EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

Title of Report:	Scrutiny Review of Digital Services	To be marked with an 'X' by Democratic Services after report has been presented
Meeting of:	Scrutiny Audit and Value for Money Council Services Committee **19th November 2020**	x
	Corporate Management Team **19th January 2021**	x
	Leader and Deputy Leaders **25th January 2021**	x
	Cabinet **15th February 2021**	

Scrutiny Committee Review Final Report

Title: Scrutiny Review of Digital Services

Scrutiny Committee: Scrutiny (Audit and Value for Money Council) Committee

Committee Chair: Cllr Hudson

Sub-group Members Leading Review:

- Cllr Gould
- Cllr Metcalfe
- Cllr Sankey

Is the Report Confidential?   No
If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972:   N/a

SECTION 1: COMMITTEE'S REPORT

1.   Scrutiny Review of Digital Services

1.1.   Background / Context

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

        i.   Scope
        ii.   Intuitiveness
        iii. Access to services

1.2.   What are the core questions the review is seeking to answer?

        i.   What progress has been made towards full digital services?
        ii.   How easy and intuitive are the digital services?
        iii. How does the Council ensure everyone has access to Council services?

1.3.   What is the purpose of the Review (in one sentence)?

    1.3.1. 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.

1.4.   Scrutiny approach

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

1.5.   In scope

        i.   East Staffordshire Borough Council digital services

1.6.   Out of scope

        i.   Digital services provided by other organisations

1.7.   Current Digital Services

    1.7.1. What is the Council's vision in terms of its digital service provision?

        i.   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

1.7.2. What are our most popular online services?

1.7.2.1. 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

1.7.2.2. 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 in Table 1 below):

Table 1

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

1.7.2.3. 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. N.B. Trent and Dove have recently launched a digital application process - https://www.trentanddove.org/bricks-mortar/information-for-applicants/how-do-i-apply/

Table 2

No	Task	Available Digitally?	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

No	Task	Available Digitally?	Solution
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

1.7.3. What is the Council's digital solution for these services?

1.7.3.1. Please see Table 2 above

1.7.4. What digital services could the Council provide?

1.7.4.1. 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).

1.7.4.2. Table 3 below provides a summary of those services:

Table 3

Online Service	ESBC	CCDC	LDC	NuLBC	SSDC	SBC	SMDC	TBC
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

*NOTES:

Pay/Report/Apply tabs: The Council previously used Pay for it/Report it/Apply for it tabs/buttons on our homepage however our analytics demonstrated that they were not widely used and nor does this approach reflect the way in which we people use our website. Instead, and in line with SOCITM recommendations, the Council focuses on promoting our top tasks and services, which is more effective for people on mobile/tablets and for those who come to our site via a search engine.

My Account tab: As part of our Digital Strategy the Council will be conducting complete a feasibility study to investigate the possibility of introducing online customer accounts, which will allow information from different services and systems to be managed in one place. The benefits of implementing this type of solution will need to be carefully considered against the relatively high cost of purchasing and licensing this type of system.

Live Chat tab: The feasibility of introducing a live chat facility is to be considered as part of the Digital Strategy work.

Events Calendar tab: The Council did have an events calendar page on its website however the analytics showed that it wasn't viewed very often. The facilities that have events, such as the Brewhouse and The Market Hall, have their own events section within their pages. Our analytics showed that users are much more likely to go the page of the facility holding the event rather than a general what's on calendar.

Visitors to the area tab: The Council promotes Enjoy Staffordshire and the National Forest website and its webpages will be updated in line with the 'A plan for Tourism' report presented to Cabinet in 2020.

How do the Council promote its digital services?

      1.7.4.3.   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.

    1.7.5. What is the progress regarding Democratic Enablement?

      1.7.5.1.   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.

      1.7.5.2.   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.

      1.7.5.3.   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.

1.8.   <u>Intuitiveness of digital services</u>

    1.8.1. Are the Council's digital services available across multiple platforms?

      1.8.1.1.   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.

