

# Dorset Councils Partnership: Digital Strategy

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## Introduction

The digital revolution has the ability to transform the way Local Government delivers services to its residents.

In the last ten years technology has evolved at a rapid pace. The digital revolution is transforming society, so much so, it is often referred to as the third industrial revolution.

In **just 10 years**, we have seen the evolution of smart phones, the advancement of companies like Amazon, Uber, Airbnb, Netflix, Spotify and Whatsapp and banking online has increased from **30%** to **63%**<sup>1</sup>.

Residents, businesses and visitors are increasingly expecting public services to provide the same level of service they receive in the private sector. In the current economic climate and with funding dramatically reducing from central government, there is never a better time to for us to explore the value digital can bring.

Since 2015 we have been on a transformation journey to help meet the challenges we face in the future. We have already undertaken a lot of work to help provide the best possible outcomes for our residents and communities and will highlight examples of some of this work within this strategy.

By harnessing new technologies and approaches to delivering services, we can deliver and continue to transform services to meet the expectations of our residents. We will put our customers at the heart of our transformation and invest in the skills and confidence needed within our workforce to deliver digital change.

Our digital transformation will not work in isolation of our customers who may not be digitally confident; we will continue to work with partners to address digital exclusion. By providing the ability for those that wish to engage with us online, we can free up valuable resources to provide added value services to those who need the most support from us.

**As a digital partnership we will deliver sector leading online services and digital presence for our customers**

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<sup>1</sup> **Source:** Office for National Statistics (UK) – Online banking penetration in Great Britain from 2007 – 2017.

## Delivering better services to our customers

Dorset Councils Partnership is committed to the delivery of better services for our customers. Since 2015, there have been a wide range of improvements to how services are delivered. Our transformed services are those that improve the standard of delivery for customers whilst maintaining or reducing the cost associated with delivering that service.

Through our transformation work, the partnership has been progressively digitising and here are just a few examples:

- Our Benefits Team are now using Risk Based Verification to improve processing times and to, where possible, make payments quicker to help alleviate difficult circumstances for those who are in need
- All Housing Applications are now submitted and processed digitally, allowing more time to provide support to those most in need of our support
- We have introduced an online appointment booking process for key services to enable our customers to book appointments at a time and location that suits them
- Our Crematorium now uses technology to stream services across the world, to help friends and relatives who are not able to attend in person. They also provide an online booking service to support Funeral Directors
- Planning Consultations are now e-mailed to town and parish councils and are available for residents to review and comment online
- Our Engineers team have replaced paper with handheld devices to help make site visits easier and reduce re-keying of information
- We have used business intelligence and customer feedback to re-order our menu choices on our general enquiry telephone number to save time when calling us

### **Case Study:** Housing Applications

Since 2012 all Housing Applications have been made through our online register, Dorset Home Choice. This is now the case for all three councils, and all councils across Dorset.

When the team began work to identify ways to digitise some of their back office processes, they realised that starting the process with a long paper form was time consuming for both customers and officers.

Since the online form has been in place, support has been available throughout. If a customer is not able to complete an application on their own, officers will work with them and provide support. This can be by calling them and talking through the form, through an appointment at our offices or visiting them at home.

**Through the reduction in paper forms, we have more time to provide support to our customers.**

**We will continue to digitalise our services with the intention to look for ways to deepen the automation of workflow and processes within the organisation to deliver greater efficiencies**

To make this happen, we will:

- Work with high transactional services to reach a target of an additional **20% of transactions** to be fully automated by 2019
- Support the launch of the new Dorsetforyou platform
- Undertake a digital survey for staff, senior managers and councillors
- Measure our current progress using a Digital Maturity Curve and benchmark this progress against other public services in Dorset
- Identify ways to better understand our customers so that we can target services and communications appropriately

## **Digital skills and inclusion**

Many residents and business prefer to transact online, at their own convenience.

