REPORT TO EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 7 November 2023

REPORT TO COUNCIL

Date of Meeting: 12 December 2023

Report of: Director, Jo Yelland

Title: Digital Customer Strategy 2023-2025

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report presents the draft Digital Customer Strategy 2023-2025, why it is important for the council and gives feedback on the public consultation that took place between July and September 2023. It also reports insights from independent research on how well the council understands and meet the needs of customers including those facing digital exclusion.

2. Recommendations:

2.1 that Executive recommends and Council approves the adoption of the Digital Customer Strategy 2023-2025 together with the intended outcomes and priority actions proposed; and

2.2 that Executive and Council notes that a detailed delivery plan will be produced to enable Council to monitor progress towards the achievement of the ten goals set out in the strategy. The implementation plan is likely to require additional resources and so this will be bought back through the Council governance process in 2024.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 As part of One Exeter, the council is embarking on an ambitious organisational wide programme of transformation including development of a Digital Customer Strategy. The strategy sets out the council's vision to put the customer first which means constantly looking to improve the user experience and ensuring that customer's needs guide how services are developed and delivered.

3.2 This is needed as customer behaviour and technology are becoming increasingly complex and changing faster than ever. It is critical that our whole organisation understands what we mean by excellent customer and digital service, where we want to be and the outcomes we want to achieve.

3.3 Digital customer transformation demands a step change to the structures, systems, processes and technology that we use and requires a strategic approach. Enhanced

knowledge, skills, and experience of the digital world will inform our everyday values, attitudes and behaviours.

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources

4.1 There are sufficient resources available to develop the detailed delivery plan by December 2023. However, whilst existing resources will be directed toward the delivery of this strategy as appropriate, there are potential additional costs that will be identified as the delivery plan is crafted. Work has already begun with our IT provider STRATA Service Solutions Ltd, alongside our partners (East Devon and Teignbridge District Councils), on the infrastructure necessary for all partners to deliver on their digital and customer ambitions. There may be additional skills and capacity needed in our own workforce in addition to technological architecture. Business plans will be produced as required and considered as part of existing "business as usual" processes and governance throughout the lifespan of the strategy.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

5.1 The paragraph above is noted. Any financial implications, where there is no existing budget available, will require a further report to Council to allocate funds.

6. What are the legal aspects?

6.1 The Council is working with its IT provider, STRATA Service Solutions Ltd and its partners (East Devon and Teignbridge District Councils) to re-design the underpinning data architecture to ensure it is fit for the future and to enable the step change in the Council's customer services approach as set out in this strategy.

6.2 Councils are required to comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulations (UK GDPR) concerning the use of personal data and officers will apply the key principles under the Act and UK GDPR in formulating the new Digital Customer Strategy.

6.3 The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 require public sector organisations to make their websites and mobile applications accessible. The 'accessibility requirement' is set out in the Regulations and '…means the requirement to make a website or mobile application accessible by making it perceivable, operable, understandable and robust'. The effect of this is to reduce barriers to accessibility provided that to do so '…would not impose a disproportionate burden on the public sector body'. The factors to take into consideration in determining proportionality are set out in the regulations.

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This recommendations set out in this report, raise no issues of concern for the Monitoring Officer.

8. Report details:

8.1 As part of One Exeter, the council is embarking on an ambitious organisational wide programme of transformation including development of a Digital Customer Strategy. This sets out the council's vision to put the customer first which means constantly looking to

improve the user experience and ensuring that customer's needs guide how services are developed and delivered.

8.2 Digital technology has, and is continuing to change the way people live, connect and work. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen resident and customer expectations shift. Digital technology has evolved significantly and for most of us, digital technologies have become an essential part of our lives. We all want easy access to joined-up information and efficient, secure services in the palm of our hand.

8.3 People increasingly expect to interact with organisations wherever they like, whenever they like, on whichever device they have and on whatever channel they choose. With customer behaviour changing faster than ever, the task of digital transformation demands significant changes to people, processes and technology.

8.4 In addressing this challenge our vision is to put the customer first. This means: constantly looking to improve the user experience and ensuring that the customer needs guide how services are developed and delivered; understanding and responding to customer communication preferences; taking into account the needs of people who may face barriers to using digital services, and balancing customer choice with efficient service delivery.

8.5 To deliver this vision our mission is that: we excel at customer and digital service.

8.6 In order to achieve our mission this strategy sets out ten goals, which cover all elements of digital customer service. The ten goals are set out in the proposed Digital Customer Strategy 2023-2025 in Appendix 1. For each of these goals we have explained the outcomes: the way we want things to be and our priority actions: the improvements that we will make to achieve these outcomes.

8.7 In developing the vision, mission and goals within the strategy we have drawn on best practice from the Local Government Association, formal networks such as the Local Government Partnership Network events and informal contacts and relationships with other local authorities.

