



Committee and Date

Performance Management  
Scrutiny Committee  
30<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Item

Public

**GREEN PAPER**  
**Digital First Approach**

Responsible Officer:

E-mail: David.Baker@shropshire.gov.uk

Tel: 01743 254118

**1. Synopsis**

This report sets out the principles of a 'Digital First' approach and key considerations in adopting this approach.

**2. Executive Summary**

- 2.1 With technology changing the ways people access services, customers expecting more from services and ever-increasing costs, we need to provide services in an efficient, innovative, cost-effective manner. To address this, we are proposing to mandate or encourage a Digital First approach when looking at how services now and in the future are delivered and commissioned.
- 2.2 Our Digital First approach is to create compelling digital services over traditional methods, pursuing as many transactions as possible through digital routes. An important part of our approach is that traditional methods are not precluded as a potential delivery channel, and we accept that some individuals will be best served in the traditional manner.
- 2.3 A Digital First approach to delivering and commissioning services will ensure that Shropshire maximises its use of the benefits of digital technology in delivering the Shropshire Plan.

**3. Recommendations**

**Members are asked to:**

- 3.1 Consider the information relating to our Digital First approach and recommend to Cabinet and then Council a Digital First approach for delivering and commissioning services now and in the future.

## **REPORT**

### **4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal**

- 4.1 Not mandating or encouraging a 'Digital First' approach could mean digital opportunities are missed, resulting in services that don't meet customer expectations, inefficiencies, higher costs, and potentially avoiding positive environmental impact.
- 4.2 Traditional systems and infrastructure are more costly to maintain, present greater security risks and run an increased risk of service disruption.
- 4.3 Older systems negatively impact employee satisfaction as they become frustrated with less efficient tools, undertake tasks that could be delivered via self-service or automated channels, and deal with siloed data.
- 4.4 Mandating or encouraging a 'Digital First' approach where appropriate forces the council and the market to address the challenges of efficiency, innovation, and cost-effectiveness.

### **5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1 Digital technology and a Digital First approach can save money, the Government Digital Service (GDS) reported saving central government £1.7Bn per year in 2015. It is important that we differentiate any savings between hours freed up to do other work, cost avoidance, efficiencies, and cashable savings.
- 5.2 Financial implications as a result of 'Digital First' will be considered when commissioning services. Any implications are expected to have positive outcomes.

### **6. Climate Change Appraisal**

- 6.1 There are many benefits to the climate by taking a Digital First approach, the example benefits include but are not limited to: -
  - Reducing paper usage through digital end-to-end services.
  - Reducing travel and pollution by taking part in virtual meetings, accessing services and data remotely.
  - Saving energy by utilising cloud services or using the Internet of Things to monitor building usage, intelligently controlling the lights and heating.
- 6.2 Full implications and considerations of climate change as a result of 'Digital First' will be considered when commissioning services. Any implications are expected to have positive outcomes.

## 7. Background

- 7.1 Technology is continually changing the way people go about their daily lives, how they interact, learn, play, and work, offering new and exciting opportunities for the way Shropshire Council connects and interacts with citizens and staff.
- 7.2 This technical progress is predicted to continue for years to come, and it allows Shropshire Council to help ensure that both local residents and visitors to the county enjoy the benefits of the digital age, while working to ensure that those in 'digital poverty' are not left behind.
- 7.3 Valuable information is held all over the organisation, and digital services enable better data collation, sharing and insight. The council can then make better use of this data, allowing us to understand our citizens better and use business intelligence to drive decision making. New insights and predictive analytics will facilitate early interventions, and a proactive rather than reactive approach will improve both efficiency and outcomes.
- 7.4 Digital technology helps to remove some of the challenges of covering a large geographical area, remotely connecting residents to services in a more cost-effective and efficient manner. Accessing services digitally also reduces both time and travel costs and the associated impact on the environment, placing us on an even footing with urban authorities in terms of service delivery. The challenge with digital services is differing levels of digital infrastructure and digital skills, not understanding or appreciating the benefits of digital technology and trusting online services.
- 7.5 In order to address these digital exclusions, there is a bid to expand the Digital Skills Programme, supporting a further 3,000 digitally excluded Shropshire residents aged 55 or over to interact with the Council digitally. Our Shropshire Local customer service points offer a place for our citizens to talk to friendly council staff face to face and get support with a range of services, if citizens don't have a computer at home, they can use our public access computers.
- 7.6 In Shropshire 98% of premises are able get broadband, but uptake is only around 70%, although some will be using their mobile phones to access the internet. Clearly, efforts should continue to enable the remaining 2% of premises to access broadband, while helping those not yet accessing the internet to do so. This is a key enabler of the digital revolution, vital to the future prosperity and health of the county.
- 7.7 The Government Digital Service (GDS) has led the way in transforming services, setting out Digital by Default Service Standards, a set of criteria designed for digital teams building

