

**High Peak Borough Council &
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council**

Access To Services Strategy 2022

Introduction

For a number of years High Peak Borough Council and Staffordshire Moorlands District Council have been making it easier for our customers to get in touch with us.

Traditionally the focus of the Councils has been to show how services will be provided to local residents. The stress is now placed on the importance of the Councils opening up to customers and allowing them to engage with services in ways that suit their needs and requirements

Rather than ‘doing things’ for people we have invested in ways to give people the means, information and support to do things for themselves.

We also recognise that not everyone will choose or have the facility to access digital services and we have a team of staff available to help people when needed.

We want our customers to feel valued by their Council, trust us and have excellent customer experiences in their dealings with us whatever channel they choose.

Aim of the Strategy

The aim of this Strategy, as set out in the Councils’ current 4-year Corporate Plans is to:

‘Ensure our services are readily (HP) /easily (SM) available to residents In the appropriate channels and provided ‘right first time’

The strategy builds on the Channel Access Strategy (2016) outlining how we will provide access to our services to keep improving the customer experience and utilise technology to make things better and easier for all. The Access to Services Strategy also has strong links to the Councils Digital Strategy and Organisational Development Strategy

In order to meet the overall aim, a range of actions will be proposed following the process of:

Understand	the requirements of the customer and service areas
Develop	access channels and appropriate skills and resources to meet customer needs
Deliver	continually improve the customer experience

Customer Access Strategy – the journey so far

In January 2016 the Councils developed the ‘Customer Access Strategy’ to reshape the way in which customers access services, to meet ever changing customer demand, deliver efficiencies and improve processes to fit the digital age. Offering digital channels where this is

preferred by, and acceptable to, customers enabling business to be carried out at a time and a place of their choosing

The strategy covered all core access channels such as telephone, face to face, online and focussed on 2 key areas:

Channel improvements – Maximising the efficiency of all channels through user-centred design to ensure that both customer and business needs are considered

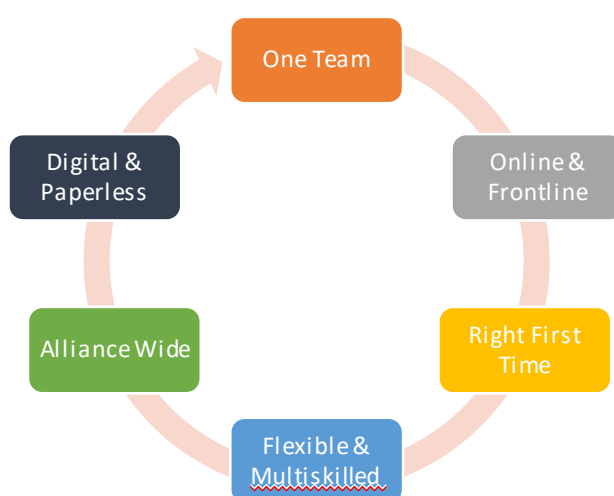
Process improvements – Delivering business processes for the digital age, supported by appropriate, proactive marketing and engagement with staff and customers.

The customer access strategy has been successful in implementing / launching the following campaigns and training programmes




Citizens Portal	A Citizens Portal was launched, allowing customers to self-serve, view their account balances and a history of certain transactions with the council, report problems and request services through one secure authenticated channel.
ICan (Do it online) campaign	<p>In March 2017, the 'ICan' (do it online) campaign was launched, improving services and reducing costs. The priority being to place the customer first and provide a single view of customer transactions.</p> <p>Staff, citizens and other stakeholders were engaged to roll out the ICan campaign and the Communications team arranged press releases through media and local radio, postcards were included with all council tax bills, posters displayed at libraries, parish and town councils as well as posts on the Council's social media pages. Self-serve PCs and tablets were installed in all reception areas.</p> <p>There are now around 400 forms available online for customers to 'Pay, Apply and Report'</p> <p>Implementation of the customer service vision and the ICan campaign realised savings of £300,000 (cross Alliance) from staff reductions and savings on post and print.</p>
Staff Training: Customer Service Excellence Programme Handling Challenging Situations	<p>In July 2018 all staff across the Alliance engaged in the first part of the Customer Service Excellence Programme 'I Can Make a Difference' – with the aim to 'Establish a culture to deliver excellence across the Alliance'</p> <p>The programme was focused on key behaviours, closely linked to corporate values and a reminder that good customer service also helps support with working more efficiently and reduces unnecessary repeat calls and avoidable contact. It was launched as not just a training programme, but a culture change programme aimed at all staff at all levels. 'Train the trainer' sessions were also held and now internal staff deliver this training as part of the corporate induction plan.</p> <p>It was recognised that front line staff have to deal with many challenging situations via all channels. To assist with handling such situations and as part of the Customer Service Excellence programme, the Customer Services team plus front line staff in Benefits, Council Tax and Housing attended 'Handling Challenging Situations' workshops focussing on effective communication.</p>