8.8 Early drafts of the strategy were informed with input from the council's Operational Management Board and our stakeholder partners within Strata Services Solutions Ltd. A final draft was subject to a formal public consultation which ran from 2nd August to 15th September 2023. The consultation was launched by Cllr Laura Wright, the Council's Deputy Leader, who set out the aims of the consultation in this statement: "*This new strategy is designed to make it as easy as possible for people to contact us and access all of our services. We now need to hear from our residents to see what they think of the plan. The feedback they provide will be hugely valuable in helping to shape the delivery of this policy going forward, and I hope as many people as possible will take part in the consultation*".

8.9 The consultation included a short online survey: publication of the strategy on the council's website alongside a short summary with the key actions points. The consultation was also promoted on the council's social media sites. To provide opportunities for those not already digitally connected to the council, officers worked with Wellbeing Exeter and other partners in the community to ensure that as many people as

possible are able to access and complete the survey. Support was also available from our customer services frontline desk in the Civic Centre. A direct approach was made to Public Libraries in the City and materials were made available to enable them to promote non-digital access to the consultation. Invitations to provide feedback were also invited from a range of stakeholder organisations and statutory partners.

8.10 Qualitative feedback was received from 7 residents and 2 organisations garnering feedback from over 100 individuals. This feedback is summarised in Appendix 2 and provides helpful insights that we can build upon during implementation.

8.11 451, completed surveys were submitted. The majority of responders were aged over 50 and a quarter were from people with a disability and there was an equal response from those identifying as male/female. Overall the responses were positively in support for the direction of travel set out in the strategy as illustrated below. This shows over 68% of respondents say it is very important to them that they liaise with professional customer service staff when they contact the council and 63% say it is very important to them that the Council provide a single point of contact so they do not have to navigate multiple complex contact points.

We want to know what matters most to you when you contact the council.
Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5. Where 1 is not important and 5 is very important.

Q1	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Resolving my enquiry on my first contact	1.33%	3.55%	14.86%	27.4...	52.77%	100.00%
Short waiting times	0.89%	1.77%	8.87%	31.9...	56.54%	100.00%
24/7 access to services	11.75%	16.63%	28.60%	20.4...	22.62%	100.00%
Speaking to an officer to resolve my issue	3.10%	8.65%	13.97%	24.6...	49.67%	100.00%
Having a choice of channels to contact the council (e.g. phone, digital services, webchat)	3.33%	3.33%	18.63%	27.0...	47.67%	100.00%
Resolving my enquiry with as little effort as possible	1.11%	2.66%	11.09%	26.3...	58.76%	100.00%
Clear standards of service; information about the quality of services being delivered	2.22%	5.76%	23.06%	29.9...	39.02%	100.00%
Ability to use any device (e.g. phone, tablet, computer)	4.88%	6.43%	11.97%	23.2...	53.44%	100.00%
Feedback mechanism – ways to feedback on my experience	6.21%	13.08%	29.71%	27.9...	23.06%	100.00%
Professional customer service staff	0.67%	0.67%	6.87%	23.2...	68.51%	100.00%
Proactive/tailored updates (e.g. text messages or emails on the progress of your enquiry)	2.66%	4.21%	19.51%	36.1...	37.47%	100.00%
A simple way to book appointments online	5.54%	3.99%	15.08%	31.4...	43.90%	100.00%
A single point of contact without having to navigate multiple, complex contact points	2.44%	2.22%	6.87%	25.0...	63.41%	100.00%
Total	21.29%	40.35%	75.83%	86.9...	94.68%	100.00%

8.12 Full details of all the questions and responses can be found in the council's BI Report on survey responses to the public consultation on the draft Digital Customer Strategy (September 2023) at Appendix 3.

8.13 To aid our understating of the experience customers currently have when dealing with the Council, we engaged the expertise of a public sector customer experience partner, Red Quadrant. The work we asked Red Quadrant to undertake is a critical underpinning phase of exploration to help us understand what data we already have about our customers and their experiences of using our services, and how to translate this data into intelligence and insights that we can use to design and deliver on our customer ambitions. The project has identified gaps in data, and Red Quadrant have made recommendations on how to enhance customer intelligence in the context of our digital customer strategy ambitions. This includes understanding the scale and characteristics of those who may face digital access and exclusion is an important focus of this work.

8.14 The objectives set for Red Quadrant were:

1) Mapping and Identifying: Identify and map existing data on customer demand and experience across all access routes and channels;
2) Analysis: Analyse our existing data to uncover insights about customer demand, experience, and outcomes;
3) Data Gap Identification: Highlight gaps in data gathering and insight across the organisation;
4) Digital Exclusion Assessment: Understanding the digital accessibility challenges our customers face and the demographic specifics of the digitally excluded in Exeter; and
5) Customer Experience Maturity Assessment: Evaluation was designed to gauge the council's current capabilities, systems, and strategies in delivering customer-centric services.