**In 2016, 68% of UK transactions were online<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Source: UK Card Association <http://www.theukcardsassociation.org.uk/2017-facts-figures/index.asp>

Through our digital strategy we will commit to providing the best possible online services to those residents, however we will not lose sight of those residents who are not online. This work will enable us to provide **more time** to those who need extra support by reducing unnecessary contact.

We believe that we can use technology to help increase inclusivity, particularly within the rural communities that we serve.

Digital transformation isn't solely linked to a web page or online form, an example of how technology is supporting vulnerable residents is from our Revenues & Benefits service:

**Case Study:** Using technology to support vulnerable customers

In 2017 the Revenues & Benefits Partnership piloted a text messaging facility for the Housing Benefits team. From the start of this process the team were clear they wanted to use this software to help support the application process, to help make payments as quickly as possible. Often, payments are held up because key information is not provided on time, the team requested text messaging software to send reminders to customers to remind them that information was outstanding.

**Tina Frampton, Benefits Manager** says: 'Often, for vulnerable customers, a letter or a telephone call from a number they don't recognise can be daunting. We have found that sending a friendly text message reminding a customer to provide information, or something as simple as 'we are trying to call you, please call us back' helps them to prioritise this contact as they are clear on what is needed to support the application.

Since the facility has been in place, the team have observed a reduction in processing times, this has not only helped to make payments quicker and simplify the application process, valuable resources can be better managed to help provide extra support to those who need it the most.

### **Risk of Digital Exclusion**

The Tech Partnership, in partnership with the Local Government Association and the London School of Economics and Political Science publish data relating to digital exclusion in the form of a heat map.

In October 2015, this study predicted that Weymouth & Portland area was at high risk of digital exclusion. In August 2017 this was downgraded to medium.

Since 2015, improvements have been made in terms of:

- Faster broadband connections in homes and significantly improved 4G coverage
- More people accessing the internet; and
- More people regularly using the five basic digital skills

All three councils are now classed as medium risk.

## Connectivity

The local economy has developed in recent years due to the digital revolution, with many businesses using technologies and systems to grow and expand their business opportunities. The rapid development and establishment of mobile apps are influencing a shift for businesses as many people are used to transacting in this way.

In partnership with Dorset County Council, we have established broadband connection to over **97% of households**. Nationally **90% of households**<sup>3</sup> are connected to the internet.

We have also secured additional funding towards the rollout of **Ultrafast Broadband** in the future.

The National Infrastructure Commission's report 'Connected Future' recommends that digital infrastructure will be put at the heart of the UK's Industrial Strategy and securing ultrafast broadband and 5G mobile networks will be critical to the UK's economic growth. Dorset is part of the Innovation South<sup>4</sup> which is identified by Government as having regional strengths that may stimulate productivity and economic growth through digital technologies.

In addition to this, the [Western Dorset Economic Growth Strategy](#) has recognised the importance of digital infrastructure and sector to:

- Aid a sustainable economy
- Create new employment opportunities
- Retain local professional talent

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<sup>3</sup> Source: Office of National Statistics, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Innovation South is a consortium of businesses, local authorities and education providers with its focus on strengths in Digital Enabling Technologies (an invention or innovation, that can be applied to drive radical change and are characterised by rapid development of subsequent derivative technologies, often in diverse fields) to develop a new approach to local economic development in the South of England.

- Attract new businesses

The future growth of Dorset's economy and employment opportunities is heavily reliant on the development of the digital infrastructure and digital services that support nearly all other sectors and industries in Dorset. The county is at the forefront of ultrafast broadband and 5G and, with the support of the Government and its Industrial Strategy, could position Dorset as a major centre of excellence in digital connectivity.

As more companies move towards flexible work arrangements and the growth in individuals working from home or away from a central office, there is a need to ensure the continued improvement in the spread of broadband and mobile connectivity.

### **What are we doing to improve?**

Whilst positive improvements have already been made, our journey must not end here, we must continue to address digital exclusion. We understand that we cannot do this alone, strong partnerships across all sectors will be the key to providing a strategic approach to confronting digital exclusion.

