



## **Scope for Scrutiny Review of Digital Services Scrutiny (Audit and Value for Money Council) Committee**

### **Sub Group Membership:**

Cllr Gould  
Cllr Metcalfe  
Cllr Sankey

### **Background / Context:**

The Committee wanted to consider the current digital services that the Council offers to ensure that it provides value for money. It seeks to review three pillars:

- Scope
- Intuitiveness
- Access to services

### **What are the core questions the review is seeking to answer?**

1. What progress has been made towards full digital services?
2. How easy and intuitive are the digital services?
3. How does the Council ensure everyone has access to Council services?

### **What is the purpose of the Review (in one sentence)?**

To review what services are currently available digitally, how they are implemented and what provisions the Council has to ensure that our residents and businesses have access to our services.

### **Scrutiny approach**

Desktop review of available services  
Interview with officers involved in digital services.

### **In scope**

East Staffordshire Borough Council digital services

## 1. Current Digital Services

### a) What is the Council's vision in terms of its digital service provision?

A new digital strategy was approved by Cabinet in October with a vision:

- To provide value for money services
- Consider emerging technologies
- For digital channels to be the preferred access channel
- Openness and transparency
- In-house development and innovation

### b) What are our most popular online services?

The summary below was based on the top 100 pages, in terms of visits, across the main website and planning explorer between 01/06/2019 – 31/05/2020. They are categorised by the URLs clicked, reflecting what areas the pages fall under.

The data does not include

- Visits to the revenues and benefits self-service areas
- Pay online section or the dynamics self-service forms
- Only covers visits where cookie consent is provided due to the EU Cookie Directive

From the data we do have, we know there were a total of 2,038,444 page views, from this we can see that the top ten most viewed pages (excluding the home page) were for planning, bins, rubbish and recycling, council tax, contact us and the search engine (figures are set out below):

Page	Area	Page Views
	Homepage	97900
/Northgate/PlanningExplorer/ApplicationSearch.aspx	Planning	87359
/planning/applications-and-decisions/applications-and-appeals	Planning	66482
/Northgate/PlanningExplorer/GeneralSearch.aspx	Planning	47955
/Northgate/PlanningExplorer/KeywordsSearch.aspx	Planning	41145
/bins-rubbish-recycling/collection-dates	Bins, rubbish and recycling	31463
/search/node	Search	30616
/bins-rubbish-recycling	Bins, rubbish and recycling	28043
/council-tax	Council Tax	27578
/contact-us	Contact us/	26707
/planning	Planning	23732

Out of the top twenty most popular areas on the website, users are able to perform online tasks associated with that area in 19 out of 20 areas. *Members you may recall in the previous version of this document that Apply for Housing was not available digitally. Trent and Dove have recently launched a digital application process - <https://www.trentanddove.org/bricks-mortar/information-for-applicants/how-do-i-apply/>*

No	Task	Available Digital?	Solution
1	Search for planning application	Yes	Planning Explorer
2	Local Election Results	Yes	Corporate Website
3	Bin Collection Dates	Yes	Corporate Website
4	Council Tax	Yes	Corporate Website / Capita
5	Check Council Tax bands and charges	Yes	Corporate Website / Capita
6	Pay Council Tax	Yes	Corporate Website / Capita / Unit4
7	Branston Water Park	Yes	Corporate Website
8	Councillors	Yes	Corporate Website
9	Tips and Recycling Centres	Yes	Corporate Website
10	Check Council Tax Account	Yes	Capita
11	Apply for Housing	Yes	Through Trent and Dove
12	Blue Bin	Yes	Corporate Website
13	Council Committees	Yes	Corporate Website
14	Jobs	Yes	Corporate Website / WMJobs
15	Order New Bin	Yes	Corporate Website / Dynamics
16	Car Parks	Yes	Corporate Website / Parking software
17	Register to Vote	Yes	Corporate Website / gov.uk
18	Council Tax Change of Address	No	
19	Planning Decision Notices	Yes	Corporate Website
20	Local Plan	Yes	Corporate Website

**c) What is the Council's digital solution for these services?**

Please see chart above

**d) What digital services could the Council provide?**

As part of the review, a benchmarking exercise was undertaken with Staffordshire authorities to compare what digital services are available across these local authority websites (attached as Appendix 1).

The table below provides a summary of those services.

	ESBC	CCDC	LDC	NuLBC	SSDC	SBC	SMDC	TBC
<b>Online Service</b>								
E Services Tab	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
A-Z of Services	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Pay/Report/Apply tabs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
My account tab	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Live chat	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Find your councillor tab	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Events calendar	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Visitors to the area tab	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

**e) How do the Council promote its digital services?**

The council uses many platforms to promote its services, such as social media (Facebook/Twitter), search engines such as google and yahoo, ESBC website and advertisements.