Bereavement Support	<p>Following feedback from customers and (at times) delays in processing, it was recognised that improvements were required to the way in which bereavement enquiries were handled and prioritised.</p> <p>The customer service team worked with frontline services and reviewed processes, webpages and documentation relating to bereavement. Workshops were delivered by Cruse (a national charity who provide bereavement support services). The training supported staff in understanding how to communicate effectively and compassionately with bereaved people and develop confidence when talking / making contact about difficult and sensitive topics.</p>
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In 2017 we created our customer service vision and this continues to drive forward our customer service function



There has been significant progress made as part of the Channel Access Strategy with a reduction and switch in methods of contact , improving services and reducing costs. The table below demonstrates the switch in contact methods 2016/17 to 2019/20.

Contact stream	2016/17	2019/20	Difference	Trend	2020/21
	190,200	106,424	-45%	↓	110,962
	96,956	58,654	-40%	↓	0
	30,539	130,476	+327%	↑	115,782

During 2020/21 the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the volumes of overall contacts and the contact stream.

Our receptions remained closed and in some service areas customer activity came to a halt for a period of time, for example moving house , council tax recovery. In other service areas additional activity took place for example business grants , these are all reflected in the volumes of contact.

Our call centre remained open with advisors available to assist those who cannot access services online.

Customer satisfaction increased with a reduction in the number of complaints and an increase in the number of compliments

Feedback	2019/20	2020/21
Complaints	183	138
Compliments	184	224

Our Customers

In order to ensure our services are accessible, with information readily available to those that require to access them, we need to understand who our ‘customers’ are:

	HPBC	SMDC
Households	42,441	44,263
Residents	91,662	97,106
Businesses	4,040	4,180
Elected Councillors	43	56
Staff	329 Staff across both authorities	
Visitors	6.1 million visitor days	8.8 million visitor days
Suppliers	460	350
Partners including community and voluntary groups across both councils		

Different customers transact and deal with the Council in varying amounts depending on circumstances and need. It is important that however often, all customers receive a good experience.

Consultation and Engagement

Central to understanding the needs of the customers are the views and experiences of the customer. It is vital therefore that engagement with the customer is embedded in the design of access to services. This engagement can take a variety of forms for example, surveys, focus groups, customer feedback formally or comments made to staff. This approach ensures all customer groups are included in the process, especially hard to reach groups such as those considered to be digitally excluded.

The Council areas are made up of a variety of different communities with differing social economic and geographical characters. Each Council has well developed partnerships across the public voluntary sector and it is vital that we engage with our partners to understand the varying needs and how we can effectively work together. We are already part of project groups/teams working together to support the local communities and provide residents with the appropriate access and support to services.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys form part of our Institute of Customer Services (ICS) membership, the surveys are benchmarked externally across Public and Private sectors and results scored across 5 customer priorities:











Results identify areas of strength and validate actions and priorities of service strategy to support our customer service culture.

