Thurrock Council

Digital and Customer Experience Strategy

2022 to 2025

Focusing on our digital future, connecting technology and knowledge to deliver a Digital Council and a Digital Place. Further improving our customer access and staff experience and opportunities through digital transformation, better services, and tools.

Introduction

In recent years there have been significant advances in the way digital technology can assist with modernising the way the council can deliver services. Digital is transforming the way people live their lives - from the way we communicate to the way we purchase goods and services. The restrictions during the COVID pandemic have, at pace, brought about a new understanding of digital engagement and interaction which can be further harnessed.

Digital technologies enabled the council to continue to operate during the lockdown and we will increase their use to help us improve accessibility for staff, businesses and residents as well as reduce the cost of our services through increased efficiency and automation. These savings can be reinvested into front line service delivery.

We are not at the start of our digital journey. We developed our first digital strategy in 2017. That strategy achieved much but there is more to be done. This is about continuing that journey, over the next three years. In publishing our first combined Digital and Customer Experience Strategy we will have a framework for how the whole council can work together with its partners and customers to reshape how we deliver services and how people request and use them. This strategy is about adapting to customer needs, not confining how people interact with us but finding the most effective way. This is about helping those who can to self-serve but being mindful that some residents will still need our help and assistance.

Our People, Digital and Customer Experience and Data Strategies

Our People Strategy and Digital and Customer Experience Strategy together set out the key outcomes, activities and behaviours needed to support the delivery of our corporate priorities. We are also currently developing a new Data Strategy defining how we will collect, store, manage, share, and use our data to design, deliver and transform public services to improve outcomes and drive efficiencies.

About the Digital and Customer Experience Strategy

Our vision is to provide a consistent service offering that will enable our customers to be more engaged through the use of modern technology and data, on a 24/7 basis where possible. We will build on the changes that have been made as a result of the pandemic and deliver transformational change to services and smarter working for the council itself.

What is digital?

Digital is not just one thing. To truly transform our organisation, we need to evolve our thinking, the way we work, the systems we use and how effective and efficient we can become to meet the needs of our customers. 'Digital' is not a set of activities – as much as anything it is a mindset of being service-oriented and adaptive and having an absolute focus on improving people's lives. Digital encompasses:

- technology
- systems thinking
- data
- behaviour change
- enabler

Now is the time to enhance our delivery capability.

What do we mean by customer experience?

Customer experience is the impression people have of the council when they contact us or use a council service. This includes their perception of our brand and their experience of interaction with our digital / non-digital channels, along with their whole journey through the customer lifecycle. Our customers vary including residents, businesses, students, partners, members, and employees.

Vision and guiding principles

We will transform our service interventions and further enable self-service access to our services through the use of modern digital technology. We will simplify the ways of communicating and doing business with the council.

To ensure we utilise the benefits from new digital capabilities the council will improve processes and make them more efficient, ensure they add value and improve the customer journey for residents and businesses to create a better customer and user experience.

Our guiding principle will be customer usability. Apps and processes will be designed around that - there should be no difference in the quality-of-service customers receive whether they use an online app, phone, an appointment, or switch between any of these channels. This is known as an Omni-Channel solution.

Our Challenges

The council faces many challenges over the lifetime of this strategy including:

- an increasing population, increasing demand - 11.6% population increase since 2011 and projected to continue to increase

- an ageing population, increasing demand on our care services - there has been an increase of 19.4% in people aged 65 years and over since 2011

- an ambitious growth agenda that will impact on our existing infrastructure

- a financial challenge following COVID and increased social care demand

- a new national focus on Levelling Up and a review of local government structure / functions

- meeting current service levels with fewer resources

- an expectation of excellence from our customers and members

- increased scrutiny on spending and best value following intervention

- harnessing the improved digital skills and literacy that the pandemic has influenced within our customer base

These challenges mean the council must take advantage of advances in digital technologies to enable it to deliver more efficient services and streamline our processes.