This is a key area of our focus going forward.

### **We will reduce the barriers to digital inclusion**

To make this happen, we will:

- Become an active partner of the Routes to Inclusion partnership, supporting the expansion of the Digital Champions network
- Work in partnership with Dorset County Council to help support our Universal Credit customers through the Digital Champion network
- Work with Google Digital Garage to provide opportunities for local businesses and charities to develop digital skills
- Work with local businesses to share digital knowledge and best practice through established networks
- Continue to monitor our risks of digital exclusion and work with partners to reduce this
- Work in partnership with other local organisations to identify opportunities to develop digital skills within the area

## Developing our people

Our people are at the heart of what we do for our communities and customers. Our successes are a direct result of their commitment, engagement, skills, capabilities and professionalism.

Investing in our people by providing a learning environment, developing the right cultures and thereby doing the best for our communities is a key part of our organisational objectives.

Our ambition for our people is to:

- Develop and support a high performance workforce, enhancing leadership capability and individual accountability to drive necessary culture change
- Capitalise on the opportunities inherent in a diverse workforce, enhancing and sustaining this with the skills, attributes and qualities to deliver our goals and best utilise our talent
- Embed our Values and Behaviours to ensure all employees are working towards the same vision
- Ensure that we lead by example, put our values into practice and not accept any behavior that doesn't meet the standards we expect

As a major employer within the area, we recognise the importance of providing our employees with the right skills and confidence to support our journey to becoming a digital organisation, this not only benefits us as an employer but by doing this we are also investing in sharing that knowledge within our communities.

We want our people to adopt digital as a new way of thinking to help them to design services based upon **user needs**.

We have significantly invested in technology to promote flexibility and increase collaboration across the partnership and within the community. **77% of our workforce** in roles that need to use a device to do their job have been issued with mobile devices and **96% of councillors** are paperless.

### **Case Study:** Smart Working:

Since 2015 we have been progressively changing the way that we work, to support a collaborative environment.

Our Partnership serves a population of 235,000 people, spread over 669 square miles. We are increasingly using technology to help us work **smarter**.



We can now:

- Use technology to complete applications with customers in their homes
- Receive information and upload it to our back office systems immediately
- Have the most up to date information available to us at all times
- Work in a collaborative way as our offices designed around activities
- Reduce travel time and our carbon footprint

**As a key employer in the local area, we want to make sure our people have the skills and aptitude to deliver digital services to residents, businesses and visitors**

To make this happen, we will:

- From November 2017, Digital has been incorporated into our recruitment processes. All person specifications, shortlisting criteria and interviews will now have a section dedicated to digital to ensure that we recruit according to our digital ambitions.
- Working in partnership with Google, Government Digital Service and other local authorities, a series of learning opportunities are being developed and will be delivered, starting in 2018. These will complement the internal work that is being undertaken to invest in our learning and development offer as an organisation
- We will encourage our employees, elected members and volunteers to take an active role in supporting our residents to improve their digital skills and confidence be this through the work they undertake within their capacity as an employee, or by promoting volunteering opportunities as an organisation to help embed digital into the community
- Establish a digital mentor programme for employees to provide peer-to-peer support to develop digital skills
- Adopt the Government Digital Service principles corporately and provide training and support in understanding how we can use these principles to standardise our approach to delivering digital services

## Digital engagement & democracy

We have 111 elected members, representing 237,810 people across our three sovereign council areas.

The way that we digitally engage with our communities is really important. Our elected members recognise the organisation's digital culture and they are part of the much wider business transformation that is taking place across the Partnership. This presents them with the opportunity to be a more cost-effective, business-like and efficient decision making organisation.

### **Case Study:** Modern.gov App

In 2016 we invested in the Modern.gov app. This app provides us with a solution to paperless committee papers and other documents relating to the democratic process.

