



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Xentrall

Shared Services
Delivering Excellence for All



Darlington ICT Strategy
2022

Introduction

This ICT Strategy, the third in this modern series, is set in unprecedented times as the world continues to respond and adapt to the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Combined with the effects of long-term austerity measures, the pandemic has not only added immense pressure to public services, but like the response to austerity, it has shown how agile and effective the public sector can be when in a very challenging situation. Local government has particularly shone.

More specifically, the foundations set by the Council's previous ICT strategies have paid dividends and allowed many of the office-based ICT users to work from home with very little notice on a long-term full-time basis. A mix of laptops and secure desktops were deployed.

Without this capability, the effectiveness of the Council's initial and on-going response to the pandemic would have been very different indeed. It is sobering to think that some organisations struggled to mobilise their teams and work effectively for many months and even years.

Having been "thrown in the deep end", it was pleasing to see that the Council's ICT users coped very well with their rapid immersion into working from home and they soon got up to speed with their usual day-to-day tasks, whether operational or strategic in nature.

Partly as a consequence of pandemic home working, the Council is reviewing its approach to a future blended way of working, be this at home, out mobile or back in the office. This review is benefiting from what's been learnt from the previous 20+ months of home working, successfully undertaken by so many.

Pandemic aside, the wider environmental factors influencing the period covered by the previous strategy remain broadly unchanged, as there continues to be budget pressures facing the Council.

Be it budget savings, Council-wide improvement initiatives, service transformation & online migration or simply just getting the day job done, crisis or otherwise, ICT is fundamental to all.

Effective ICT systems and services should not be taken for granted, however. They do not happen by chance.



Challenges Ahead and Principles to be Applied

The eight principles developed over the life of the two previous ICT strategies have been effective and proven their worth. The development of this latest strategy however has given an opportunity to refresh and rationalise these and reflect current thinking.

There continues to be many challenges facing the Council. Financial pressures are now accompanied by a pandemic response, neither of which are ending soon. New pressures will no doubt emerge, perhaps of a similar nature or even totally new.

These refreshed, now seven principles, like before will help us navigate the challenges ahead, be them known or unknown, and guide us to the right decisions.

The Systems and Information Governance Group will continue to oversee technology related project proposals, and along with ICT Services, will uphold these seven principles in assessing project submissions. Such assessments though should be considered in-part as a safety net, as these principles should be embedded into the service management approach and being applied by service managers when discussing solutions to operational requirements, be these technical or otherwise.

The integration of technology proposals into such service plans ensures that the technology-service relationship is clear and maintained.

Affordability, efficiency, targeted investments and importantly maximising the use of existing ICT assets, are all factors which must be uppermost when considering technology related initiatives, either standalone or as part of wider service reviews.

Principle 1 Technology should be at the core of any service redesign or transformation initiative, with appropriateness and value for money being the tests for any potential technology investments, and also ensuring that existing ICT assets have been considered and exploited as far as possible to maximise gain and eliminate waste.





Those staff with laptops prior to the pandemic were more easily able to transition to working from home. In recognition of this benefit and to facilitate a blended approach to future working, a corporate approach and associated funding for laptops based end-user technology has been agreed, and this will sit alongside effective training both in applications and the general use of ICT.

Principle 2 Those using ICT systems should have the correct technologies to aid them in their work and the appropriate level of skill to use these effectively.

Both service management teams and the Systems and Information Governance Group play a key role in ensuring technology is not an ill-fitting bolt-on or a thin veneer. It must be an efficient integration from customer to back-office providing a good seamless experience for customers and designed from their perspective. Ensuring suppliers adopt an open API (Application Programming Interface) approach in their product development is key in assisting with this integration of systems.

Principle 3 Migrating services on-line, where appropriate, should be the default position of any service review or investment in an ICT system or simply when the opportunity to do so arises, with an end-to-end design being adopted and an API approach being sought from system suppliers.

Service ICT leads, the Systems and Information Governance Group and ICT Services have a responsibility to recognise common technology requirements across the Council which may be better served by a corporate ICT solution with potentially a raising of priority.

Principle 4 A corporate approach should be considered where several services have similar ICT requirements.

The ICT architecture design provides a resilient and secure underpinning platform on which all of the Council's service applications and enterprise systems run. This platform extends beyond the Council buildings and into people's homes and yet wider still. This enables home and agile working.

Principle 5 Information technology should be a catalyst for transformation and the enabler of services. It should not be an obstacle, but should be resilient, scalable, secure and intuitive.

With the detrimental impacts of cyber-attacks and incidents ever-present in the news, cyber security is now a well understood term. The Council's online protection systems are well managed and kept up to date, but this critical and important investment can be put at risk by ageing and unsupported applications that may not carry similar levels of protection.

Principle 6 Obsolescence, ageing systems and unsupported software should not be allowed to put the Council's wider technology platform and data at risk.

Similarly, the effort and expense in protecting the Council's systems and data can be undermined by a member of staff clicking on something they shouldn't. Continued awareness and vigilance are key as phishing attempts and other security threats become more sophisticated.

Principle 7 Awareness raising initiatives and training will be used to help staff maintain vigilance and be able to identify and know how to act when presented with a potential security threat and the implications of any data loss.

The Strategic Priorities for ICT

These three themes capture the strategic areas of focus for the ICT service and in turn the services it delivers to the Council.

ICT Governance and ICT Service Development

The nature of the governance of the ICT service and its projects can change over time as management structures and corporate groups change and adapt within the Council itself.