government services. The most important message is that services are not to be replaced with digital-only offerings and instead are meant to encourage those who can turn to digital channels do so.

- 7.8 At Shropshire we want to pursue and promote a 'digital county' in which as many transactions as possible are done through digitally enabled routes, while also accepting that some transactions and individuals will be better served in the traditional manner.
- 7.9 We need to consider how the council currently delivers and commissions services, and how services will be delivered and commissioned in the future. The challenge will be how we and our contractors meet the needs of the residents across the county in the most efficient, innovative, and cost-effective way. We will want to see the council and the market respond to these challenges and look at digital opportunities where possible and appropriate, including adopting, or mandating, a 'Digital First' approach.
- 7.10 Our Digital First philosophy is creating digital channels and services over traditional methods. It is important to note that our Digital First approach does not preclude traditional methods as a potential delivery channel. Instead, it means creating a flexible environment that allows us to optimise as many channels as possible to deliver our services in innovative, efficient, and easy to use ways. Creating digital services so compelling that those who can use digital channels actively choose to use our digital services, freeing up resources for those who need assistance or are better served in the more traditional manner.
- 7.11 Shropshire Council is continuing to develop its use of technology and encouraging or mandating where appropriate a Digital First approach for contractors when delivering and commissioning services, will ensure that Shropshire maximises its use of the benefits of digital technology in delivering the Shropshire Plan.

## **8. Additional Information**

- 8.1 Digital technology enables individuals, businesses, voluntary and community sector organisations and public bodies to greatly expand their knowledge, reach and ability to transact efficiently. Digital technology should be a significant consideration in the design and delivery of all commissioned services now and in the future.
- 8.2 There are several issues to consider in adopting any digital technology, although the current Digital Skills Programme and bid to expand the programme will help address these:
- 8.2.1 Shropshire is the 2nd largest inland council with 57% of the population living in rural areas with differing levels of digital

infrastructure. In Shropshire 98% of premises can get broadband, but uptake is only around 70%.

- 8.2.2 No matter what we do some people will not trust digital services and are unwilling to share information digitally.
- 8.2.3 Provisions need to be in place for those people who will be better served via traditional means due to health or other reasons.
- 8.2.4 Some people lack the digital skills to engage with us through digital channels.
- 8.2.5 Citizens may not be able to afford or have devices they can use to engage with us digitally.

## **9. Conclusions**

- 9.1 Shropshire must consider how we currently deliver and commission services, and how services will be delivered and commissioned in the future, and how we and our contractors will meet the needs of the residents across the county in the most efficient, innovative, and cost-effective ways.
- 9.2 The council and contractors must look at digital opportunities where possible and appropriate, including adopting, or mandating, a 'Digital First' approach.
- 9.3 Without adopting a 'Digital First' approach our digital opportunities could be missed resulting in services that don't meet customer expectations, inefficiencies, higher costs, and potentially avoiding positive environmental impact.
- 9.4 Our 'Digital First' approach is to create digital channels and services over traditional methods, pursuing as many transactions as possible through digital routes, ensuring that traditional methods are not precluded as a potential delivery channel, and accepting that some individuals will be best served in the traditional manner.
- 9.5 Encouraging or mandating a 'Digital First' approach where appropriate when delivering and commissioning services, will ensure that we maximise the benefits of digital technology in delivering the Shropshire Plan.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

None

**Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)**

Councillor Rob Gittins

**Local Member**

**Appendices**

None