This app ensures that our elected members, officers and the public always have the latest meeting papers for the meetings they are attending. It automatically keeps itself updated and is interactive so that sections can be highlighted and annotated, just as if paper was being used.

96% of elected members are now paperless.

**“Increasingly councillors will undertake their representative role through digital media, and there are clear opportunities to use online capabilities to engage people in the new types of conversation about the future of their neighbourhood or different ways to use the community resources”<sup>5</sup>**

We recognise that our elected members want to lead in this area and are already connecting with our residents digitally. To take this further, we will use the [21st Century Councillor](#) framework to provide a series of learning opportunities.

In November we launched our Digital Mentors group. This group consists of 14 elected members who provide support to their peers who would like to work more digitally. They also share ideas and try new IT systems or initiatives before they are rolled out.

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<sup>5</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Century Councillor, University of Birmingham & Public Service Academy, July 2016

We also understand that our elected members have the ability to be digital champions themselves within their communities, in 2018 we will provide our elected members with Social Media training and guidance on how to communicate and engage with residents through digital channels.

## Engagement

Public engagement can be used to gain valuable insight into issues that are of concern to our residents. It is essential for the success of local service provision, especially when there are austere economic pressures affecting public spending; and where local politicians need to make tough decisions.

People who live, work or study in the area can now submit an e-petition, electronic question, statement or deputation online. This form of public engagement continues to be available in paper format too and can inform the debate that takes place, bring an issue to our attention and gather feedback on how we are delivering services.

As members of the Dorsetforyou partnership, we contribute to the [Dorset Newsroom](#). This area is hosted on our shared website and provides a hub for local news.

The evolution of social channels means our residents are increasingly wanting to interact with us online. We use social media to provide updates and engage with our communities and use business intelligence to measure how successful this is. Through managing our social media presence, our Communications team are able to relay sentiment and messages from posts we receive back to services, this helps us to adapt and understand customer feedback almost immediately.

## Electoral Services

Nationally the ability to register to vote online has been introduced and this has been extensively used across the Partnership. Responding to the annual canvass digitally or by automated telephone saves on the cost of printing, postage or personal visits to gather this data.

Authority	Postal	Telephone	Internet	SMS	Postal v Non-postal response
North Dorset	11915	6327	8457	2198	41% v 59%
	41%	22%	29%	8%	
West Dorset	25694	4635	12292	3592	55% v 45%
	55%	10%	27%	8%	

Weymouth & Portland	15306	2668	7022	2506	55% v 45%
	55%	10%	26%	9%	

It's clear that our residents have an appetite for this too, North Dorset District Council has achieved the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate of attainer registrations (young persons aged 16 -18) in the country.

“Democratic and Electoral Services have critically examined all of our process to ensure that we are offering an modern, efficient and effective service, and one that is improved for our customers, providing them with more avenues to access our services. Whilst there will always be those who wish to engage with us in person (including postal/telephone/face-to-face) we'll continue to look for ways to enable our customers to self-serve when that's their preference.”

**Jacqui Andrews - Corporate Manager, Democratic and Electoral Services**

## **We will embrace the opportunities digital provides us with, to help engage with our residents**

To make this happen, we will:

- Implement a committee workflow system to improve the efficiency of the committee process across the Partnership
- Investigate the potential to live stream meetings to provide improved accessibility to the democratic process
- Embed paperless meetings as an important means of communication within the Partnership and with the public, media, town and parish councils

Provide a series of training opportunities for councillors including:

- Councillor 'new conversation' workshops – developing skills to engage with residents
- Digital Mentoring Programme to provide peer to peer support
- Provision of online learning development modules to increase digital skills and awareness

## Transforming our services together

This is an exciting opportunity for us, not only will it help us to provide services in a modern and efficient way, we can provide greater customer satisfaction by designing services around **user need** and **preferences**.

In order for us to make digital to work for everyone, we need to entirely rethink the way we deliver our services. To be truly digital, we must redesign processes before we digitise – not digitise lengthy, inefficient processes.