8.15 The detail of this work is in the Customer Intelligence at Exeter City Council, Red Quadrant Report (September 2023 at Appendix 4. Key findings are summarised here:

8.16 The Council's understanding of customer interactions and experiences is fragmented, with current datasets primarily limited to phone and web-based interactions, providing partial insights into reasons for contact and satisfaction. However, there is no holistic view and oversight of the council's customers' journey and responses across all engagement channels. A key challenge is the presence of multiple access points for our customers. Each service has a distinct point of contact, leading to possible inefficiencies and inconsistencies in the customer experience.

8.17 The in-depth research involved a variety of methods: a systematic three-sprint approach, regular interactions with the project team, data collection and synthesis, and stakeholder surveys. The objective was to understand the council's current customer experience maturity and provide actionable insights. Key Findings:

1) The Council's customer experience operating model boasts strengths in digital transformation and a commitment to data-driven improvements. However, clearer governance and role definitions, along with explicit service design principles and outcome measures, are needed;
2) The Council's data maturity has room for growth. There are gaps in demand data recording, particularly in non-digital channels. Enhanced data literacy and improved data management practices are pivotal;

3) Digital inclusion is vital. While Exeter's risk of digital exclusion is slightly lower than regional and national figures, 10-15% of residents still face barriers; and

4) The Council's customer experience maturity score stands at 2.7 (on the cusp of 'emerging' to 'developing'). This underscores potential across all four pillars of customer maturity.

8.18 Key recommendations for the Council to take forward in its delivery plan include

- Develop a customer intelligence model and a data accountability framework;
- Invest in digital inclusion, with strategies like a digital champions programme and connectivity solutions;
- Cultivate customer-centric strategies, rooted in deep customer insights and co-design;
- Elevate the organizational culture, linking employee experience to customer experience; and
- Drive a strategic vision for customer experience, underpinned by clear standards and robust governance.

This comprehensive review provides a clear baseline in customer experience, while also highlighting avenues for considerable enhancement. By acting on these insights, The Council will be able to foster a more connected, responsive, and resident-focused council.

8.19 This research highlights the importance of Digital inclusion: an issue already reflected as one of the 10 key themes of the proposed strategy. We define digital exclusion as: 'individuals who face barriers to accessing digital services leading to inequality of outcome'. There are four main causes of digital exclusion:

1) Digital Skills;
2) Data and Connectivity;
3) Devices; and
4) Motivation or Attitude.

8.20 The details of the research undertaken in this area can be found in Red Quadrant Report but key headlines are:

- The population of Exeter is at a slightly lower risk of digital exclusion than that of the Southwest region and England;
- 10-15% of the local population are likely to face some barriers to digital engagement;
- A significant majority of customers are likely to move to digital channels to access services as they are introduced, delivering benefits to both customers and the Council;
- Some digital inclusion support or alternative access channels are needed, particularly for targeted services such as social housing;

The average digital exclusion risk index (DERI) score for all areas (LSOAs) in Exeter is 3.395 out of ten, compared to 3.649 in the Southwest region and 3.597 in England. Only two areas in Exeter have a DERI score above 5, indicating a higher risk of digital exclusion, which are in the Priory and Mincinglade and Whipton wards. These areas contain 3,891 residents (3% of the local population). This is illustrated in the heat map below.
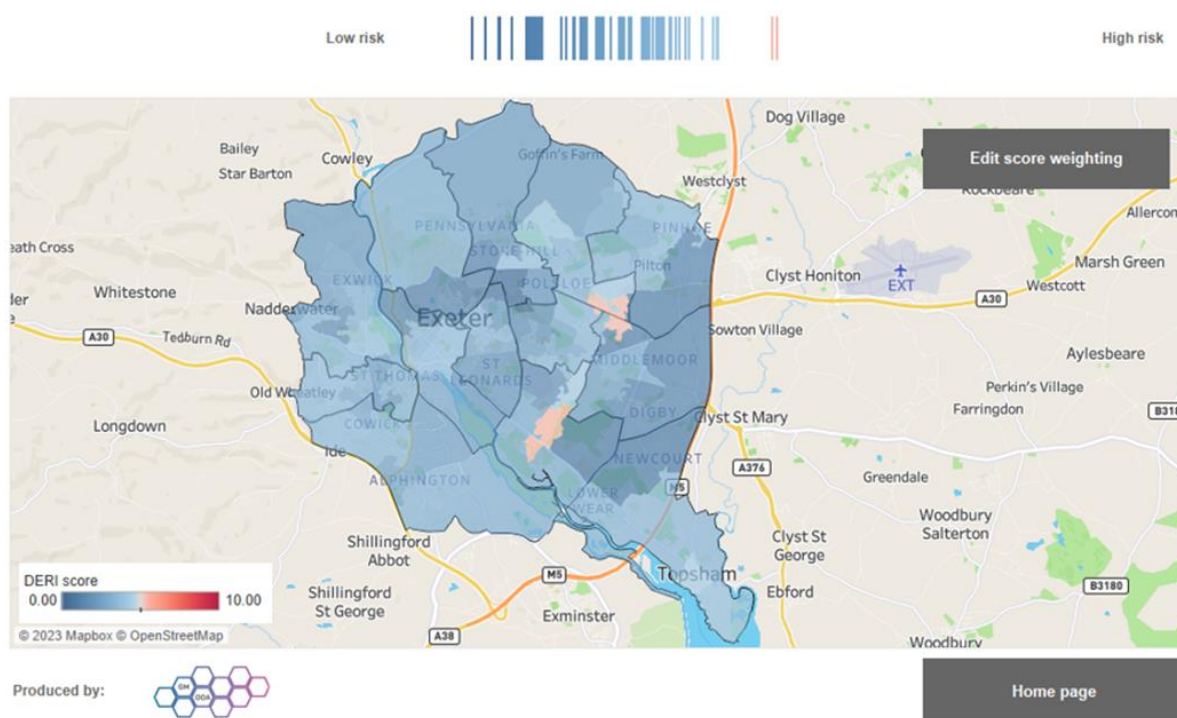
Digital Exclusion Risk Index
DERI Score