    1.8.2. Does the Council use plain English, where appropriate, in describing its services?

      1.8.2.1.   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.

      1.8.2.2.   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.

1.8.2.3.   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.

1.8.3. How prominent are the Council's web pages on popular search engines such as Google?

1.8.3.1.   On researching the three top search engines, East Staffordshire appears either top or within the top 3.

1.8.3.2.   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.

1.9.   Access to Council services

1.9.1. How does the Council ensure that all residents can access the Council's digital services?

1.9.1.1.   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.

1.9.1.2.   In addition to conforming to industry website accessibility guidelines where possible, the Council also has a website accessibility toolbar:

1.9.1.3.   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

1.9.2. Are those unable to transact with the Council digitally, still able to access Council services?

1.9.2.1.   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.

1.10. Conclusions

    1.10.1.   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 core services have a digital option.

    1.10.2.   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.

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

    1.10.4.   Therefore overall we feel the digital services are good and fit for purpose. The recommendations detailed below reflect this statement, and lead us to suggest that the next stages are for the Council to continue to look at developing things further and add additional value to its current provision through effective delivery of the new Digital Strategy. This could be done by enhancing its technology and reviewing its processes to ensure they are streamlined to deliver the best outcomes intended, considering the new or innovative use of internal solutions, use of any emerging external technology where appropriate, or working closely with our partners to drive improvements. We note that the benchmarking undertaken in this report indicates that other authorities have an "account" function, and we support the assessment of this function's feasibility for the Borough as set out in the Digital Strategy. Given the importance of the delivery of the Digital Strategy in developing the Council's digital provision, we would welcome an ongoing role for the Scrutiny Committee in reviewing its progress.

2.   **Recommendation(s) of the Committee**

2.1.   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 delivery of the new digital strategy.

2.2.   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 packages 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.

2.3.   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.

2.4.   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.

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

3.   **<u>Appendices</u>**

3.1.   Appendix 1. Benchmarking

SECTION 2: OFFICER CONSULTATION

4. **Financial Considerations**

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: **Lisa Turner**

4.1. The main financial issues arising from this Report are as follows:

4.1.1. Whilst there are no immediate financial issues arising from this report there are a number of suggestions described within the recommendations section that will have significant financial considerations. In line with the Digital Strategy 2020, the cost/benefit of each proposal will be fully developed on a case by case basis. Any proposal will be brought forward for consideration in the event that a financial contribution is required which cannot be met from existing budgets, in-line with financial regulations.

5. **Legal Considerations**

This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team: **Angela Wakefield**

5.1. The main legal issues arising from this Report are as follows:

5.1.1. For projects that are considered to likely involve a high risk to people's personal information, the project or service manager will need to complete a Data Protection Impact Assessment.

6. **Risk Assessment and Management**

6.1. The main risks arising from this Report and the Council achieving its objectives are as follows:

6.2. **Positive** (Opportunities/Benefits):

6.2.1. Opportunity to improve our digital services and make our digital channels the preferred method of interaction.

6.2.2. Ensure that our digital process are efficient and maximise the use of existing software.

6.3. **Negative** (Threats):

6.3.1. The public not being able to use newly developed self-service systems and revert to more traditional methods of interacting with the Council. This risk will be mitigated by testing at all stages of development.

6.3.2. The security of our systems and ensuring those who use our services do so in a secure environment is vital. All of our digital services will be provided through our existing ICT processes.

6.4.   The risks do not need to be entered in the Risk Register.

6.5.   Any financial implications to mitigate against these risks are considered above.

7.   Equalities and Health

7.1.   **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

7.2.   **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed.

8.   Human Rights

8.1.   There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report.

9.   Sustainability (including   climate   change   and   change   adaptation   measures)

9.1.   Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) **Yes**

9.2.   Please detail any positive/negative aspects:

    9.2.1. Positive (Opportunities/Benefits)

        9.2.1.1.   Digital technologies can help reduce carbon emissions in a number of ways through solutions provided by digital services including remote working, improved customer communications and building management for example

    9.2.2. Negative (threats)

        9.2.2.1.   None Identified