What we aim to achieve

The outcomes of this strategy over the next three years will be:

- an improved customer journey, through a one front door approach and user-centred design principles. These will be designed to get interactions with customers right first time
- an enabled workforce, equipped with the technology they need to do their jobs effectively – a reduction in manual processes, automation of repetitive tasks and improving processes. This will enable services to focus on complex and specialised work, adding additional value
- a better understanding of our customers through the smarter use of joined-up data. We will use data and analytics to gain insights to improve and make informed decisions
- a more sustainable financial model for the council, where we can improve service delivery while maintaining or reducing costs
- a positive impact on our climate commitment through a reduction in the use of paper and changes to our mailroom and processes. Where practical we can use digital technology to support us deliver a more cohesive and joined-up council through the use of digital tools, increasing cross-functional project work, sharing budgets and goals and being more transparent
- a vibrant digital business sector that contributes to the economic growth of the borough and new developments will be designed with the use of digital technology to improve the public realm environment

Thurrock Digital and Customer Experience themes

Our digital and customer model consists of four themes that aggregate to provide an overall solution that will enable us to harness the potential of digital design, data, customer focus, collaboration, and technology.

The four themes that will enable us to achieve this are:

- **Theme 1 – Digital Thurrock**

We will create a connected place where technology supports and enables - bringing people together, driving economic growth, improving the quality of life, and contributing to Thurrock being a digitally connected place where residents and businesses can thrive.

- **Theme 2 – Digital Customer**

We will create an environment that enables residents, businesses, and partners to interact with the council and access information and services easily when they need them, 24/7 where possible, through the most appropriate channels.

- **Theme 3 – Digital Office**

We will adopt a digital culture and ways of working that lead to service improvements and enhanced operational delivery, equipping our agile workforce with the technology and training they need to deliver where it needs to be delivered

- **Theme 4 – Digital Foundation**

We will create an environment where our services are always reliable by maintaining a highly available, efficient, integrated and secure infrastructure.

Our approach

We will follow five principles to guide our digital, customer, technology, and data work:

1. Customer Focused

Transformation of our services will focus on meeting the needs of our customers, particularly those who are vulnerable. We will use data to improve our understanding of their needs. developing and planning our services to meet those needs**.**

Our services will be digitally inclusive and simple to use, supporting those who are unable to use digital technologies. We will ensure we provide value for money by measuring success, managing our current performance, and continuously improving. The customer will be at the heart of everything we do, and we will always strive to get it right first time

2. Designed based on data

The data we collect will help inform us about our service users' needs and will be supported by all aspects of this strategy. We will utilise data analysis techniques to manage demand for services, using methods to forecast and predict future events where possible, making us more agile and responsive.

Our solutions will be secure by design, protecting people's personal and identifiable data through robustly applying GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) principles and cyber security will be designed in to all our systems, changes, and processes.

3. Collaboration

Our staff and customers will be able to securely use our platform and services at any time from any location using their device of choice. We will give people the space they need to deliver, sharing knowledge and working in an open and transparent way with our partners and with other sectors e.g., community, faith, and voluntary organisations.

4. Continual service improvements

We will design cost effective solutions, ensuring these are cloud based to enable Thurrock Council to become more sustainable and resilient. We will continually improve our processes, taking advantage of advances in technology. We will aim to make our digital channels so good that our customers prefer to use them.

5. Digitally and customer focused, empowered workforce

Our workforce will be digitally skilled. We will invest in their development and enable them to be creative and innovative. We will work with them to understand what they need to provide the best possible service.

Theme 1 – Digital Thurrock - We will create a connected place where technology brings people together, driving economic growth, improving the quality of life, and contributing to place shaping

The outcome aims of this workstream are that:

- more people in Thurrock have better access to information via technology
- Thurrock has a digitally capable population who can access the jobs of tomorrow and employers can access a locally grown, technology-savvy workforce
- Thurrock develops a vibrant digital business sector that contributes to the economic growth of the borough
- businesses choose to stay and grow in Thurrock
- new developments are designed for a digital future

To do this we will:

- deliver a council-wide transformation programme enabled by technology to meet our customer needs through User-Centred Design and a Human Learning Systems approach
- support services, existing community groups and strategic partners to put digital enablement and skills where people can find them easily
- support development of assistive technology to improve the quality of life for our older and more vulnerable customers and leverage the benefits of AI (Artificial Intelligence)
- review our websites, making them more accessible where appropriate
- review all current digital services, technologies and platforms giving us the solid-data and platform we need to plan effectively for future service provision
- improve the connectivity and access to the internet by deploying enabling technologies such as a new WAN, 5G, LoRa WAN and public access Wi-Fi
- develop ways to improve the management of public assets for services such as smart parking, smart benches, and digital signage
- improve our use of data to provide more intelligent analytics to better predict needs and requirements for social care, health, housing, and planning
- support technology delivery for integrated medical centres
- support delivery of new digital services to improve customer and user experience
- design new developments and infrastructure to encompass digital technologies by default
- develop new testing regimes to ensure that contractors charged with designing software deliver on design specifications, and user-friendliness is verified through 'mystery shopper' style exercises.