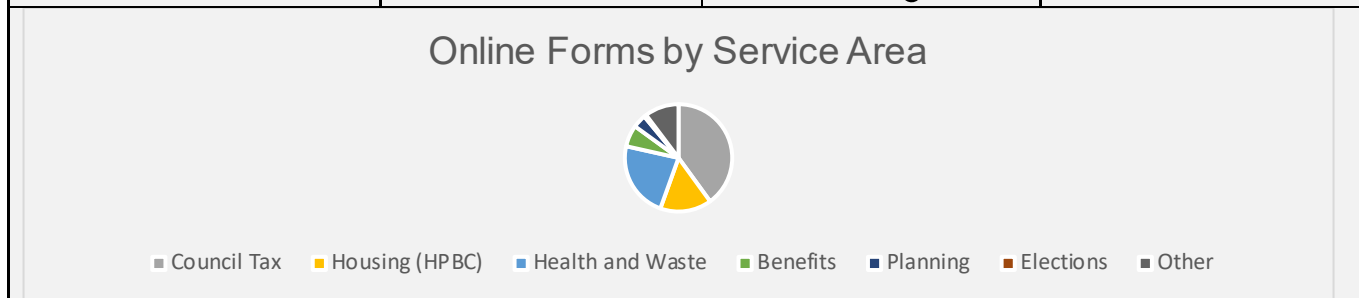
Results from the survey carried out in January 2020, demonstrated that customers are most satisfied with competence of staff and helpfulness of staff, whereas an area for development is speed of resolving an issue.

The ICS will support us and recommend a relevant blend of insight and knowledge, tools, training and practical solutions that will raise our customer service performance levels to meet customer needs. They also provide the opportunity to gain a national standard accreditation, Servicemark, which is an independent accreditation of commitment to and achievement in customer service

Current Access Channels

The table below illustrates some national and local statistics in regard to customer access and accessibility:

	Average Number of calls handled each month 8,000 (across both Authorities)		Average number of visitors to websites each month Average 95,000 sessions (at each authority)
	44 % of contact received via telephone		Devices used Mobile 52% Desktop 38% Tablet 8%
	Average number of online transactions per month 10,000 (across both authorities)		68,000 One Vue customer portal account holders
	56 % of contacts via online forms		84% of UK adults own a smartphone



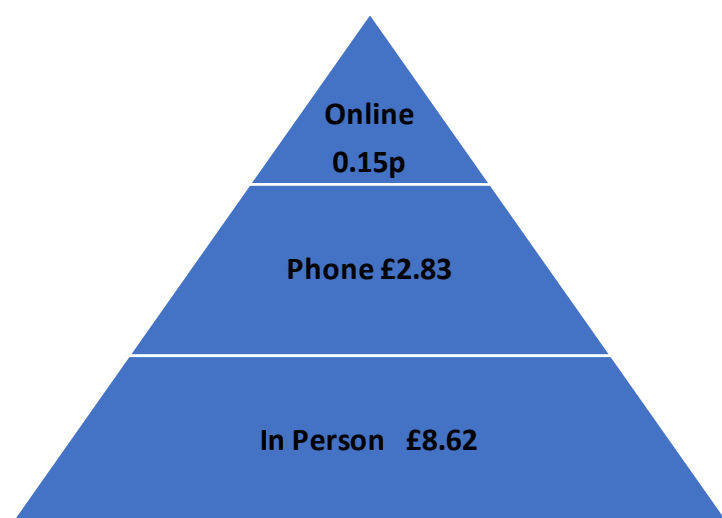
The rise in digital accessibility has been significant. Not only do people expect to be able to access services online, according to the Office for National Statistics, 8 out of 10 people are accessing the internet on mobile devices. Therefore there is a big expectation for those online services to be available and easy to use on mobile devices.

The table below illustrates the high volume services in terms of contact and transactions:

Services	Monthly Average Number of Contact by phone	Monthly Average Number of Contact online
Council Tax and Business Rates	2,600	4,000
Housing and Housing Repair (HPBC)	1,400	1,550
Environmental Health and Waste	1,200	2,300
Benefits	850	650
Planning	750	400
Elections	400	70
Other general enquiries/switchboard calls	800	1,030

The estimated cost of each method of contact are shown below, which demonstrates the efficiencies that can be made by ensuring digital services are available and easily accessible.