**f) What is the progress regarding Democratic Enablement?**

The Council records committee meetings and post the recordings online and as a result of COVID-19, the Council is Using zoom for committee meetings. These Zoom webinars are accessible to the public.

The electoral services department has begun using the GOV.UK.Notify service which is a platform for public servants who need to send emails, text messages and letters.

Electoral services receive a free allowance of 25,000 which updates every financial year. Between 2019 and 2020 the electoral services team sent 2,770 SMS and they received a number of responses, mainly confirming wrong numbers or that they already registered to vote.

**2. Intuitiveness of digital services**

**a) Are the Council’s digital services available across multiple platforms**

Our services are available across multiple platforms and can be accessed from PCs, laptops, tablets and mobile phones. The Council’s website is responsive so it adapts to different screen sizes without the need for a separate mobile website. In the recently approved Digital Strategy, there is also an action to implement a mobile app and to investigate the benefits of customer accounts.

**b) Does the Council use plain English, where appropriate, in describing its services?**

Content management on the website is devolved across the authority meaning that each team is responsible for the content on their pages. To assist content editors, each author should follow the Council’s content management strategy to ensure that content is concise, up-to-date and that plain English is used where possible.

The 'writing on the web' section of the content management strategy outlines the approach content editors should follow when developing their content. Editors should use short sentences, use headings to break up large chunks of text and use a simple vocabulary.

Out of the top 1500 pages on the Council's website, the majority of pages have a reading age between 11 and 13. As part of our ongoing quality assurance work, the reading age of our pages are reviewed and those pages that have a high reading age are identified and assessed.

**c) How prominent are the Council's web pages on popular search engines such as Google? On researching the three top search engines, East Staffordshire appears either top or within the top 3.**

The benchmarking spreadsheet compares ESBC's website to other local authorities. The content on the website and the metadata behind the pages is carefully considered in order for our pages to appear prominently on search engine results pages.

**3. Access to Council services?**

**a) How does the Council ensure that all residents can access the Council's digital services?**

The Council's corporate website aims to adhere to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), in particular WCAG 2.1 website accessibility requirements where possible. The WCAG cover a range of topics including colour contrast, code quality and keyboard accessibility. The guidelines are published to ensure that everyone can access and use a website.

In addition to conforming to industry website accessibility guidelines where possible, the Council also has a website accessibility toolbar. This toolbar performs a variety of functions including:

- A screen reader – The toolbar will read out the page to the user
- Language translation
- Allow the user to change the colour contrasts on the website
- Enlarge or reduce the size of the text
- A dictionary
- A ruler
- The option to display just text
- Search function



**b) Are those unable to transact with the Council digitally, still able to access Council services?**

The Council provides access to all services for those unable to transact with the council digitally, all departments can be contacted via telephone and postal services and can also provide support/help with digital services.

## **Out of scope**

Digital services provided by other organisations

## **What is the timescale?**

September 2020

## **What evidence / data do you need?**

Website and transactions services analytics

## **Resources**

Programmes and Transformation Team Leader  
IT Manager  
Website statistics

## **Conclusions**

Following this review we feel that overall substantial progress has been made towards full digital services with the most popular services having a digital option. Whilst some services may not be suitable for fully digital services, where for instance the situation is complex or requires specialist knowledge most bread and butter operations have a digital option.

Every effort appears to have been made to make them as straightforward as possible to use although to some extent this is limited by the complexity of some subjects.

All services have at least one alternative channel for residents to use such as telephone, mail and the customer contact centre.

Therefore overall we feel the digital services are good and fit for purpose.

## **Recommendations**

Good progress had been made on developing a digital service on which the officers are to be congratulated. Substantial progress has been made on most of the remaining work. However further progress is needed in areas such as connecting systems to enable a one account solution. Particular areas such as planning where the application search takes a bit of getting used to and improvements to document handling. These are known issues and appear to be in hand either currently or the forthcoming review of digital strategy.

Most solutions appear to be produced in house and this can have significant benefits in terms of cost and exact tailoring to ESBC requirements. However different package's and commercial options are available. Consideration should be given to alternative packages as it is quite possible that this will increase the range of options and may offer solutions that have not been considered.

Perhaps the most significant and ambitious of which is the aim of introducing a single account for users across all council services. (My account) and is offered by several other councils. This is an ambitious objective and as most residents do not interact with their council on a regular basis would reduce the number of account details to remember.

We would suggest some thought be given to the possibility of some kind of shared access to County services so that for a functional aspect customers have 1 port of call and one set of details to remember. We accept this might prove to be infeasible.

It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee be kept informed of the progress of the new Digital Strategy throughout the lifecycle of the Strategy.