Digital Thurrock - Progress so far:

- successfully secured £4m of Government funding to deliver a Local Full Fibre Network, significantly improving access to the internet for Thurrock and surrounding areas. We have also secured a further £2.5m to increase the coverage across Essex
- implemented a £400k technology modernisation programme at all our libraries. As a result, people can access our services via tablet kiosks, access the internet, undertake personal computing and printing, attend coding clubs with the introduction to IT taster sessions
- hosted the GovRoam service, enabling other local authorities in Essex to work seamlessly at other Essex sites

Theme 2 – Digital Customer - We will create an environment that enables residents, customers, and partners to access services easily when they need them, 24/7 where possible, through the most appropriate channels

This theme builds on the progress and success from our previous Customer Services Strategy for 2017-2020 which had a high focus on improving customer service and enabling our customers to transact with us digitally wherever possible. It also included many new initiatives such as a customer services modular training programme, development of a customer promise and extensive face to face support to help our residents utilise our online services. These things along with the necessity to do things differently throughout COVID-19 have created the foundations for the next steps of our digital and customer experience journey. In a modern world, we believe that most who can, will opt to access self-service systems, at a time that suits them, however, we will commit to ensuring that face-to-face is available in a timely manner, when help is needed to use self-service technology, or when issues of a sensitive or complex nature need more urgency and attention than a digital interaction.

The outcome aims for this workstream are:

Customers

- will have the best possible experience whatever channel they decide to use
- will find it easy to contact us when it is convenient for them and will get a response which resolves their issue, query or need right first time
- will find the service they receive digitally is good enough to confirm our belief that residents who are digitally literate do choose to contact us in this way all the time, where appropriate
- will be engaged in the development of services, involved in testing new and changing ways of contacting us and see their feedback acted upon
- will benefit from proactive action by our teams and our partners to increase digital skills, access to digital equipment and better digital connectivity around the borough
- will see that we have a better understanding of their needs and are able to personalise services, both through increased levels of engagement and better use of data
- will have confidence that we are an organisation that is committed to ensuring the best possible customer experience, having the staff support and culture to achieve this
- will see us taking a proactive approach to resolving issues in the borough which affect them, before they need to contact us
- will understand we protect our telephone and appointment services to enable focus for these to be given to our most vulnerable residents
- will find our information accessible and easy to understand

Partners

- we will make contacting us and transactions as simple as possible for them
- we will work collaboratively to ensure we are delivering joined-up services where possible
- close collaborative working will allow us to share our data and access each other's open data more easily, to help us ensure we are using what we know about our customers to better meet their needs
- our partnership working will benefit from us having a clear strategy in place

Employees

- will have the skills, data, and technology they need to deliver the best possible customer experience
- will be supported to turn ideas for improving the customer experience into action
- will feel supported to engage with their customers when developing a new service or way for residents to contact us

To do this we will:

- review and agree service response times for service requests and emails for all services to ensure consistent standards and that customers' expectations are set
- increase the number of services that can be purchased via our online payment platform
- review our customer access operating model, aiming to reduce unnecessary contact channels wherever possible, such as generic email addresses
- explore how technology can enhance our contact centre offering through the provision of Omni-Channel, service automation and artificial intelligence
- improve our knowledge of our customers by continuing to develop our "single view of" technology
- continue with our Right First Time customers service training for our employees, adapting this to continuously meet the needs of our constantly changing digital climate
- develop additional mechanisms to involve and engage with our customers
- continue with our customer services quality framework across council services to ensure a consistent level of service is being provided across all teams
- utilise new methodology for designing customer solutions such as Human Learning systems, which will encourage us to work with people listening to them, understanding what matters to them, learning from them, and working together
- prioritise completion of our Data Strategy and utilise our data effectively
- continue to review feedback from our customer satisfaction surveys, customer complaints, elected member enquiries and compliments ensuring that appropriate learning mechanisms are in place
- continue to join up across the council to share information digitally such as Tell Us Once so that customers don't have to contact several departments
- continue to benchmark across local government and with the private sector to identify opportunities to improve further
- support our residents to access our services through their free entitlement to digital skills training
- continue to monitor high call volumes outside of the contact centre to identify online development opportunities to remove the need for customers to call, or, if not, move some transactions into the contact centre. This may help free up time in the back-office to focus on those tasks that often require a distinct set of skills
- work closely with colleagues in our communications team to make sure that our customers get the right messages, at the right time, using the multiple communications channels open to us. We will utilise feedback to improve the way we communicate and make better use of existing tools to market new opportunities as well as providing improved service updates that are targeted to individual's needs
- ensure our online information is accessible, up to date, accurate, easy to understand and designed with our customers in mind
- ensure we have the right metrics and processes through which customer satisfaction, demand and digital take up can be measured and evaluated
- ensure that appropriate digital employee feedback mechanisms are in place