For this current strategy, its principles and priorities once approved, will be embedded within the daily functions of the ICT Service and in the co-ordination and monitoring role of the Systems and Information Governance Group. As previously described, the wider service management teams should also have an awareness of the strategy and be mindful of the seven principles contained therein.

Similar governance arrangements are in place within Stockton Council, and this ensures the overall commitment against what is a shared ICT resource is transparent and managed as one co-ordinated process.

The management and performance monitoring of this shared resource is also overseen by the Xentrall Executive Board whose members currently are the Group Director of Operations of Darlington Council, the Managing Director of Stockton Council and the Assistant Director of Xentrall Shared Services.

Another element of ICT governance is the auditing of the ICT service which is undertaken by a number of means, both internal and external. This ensures the service complies with best practice and standards.

Alongside these compliance regimes the ICT service continues to manage a successful formal service improvement programme which is steered by these and other influencing factors. The service is proud of its embedded service improvement culture and commitment to on-going staff development which supports this positive culture and focus on service delivery.

Combined, these activities provide a professional, driven and healthy environment for individuals and teams to develop and flourish, and this is for the benefit of all.



ICT Strategic Architecture

The ICT Architecture Budget Plan has proven its worth since it came into being as part of the creation of Xentrall Shared Services. This centralised model for long-term modelling and financing critical ICT architecture across the Council has been a great success.

Both Darlington and Stockton Councils have their own ICT Architecture Budget Plans, and their similarity reflects the reality of the shared core architecture designs and associated infrastructure that support both Councils. This joint approach has paid dividends in terms of both the quality and affordability of the solutions deployed.

Factors which are influencing the architecture plan include:

- There is a continual programme of architectural change to keep pace with the new developments in technology which can present real and exciting opportunities to the Council. There is also the continual challenge of dealing with the obsolescence of ICT systems and technologies which can often present opportunities in their own right.
- Cloud computing is now much more mainstream and mature. Software as a service (SaaS) is now a viable option in many cases when considering the renewal or replacement of on-premise applications. Over time, this can have the effect of reducing the scale of the on-premise infrastructure, all things being equal.
- Suppliers continue to move towards revenue rather than capital service models which can result in more stable income streams for them. Service models such as SaaS are part of this approach. Our centralised revenue based financial model continues to ensure that we are not at odds with this approach. Councils with traditional ICT capital budgets are having to adapt.
- Large suppliers are also strengthening their position to provide holistic solutions for services they may not have traditionally been associated with. Microsoft providing a telephony solution is one example. This can disrupt what might have been a traditional market and considered “safe” solutions.
- The security of our systems and data remains a critical aspect of the ICT service and its architecture plans. In what feels like a continual war of escalation, our defence systems, from perimeter to desktop, are constantly managed and maintained to mitigate the ever-present risks. Our strategic approach to architecture ensures that security is planned and funded effectively.



Council Service Development

As has been seen over the life of all previous ICT Strategies, the Council's approach and response to influencing factors, challenges and development needs changes over time, with a variety of initiatives and groups being formed and the resulting solutions and benefits being ultimately mainstreamed into daily operations. The Council's latest Customer Services and Digital Strategy is one example of this work.

Throughout, the incumbent ICT Strategy has complimented such initiatives and these in turn can be key in exploiting the principles of the strategy itself. This is upheld by the first principle:

Technology should be at the core of any service redesign or transformation initiative, with appropriateness and value for money being the tests for any potential technology investments, and also ensuring that existing ICT assets have been considered and exploited as far as possible to maximise gain and eliminate waste.

One constant throughout the years is the need to help the ICT user community maintain their skills, awareness and confidence in the systems they use. As well as ensuring we are getting the most out of our investment in the technology and the workforce, this also serves to increase an individual's confidence and awareness in using ICT systems and equipment which in turn can lead to new ideas and opportunities being discussed and explored within teams and across services. The ICT service will continue to endeavour to raise the skill level and confidence of the ICT user community.

The vigilance and actions of each ICT end user plays an important role in the holistic management of the Council's ICT security defence and alerting systems. Each individual is a key link in the chain of systems and processes which keep us safe. The ICT service will continue to invest time in raising awareness of security matters to the ICT user community.

The roll-out of enterprise-wide products like the Microsoft 365 suite, gives rise to endless opportunities for services and the Council as a whole to radically change and improve services. The ICT service will continue to assist services in their own line-of-business application implementations and also the wider delivery and promotion of enterprise products and services and the benefits these can bring.



Taking Action

These live documents help describe the environment in which this strategy sits and at any point in time they detail the actions being planned and undertaken in-line with the three strategic priorities described above.

- The Council's Customer Services and Digital Strategy can be found on the Council's website at: darlington.gov.uk/customer-services/customer-services-and-digital-strategy
- The Council's approach to blended working can be found on the Intranet at: intranet.darlington.gov.uk/services-search/blended-working
- The ICT Work Plan which details all current and planned ICT projects for both Darlington and Stockton Councils can be found on XIP at: <https://xip.xentrall.org.uk/ict/i-need-information-about/project-work/>
- The ICT Service Improvement Programme which details the current service improvement activities across the ICT service can be found on XIP at: <https://xip.xentrall.org.uk/ict/i-need-information-about/ict-service-developments/>
- The ICT Sunburst Diagram and Balanced Scorecard give an overview of the major ICT projects and performance targets for the years ahead and can be found on XIP at: <https://xip.xentrall.org.uk/ict/i-need-information-about/ict-service-developments/>