Choose a local authority / local authorities:
Exeter

Choose a score calculation base:
Local Authority

Choose an IMD score national base:
England

Low risk | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | High risk

DERI score
0.00 ▬▬▬▬▬ 10.00
© 2023 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

Produced by:

8.21 All the insights and recommendations offered by Red Quadrant will be considered and addressed in the creation of a delivery plan for the Digital Customer Services Strategy. Further actions relation to Digital Inclusion that could be delivered through the Council's Community Grants programme and its work with Wellbeing Exeter will be proposed to members in due course.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

9.1 The council's corporate plan 2022-26 is the Council's overarching strategy, setting out the council's vision and ambitions for Exeter and the outcomes it wants to achieve for both the city and the council. The Digital Customer Service Strategy is vital for the council's role in leading a well-run council and delivering customer-focused services.

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

10.1 There are significant risk to the successful achievement of the outcomes attached to the ten strategic goals. These could be themed as reputational, leadership, culture, skills, capacity and financial resources. As the delivery plan is implemented change projects will have risk assessments and mitigation plans built in.

11. Equality Act 2010 (The Act)

11.1 Under the Act's Public Sector Equalities Duty, decision makers are required to consider the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct;

- advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people's needs; and
- foster good relations between people by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

11.2 In order to comply with the general duty authorities must assess the impact on equality of decisions, policies and practices. These duties do not prevent the authority from reducing services where necessary, but they offer a way of developing proposals that consider the impacts on all members of the community.

11.3 In making decisions the authority must take into account the potential impact of that decision in relation to age, disability, race/ethnicity (includes Gypsies and Travellers), sex and gender, gender identity, religion and belief, sexual orientation, pregnant women and new and breastfeeding mothers, marriage and civil partnership status in coming to a decision.

11.4 In recommending this proposal potential impact has been identified on people with protected characteristics as determined by the Act and an Equalities Impact Assessment has been included in the background papers for Member's attention and can be found in Appendix 5. Mitigation actions will be identified and included in the delivery plan which will follow in December 2023.

12. Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

12.1 There are no direct carbon/environmental impacts arising from the recommendations.

13. Are there any other options?

13.1 The Council could consider maintaining the status quo with the majority of services offering limited variety of channels and continuing to rely on traditional (old fashioned) delivery methods and incremental shifts to digitisation. The Council could also continue to develop services from an organisational perspective and not make the shift to customer "centric" thinking. However this would create an increasingly inefficient, costly and ineffective experience for customers and staff. This would also be contrary to all expectations of a modern local authority as set pout in *The Outcomes Framework for Improving and Supporting Local Government Digitalisation* published by the Local Government Association (LGA) in July 2022.

Director, Jo Yelland

Author: Jo Yelland Contributors: Bruce Luxton and Stephen Clayton

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

- Digital Customer Strategy 2023-2025 Appendix 1.
- Digital Customer Strategy Consultation Summary of Qualitative Feedback September 2023 Appendix 2

- ECC BI Report on survey responses to the public consultation on the draft Digital Customer Strategy (September 2023) at Appendix 3
- Customer Intelligence at Exeter City Council, Red Quadrant Report (September 2023 at Appendix 4
- Equalities Impact Assessment at Appendix 5
- Local Government Association Digitalisation Almanac (2023)
  https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology/almanac

Contact for enquires:
Democratic Services (Committees)
Room 4.36
01392 265275