- review our contact centre opening hours to ensure the most effective use of resource
- consider if additional transactions should be online only, to enable additional resource to focus on supporting our digitally excluded and vulnerable customers
- create a new business plan for our registration service to enhance the offering to our customers within our new premises, including live streaming of ceremonies
- continue to operate Language line and Sign video to support customers with language and hearing difficulties

Digital Customer – Progress So Far

- We have invested in a new 24x7 payment platform that enables people to make a secure payment at a time that is convenient to them.
- As of July 2022, over 72% of residents pay their Council Tax via direct debit. We are looking to further increase the number of services through more webforms that are available online.
- Our online self-service platform MyAccount has over 45,000 people signed up to it with over 13,000 people managing their Council Tax accounts via the Thurrock MyAccount. Residents can also report environmental service requests, such as fly tipping, although it is recognised more needs to be done to build trust and faith that when this system is used, that users are able to check the status of their case, and they see a tangible outcome that matches reasonable expectations and requests. 95% of all bulky waste requests are now done online. Our residents can also use MyAccount for services such as housing benefits and reporting missed bins.
- Approximately 900 employees have already attended our Customer Services Modular training programme
- Our Customer Services Quality Framework, which was recognised by the Customer Contact Association as leading practice, has been completed in several departments already, highlighting areas for improvement and associated action plans
- New customer service delivery model developed to ensure assistance is provided to our vulnerable residents, building on delivery model changes implemented during COVID-19.
- Developed a single view of debt to enable specific support for vulnerable service users
- Achieved global standard accreditation from the Customer Contact Association for our Customer Services Team
- Supported thousands of customers to move from traditional contact methods such as face to face to utilise our digital channels
- Libraries have supported digital inclusion with free PC usage, reduced printing rates, free electricity usage for their devices, staff and volunteers assisting and supporting people to get online
- Over 16000 residents have attended Wiser4IT sessions
- Job seekers training is offered which includes training on how to use Zoom and Teams
- Basic IT, iPad, tablet, and smartphone training is provided for internet searching, online safety, shopping, price comparison, social inclusion, keeping contact with family and friends, etc.
- Successfully bid and won the good Things Foundation National Databank allowing us to examine each area of Thurrock in detail, its level of digital literacy and poverty levels to better direct our services . From this bid libraries have also secured a number of Gifting Virgin02 , Vodaphone and 3mobile SIM cards /Data and text/call minutes that can be given out freely to residents who cannot afford Broadband.

Theme 3 – Digital Office - We will adopt a digital culture and ways of working that lead to service improvements and enhanced operational delivery, equipping our agile workforce with the technology and training they need to deliver where it needs to be delivered

We will embrace smarter working and create a digitally enabled workforce that is focused on delivering outcomes with bureaucracy minimised through automation.

Our staff are passionate about their work. They want to do the best job possible for our customers and to enable them to do that our technology offer will match that ambition. To create our digital office, we will use management information more effectively, further embrace smarter working, provide a wider range of devices to work from, embed our digital skills programme and improve and streamline our estate of business applications.