Costs per transaction (SOCITM 2012)



Website and Customer Portal

Our citizens portal has the provision of answers to frequently asked questions, functions to submit forms and track service requests, it provides seamless end to end transactions for staff and customers and requires minimal involvement from council officers for each request.

With quick hit information points available online, and the reduction in contact, staff have time freed up to focus on the more vulnerable customers or to work on more complex enquiries

It has also led to a decrease in the resource required to work on paper based forms and the Councils continue to become paperless in as many service areas as possible. Not only does

this reduce the amount of paper used, it also creates cost and time efficiencies as staff and customers no longer need to process and post forms.

It is recognised that there are further improvements that can be made, particularly as technology develops and the ability to transact digitally is enhanced. The current contract with the customer portal provider is due for renewal February 2022, where we have an option to extend for further 12 months. Therefore a review is to be undertaken to ensure that the current portal is fit for purpose and can assist in achieving the objectives of the Access to Services Strategy.

We share our good practice with other Local Authorities, and have presented at conferences, webinars and provided articles reflecting on progress made. In January 2021, we provided a case study for the Local Government News, The MJ, Public Technology and Computer Weekly sharing our achievements through our channel shift / digital journey

Digital Inclusion

The inability to access online products or services or to use simple forms of digital technology disproportionately affects vulnerable and low income groups, the elderly and those more marginalised communities within our society.

This leads to a strong correlation between digital exclusion, financial exclusion and social exclusion. It is important to understand the challenges people face in terms of online accessibility:

Access	the ability to actually go online and connect to the internet
Skills	to be able to use the internet
Motivation	knowing the reasons why using the internet is a good thing
Trust	a fear of crime , or not knowing where to start to go online

Data obtained from the Office for National statistics provides some national statistics in regard to digital accessibility:

- 92% of adults in the UK were recent internet users in 2020, up from 91% in 2019.
- Almost all adults aged 16 to 44 years in the UK were recent internet users (99%), compared with 54% of adults aged 75 years and over.
- While there has been little change in internet use for adults aged 16 to 44 years in recent years, the proportion of those aged 75 years and over who are recent internet users nearly doubled since 2013, from 29%, to 54% in 2020.
- 6.3% of adults in the UK had never used the internet in 2020, down from 7.5% in 2019.
- The number of disabled adults who were recent internet users in 2020 reached almost 11 million, 81% of disabled adults; up from just over 10 million (78% of disabled adults) in 2019.

- London continued to be the UK region with the highest recent internet use (95%) in 2020, while Northern Ireland remained the lowest at 88%.