Due to the diverse nature of services we provide, it can be easy, over time, to continue to specialise processes and keep doing so, until each service has a unique way of handling a simple transaction, for example making payments. Using digital transformation as the driver, we can standardise and automate common processes to simplify transactions for our users, whilst ensuring resources are prioritised to deliver frontline services.

The new EU General Data Protection Regulations will provide us with an opportunity to **rethink** the way we handle data.

With data currently held only within services, we are restricted on the ability to truly use it to its full potential. We want to be in a position where we are able to work in partnership across services and agencies to understand our customers and provide a strategic, preventative, approach to problems that we face and will continue to face in the future. We can use data to **understand** our service users and focus on being proactive rather than reactive.

The emergence of increasingly sophisticated technology means that we can look to automate specific processes (for example assessments), this means that the work will be undertaken without any manual intervention, saving time and paper, whilst speeding up delivery.

It's important that we not only automate our external services, we must also focus on rethinking the way we deliver our corporate services to move away from unnecessary manual processes.

### **Case Study: Finance**

In 2017 the Finance Team rolled out a new system to pay suppliers' invoices. While the old process relied on hardcopy invoices, the postal system, the internal mail and handwritten signatures, the new system is highly automated, paperless and digital; saving on time, space and money.

Today, invoices are received from suppliers digitally at a central email account; paper hardcopies are no longer necessary. From there the invoices are processed by a computer using optical character recognition. If certain conditions are met, an invoice will be automatically paid without the need for human intervention. If there is something unexpected about an invoice, the system will immediately send an email alert to the appropriate point of contact to resolve.

With the new system, the 3 councils are paying more than half of their invoices within 5 working days of receipt and some the same day. Consequently, staff have reported they are receiving dramatically less phone calls from suppliers chasing payment. By promptly paying suppliers we greatly support their cash flow and drive value for money by benefitting from discounts offered in return for fast payments. What's more, because the new system is paperless and uses electronic approvals, staff across departments are freed to work from anywhere.

We must not assume that those who are currently not online won't be in the future. By making our online services accessible and user-friendly we will make it as simple as possible to interact with us online.

## **Dorsetforyou**

We are a partner of the Dorsetforyou board. The Dorsetforyou Partnership is made up of seven local councils working together to give people easy and effective access to local government information and services. This website is the first of its kind and has served us well, but we recognise the importance of adapting and changing to meet customer requirements.

The Dorsetforyou website is being redesigned, almost half of our 15,000 pages have been removed, this will mean that our online platform will be easier to navigate and only the most relevant content will be available online. Our digital team are also working with services to provide support in writing for the web and ensuring we meet accessibility requirements so that for those who are able to access services online can do so easily.

It's important that we have a consistent look and feel to the face of services online. The new Dorsetforyou platform will be easier to navigate because the development has been based upon the successful Government Digital Service principles.

We also understand that our previous approach to online content has not always been effective. We have taken in to account that our customers may not need to know lots of detail around how a service is delivered or regulated, they just need to know enough to be able to interact with us easily and professionally. So, there

will be less content and it will be better written. With this in mind we have made sure that the designs of the new pages and the words we use have been tested with users as we develop our new platform.

**We want our customers to trust in our online services, and for those that are able to, digital will be the preferred option for transacting with us, to fit around increasingly busy lives**

To make this happen, we will:

- Roll out Office 365 and cloud computing to provide greater opportunities for collaboration both within the organisation and with partners
- Work with high transactional services to automate simple assessments and processes
- Investigate and promote the use of G-cloud within our procurement framework
- Establish a joined up approach to digital transformation through clear governance framework and a Digital Innovation Lab
- Rollout of Digital Dashboards across the Partnership, to provide a clear transparent way to demonstrate our digital progress
- Review our corporate KPI's and identify opportunities to use this process to embed digital transformation as part of our service planning and performance measures
- Work more closely with our customers to obtain feedback and identify opportunities to work together when making improvements to how our services are delivered