The outcome aims of this workstream are that:

- performance is better managed across the council, its partnerships, and contracts
- staff can focus on complex decisions, as repetitive and time-consuming tasks become automated
- our staff can work in the most appropriate location for the tasks they are doing rather than in a fixed office location, with the requisite that location of work creates the best possible outcome for the service user
- our staff are digitally capable of performing the roles expected of them
- our technology enables our staff to be more collaborative and resilient
- our staff become more efficient due to their use of improved devices and applications that meet their business needs

To do this we will:

- enable our staff to focus on higher value activities through embracing the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and digitising forms and business process through our Digital Efficiencies programme
- build on our use of digital meetings and associated technology to increase collaboration between teams, increase efficiency and reduce the level of printed paper
- ensure that our staff are equipped to do their jobs effectively by regularly reviewing their needs and refreshing the equipment they use, when required
- review the applications used by our services and consolidate where appropriate.
- continue our digital skills programme to ensure that our workforce is digitally capable of delivering the tasks that are expected of them
- standardise and automate our approach to cross-functional using, sharing, and enhancing the value of data by standardising data sets, the use of automation and streamlined processes
- create and utilise management dashboards to make virtual real-time information available to support better and quicker decision making

Digital Office – Progress So Far

- We have equipped our staff, so they can work at the best location for them to ensure that the services they provide meet the highest possible outcome expectations. Through our smarter working programme, we are aligning our accommodation to enable our staff to work more collaboratively, reduce silos and create a platform of openness through ensuring adequate physical 'team time' to ensure creative value and innovation generation which can be lost via purely digital means
- We have launched our Digital Academy to help upskill our employees at all levels, so they can utilise our new technology and apply it in the workplace
- To enhance our Smarter working credentials, we have implemented Oracle Cloud platform and are currently implementing the Microsoft 365 suite of applications. To ensure these new digital technologies are embedded within the organisation our Digital Academy and skills training syllabus is embedded in the Corporate Training programme
- To provide a better online computing experience for all our staff and visitors we have built a new high quality Wi-Fi service. We are also investing in a new future proofed Wide Area Network to ensure we have the same digital capability at all council sites.
- In order to achieve savings and efficiencies, by freeing our staff to focus on more complex work, we have invested in a robotic process automation platform that will automate some less complex, labour-intensive processes
- We have introduced the 4Me enterprise service management tool for seamless collaboration between internal customers and the IT Service. This enables staff to self-serve their requests and has removed the need for paper forms. This migration to self-service is reducing the number of telephone calls to the service desk which is freeing staff time up to focus on other tasks.

Theme 4 – Digital Foundation - We create an environment where our services are available when they are needed and build and maintain a resilient infrastructure

The outcome aims of this workstream are that:

- at least 50% of our people can carry on working in the event of a disaster to allow services to continue
- the information we hold about people is secure
- our network is available 99.9% of the time
- more staff say our IT platform meets their needs

To do this we will:

- continue to expand on our M365 platform to enable smarter working, application rationalisation and greater collaboration within the council and our partners
- deliver a consistent, fit for purpose IT experience for all our staff by upgrading our LAN and WAN offerings, deliver an improved Wi-Fi experience from all our settings
- provide the latest digital solutions in line with business requirements to ensure we deliver a consistent approach
- develop a fit for purpose IT service model that meets the requirements of our workforce
- develop our use of automation technologies to drive efficiencies in our processes

- improve our resilience by removing the remaining single points of failure from within our technology infrastructure
- Ensure an annual review of our IT Infrastructure Backup and Security Resilience Risk Assessment is completed, with reasonably practicable mitigation actions executed as identified.

Digital Foundation – Progress So Far

- We have designed and built a new state of the art Data Centre. This has removed a significant risk for the council and enhanced our disaster recovery capability whilst also reducing our carbon footprint. We have identified and removed single points of failure within our infrastructure to make it highly available
- We have responded to the change in working practices by investing in laptops for our staff and the introduction of "Always On" VPN technology. In addition, we have invested in our virtual desktop by building our new 'Connected Workspace' platform capable of providing staff a high-quality computing experience which is available 24 hours a day.
- We have started our migration to Microsoft 365 by delivering a new online email service and implementing MS Teams across the organisation.
- To provide a better online computing experience for all our staff and visitors we have built a new high quality Wi-Fi service. This is now being rolled out to key council sites and over the lifetime of this strategy all council sites will be provisioned with this service.

Next steps and measuring success

To ensure delivery of the vision and outcomes outlined within this strategy, an action plan is in progress including all actions listed within this document along with owners and timescales. This will be monitored via Digital and Demand Board and as part of our overall transformation programme.

The board includes representatives from across the organisation and provides the governance for projects and new initiatives to ensure a collective, digital-first approach and continuous assessment against this strategy and the required outcomes.