High Peak and Staffordshire Moorlands

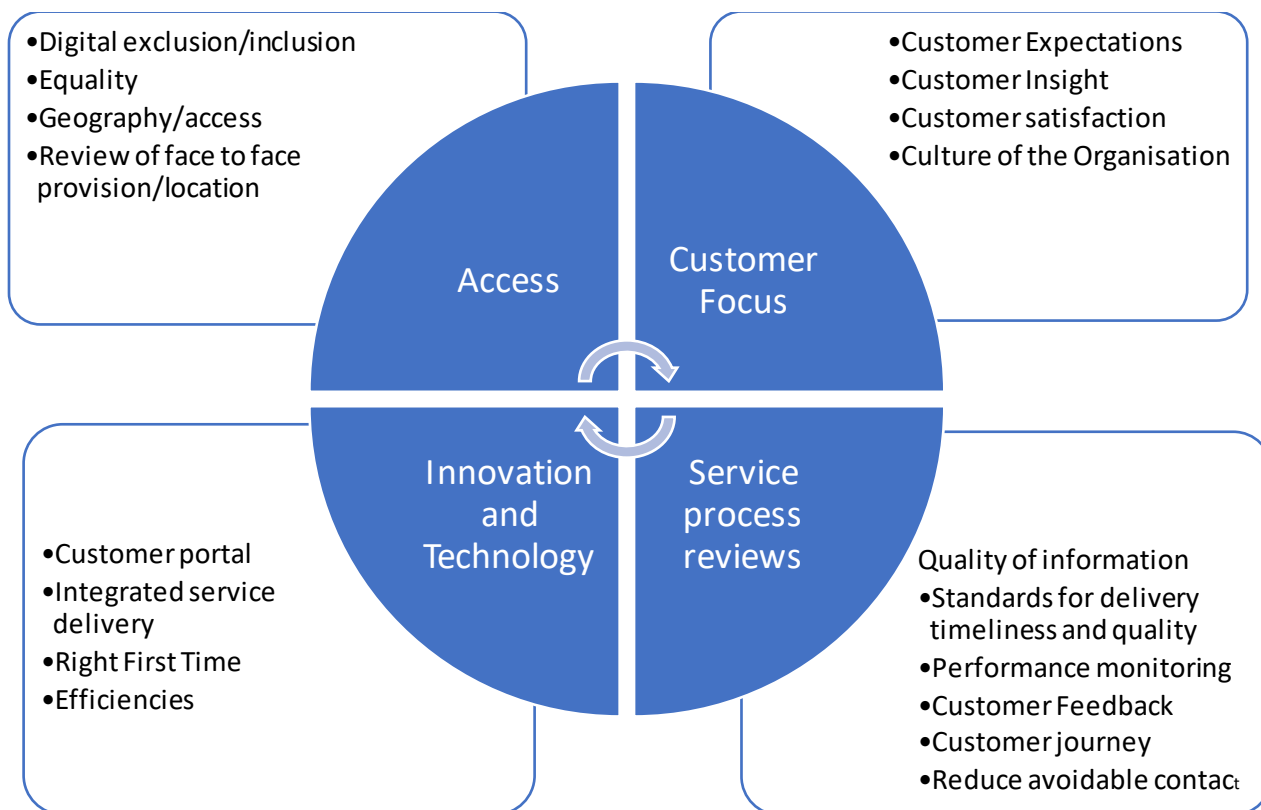
High Peak has an ageing population; the proportion of residents aged 65 plus was estimated at 21.33% in 2019 and is projected to rise to just below 30% over the next 20 years, which would make it the biggest age group in the borough; taking over from the 45-64 year age group 8.9% of the population in South and West Derbyshire (High Peak, Derbyshire Dales, Erewash, South Derbyshire, Amber Valley) do not use the Internet

Staffordshire Moorlands has an ageing population. Over 25% of the local population are aged 65+, up from 20% ten years ago. The majority (29%) of Staffs Moorlands residents are currently aged between 45 and 64. 12.1% of the population of Staffordshire do not use the Internet

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2019>

Development of the Access to Services Strategy

The Access to Services Strategy will focus on 4 key themes:



An action plan has been developed focusing on each of the 4 themes and using the following process:



Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are our customers and what are their expectations • Why are they (customers) accessing our services • What are the preferred /most frequently used channels of access by the various groups • What does customer service mean to service areas within the Council
Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the information gathered in the understanding to provide access channels to suit the expectations of customers • Make it easier and quicker for customers to access services • Reduce human intervention by automating across service areas • Provide assistance for those who cannot access services online
Delivering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with service areas to offer most suitable channel of access • Improve the customer experience • Improve performance

The Action Plan sets out how we will deliver the strategy . It will be monitored by staff and portfolio holders. We will also monitor customer feedback and performance data to assess the quality of service provided.

Summary

The strategy will develop over a 3 year period and the priority areas are :

- Complete automation and integration of revenues and benefits requests
- Digital Exclusion – identify areas demographically and geographically and work with service areas and partners to remove the barriers and provide support to our customers

- Review of the Customer Portal , invest in a system that has the capacity to integrate with other software providers across all of our service areas improving the customer experience

It will also require resources across both councils to be committed and focused in support of the action plan . and a number of other corporate commitments touch directly on the improved service access , specifically :

- Digital Strategy
- Organisational Development and Transformation Strategy
- Communication Strategy

In order for the strategy to be successful, the key principles for our organisation are:

- Customer Satisfaction and Customer Service is not an add on to our business it has to be intrinsic and integral to everything that we are doing.
- Customer service is no longer a department it is a philosophy that should be embraced by every employee at every level – it is part of everyone’s job.

