created within the Digital Services team to focus on digital inclusion at North Herts Council. The Officer will play a pivotal role in improving digital inclusion and customer experiences where possible across Council services.

This position focuses on conducting research to understand customer journeys, identifying who is being excluded and where, where there are gaps or areas for improvement, and suggesting strategies to address exclusion and promote accessibility. The role involves research, analysis, and collaboration to ensure services are inclusive, efficient, and aligned with best practices from other Councils and comparable industries as well as direct delivery of support.

- 3.4 Digital inclusion is at the heart of all our digital transformation projects, ensuring systems are accessible and intuitive for both customers and colleagues. When planning our builds, we make sure ease of use and accessibility are at the forefront, and we continually adjust and optimise our platforms, with help from Customer Services who help us to identify when users are encountering challenges. By providing and optimising these channels, we can increase the number of customers who are able to self-serve online in a way that works for them.

Alongside this, we also recognise there are customers who through preference or ability cannot interact with services online, and so we ensure that no analogue channels are ever closed off or restricted by the implementation of a digital solution. The Customer Service Centre continues to provide support across phone lines, paper forms or correspondence, and in person, with reception open and resourced from Monday-Friday 9am – 5pm. Public access computers allow customers to come in to receive support from the team with our digital processes. Service area Officers also remain available for meetings and consultation during these opening hours.

The Communications team continually assess and update the Council website and check new areas to ensure they adhere to web accessibility standards and our North Herts Accessibility Statement.

- 3.5 Since the Digital Services team were put in place, projects have been allocated on a case-by-case basis, usually prioritised by contract end dates and greatest need. Since LGR was announced, priorities have naturally pivoted away from larger application builds and more towards business process mapping and improvements of current processes and to prepare for the upcoming change. Any major decisions are discussed with the Digital Oversight Group, consisting of the Executive Member and representation from the Leadership Team. Moving forward, considering LGR, there is a strong strategic focus on making sure any digital initiatives are being developed in the best place. This could either mean on the Microsoft platform 'Workspace', or on the Netcall platform.
- 3.6 Ensuring our services are optimised and robust ahead of LGR directly benefits our residents by ensuring our digital systems are accessible and run smoothly, making the experience easier for our customers and teams. It also reduces manual admin so resource can be focused on the areas where it's needed most.

Likewise, our Business Process Analysis projects are identifying high-traffic areas where customers experience pain points, where small adjustments can make a big difference to our customer's experience with the Council, making it easier for them to access the services they need. When identified, these projects are being discussed and worked on.

- 3.7 It's important to note at this point there has been no additional budget allocated for the Digital Services team. The team was created using existing resource, and by

continuously making the Customer Service Centre more efficient through new technology and updating processes. The creation of the team has meant that many successful digital projects have been developed over the last couple of years at no additional cost to the Council, as outlined in Appendix A.

- 3.8 A catalogue of the projects delivered to date by the Digital Services team is shown in Appendix A, which demonstrates the breadth of work that we've been able to achieve using the Netcall digital platform. These vary from complex builds such as replacing the previous Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system with a clearer and quicker system that connects customers with services across the Council, to more straightforward forms and systems that streamline processes and reduce administrative burden for our teams.

A key project over the last year has been the development and launch of the Garden Waste platform, and 22 additional Waste processes including Bulky Waste bookings, Trade Waste, Clinical Waste management, and reporting fly tipping. The Digital Services team ensured all processes are fully integrated with the Waste management platform Echo, and with our payment and permit systems, removing a significant amount of manual admin work from the Customer Service and Waste teams, reducing the risk of human error, and improving the user experience for customers and our internal teams.

The expertise held within the Digital Services team has allowed us to develop and maintain increasingly complex solutions and integrations, and while larger software rationalisation projects are no longer our strategic priority, the team are equipped with skills that allow them to problem solve and create solutions quickly and confidently.

Alongside system builds, the team have developed analytical and strategic skills that allow them to assess, improve and redesign processes, and identify where workflows and processes can be improved. They then have the technical ability to implement these changes where appropriate. This has been bolstered by the recent procurement of a process mapping tool, which is already being used to enable faster process mapping and analysis, identifying areas for streamlining and optimisation. In-platform analytics will help to provide more tangible metrics for decision-making (e.g. time saved, or estimated costs).

- 3.9 The Safety Advisory Group (SAG) platform was delivered in early January and has undergone internal and external training and testing to ensure the platform delivers for all users. The previous process was very manual, requiring an officer to manually coordinate via email between the applicant and the SAG consultees (14 internal and external consultees including the Police, Herts Highways, and Waste Management Providers), going back and forth between the parties to ensure the appropriate documentation was provided and that all consultees had fed back, and coordinating SAG meetings where required, and maintaining trackers for each of these steps. With approximately 120 applications each year, and each step being manually actioned by the officer, this was a considerable time burden, and an inefficient process for customers and staff.

The new platform allows the entire process to be managed within one system, automating updates and communication, and allowing applicants and consultees to easily manage applications. The feedback has been excellent, with users informing us

that it is clear and easy to use and will significantly reduce the administrative burden on the SAG team. The platform went live on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2026.

- 3.10 All projects undertaken by the Digital Services team have adhered to North Herts Council and web accessibility standards, meaning they are clear and easy to use for people of all abilities. We also ensure that we're following our Customer Service strategy, putting people at the heart of everything we do – whether that's residents, staff, Councillors or other partners. We aim to make it as easy as possible to access our online services, whilst making sure that those who do not use digital services can still interact with us through traditional methods. Our digital service design principles also outline that we design for positive outcomes – investing time and effort to make sure things are as simple as possible.

Service Areas are highly involved in the projects, to ensure the solutions that we build deliver for their requirements in a way that is clear and efficient for them to use. We provide comprehensive training before any system goes live to ensure that users are comfortable and generally appoint a 'Champion' for the new platform – someone who sits within the service area who is given the resources and support to become an 'expert', so support can be provided within their own team.

On top of this, clear and structured user guides are created to provide a step by step of using the new systems, which can be used for onboarding new team members or if existing users need to refresh their knowledge on a particular process. Ongoing support and maintenance is provided by the Digital Services team, particularly in the first month after a system goes live to support a smooth transition and ensure users are comfortable.

We have ensured that digital transformation remains accessible to all users by applying North Herts Council policies and customer service standards throughout each project. This includes designing services to meet accessibility requirements, the Customer Service Centre maintaining clear non-digital contact routes and supporting residents who are less confident online through face-to-face staff guidance and user-friendly resources for staff. These measures ensure that improvements benefit all residents, including those who are not digital natives.

## **4. NEXT STEPS**

- 4.1 The digital transformation programme will continue to evolve as we refine our systems, strengthen accessibility, and respond to emerging organisational needs. Over the next year, the focus will remain on detailed business process analysis and improving the customer experience.
- 4.2 Quarterly Oversight Group meetings will continue to guide the programme, providing a structured and transparent forum to review progress, address challenges, and confirm strategic priorities. This ongoing governance will help maintain momentum, support informed decision-making, and ensure that digital transformation activity continues to deliver tangible value to services, colleagues and residents.

## **5. APPENDICES**

- 5.1 Appendix A – Case Studies

## **6. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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## **7. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None.