ACTION PLAN

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
CUSTOMER FOCUS	Establish who our customers are and what they expect from us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilise data to identify the demographic and characteristics of the Borough Work with communities service and where required make reasonable adjustments to enable all customers to access our services Review the high volume transactions and methods of contact Consult with customers and involve them in the design of new services. Identify where partners / voluntary sector organisations could support with access to services Utilise key business data (enhanced as part of the business grants process) to assist with improvements in communications with businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the key characteristics of the population assists with understanding needs and service access requirements Greater collaboration across organisations / voluntary sector provides a joined up approach to customer service
	Ensure the Council has the right skills to provide Customer Service Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a training programme / professional qualification opportunities for Customer Service staff and wider Council staff focusing on customer service excellence in conjunction with Institute of Customer Services (ICS) Consider potential to work towards accreditation and awards in conjunction with ICS Engage employees views on customer service across the organisation via an employee engagement survey Identify and celebrate success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention of a professional customer based workforce Embed a customer first culture and establish clear consistent standards throughout the organisation to recognise customer service is a part of all roles Obtain valuable insight about how employees feel about the customer service provided within

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
			<p>service areas and any anomalies in different service areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased employee job satisfaction
	Identify the current level of Customer satisfaction and where improvements can be made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review ICS Survey results completed in 2019 Re-run ICS customer survey during 2022 Consider how customer feedback can be obtained regularly to continually identify service improvements through everyday contact Consider how local/national data can be utilised to benchmark customer service Develop a customer charter detailing level of service customers can expect from us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2019 results provides starting point and identifies areas of improvement Updated survey provides updated picture in respect of customer satisfaction and establishes if improvements have been made Customer expectations managed
	Ensure the Council communicates with customers on an open and transparent basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide honest feedback on how / what we can assist with and in what timeframe Be clear on the areas we cannot assist with, but improve signposting to those organisations that could assist Community learning and localised engagement and openness from the Council making information available Ensure customers are kept updated on progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Builds a greater sense of trust and more engaged working relationship between council and customers Enhanced reputation
SERVICE PROCESS REVIEWS	Ensure information and data is up to date and relevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly review website pages to ensure information is up to date and user friendly Use analytics and statistics to improve the information available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in avoidable contact Increased capacity of staff to focus on higher value tasks / assist vulnerable customers

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service areas take responsibility for maintaining content on webpages • Prioritise website information in respect of the most popular transactions / queries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers have anytime access to required information
	Map the customer journey across service areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use customer journey mapping to aid redesign of service provided to the customer • Draft customer journey mapping schedule in order to review all service areas over a realistic period of time • Utilise results to ensure customer service standards consistent across the organisation, delivery times clear and realistic and customers are updated on progress. • Consider the use of digital solutions where there is a business case to do so (linked to the Digital Strategy) • Introduce a user-centered design process framework that incorporates validation from the user every step of the way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become proactive rather than reactive • Improved customer satisfaction and user experience • Reduction in avoidable contact • Reputation for acting on customer feedback • Understanding of expectations shared and clear to all staff across service areas
	Ensure the Customer Service Team can deliver objectives of Access to Services Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review current Customer Services structure to ensure the roles and responsibilities are fit for purpose • Consider how Customer Services can be operated effectively on an 'agile' basis • Ensure the workforce has the appropriate skills, tools and authority to effectively deliver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of effective and innovative customer services

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY	Enable a Single View of the customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer Portal to meet needs of service areas and customer • Good quality data on customer contact can help track progress and better understand the interactions and drivers • Sharing of information across service areas • Frontline have access to information in order to process the enquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right first time – improved customer experience • Reduction in avoidable contact • Simplify and reduce interactions between customers and different council departments • Improved customer experience
	Consider integration / automation across services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Strategy will be the driver for technology and software implemented • Increase and enhance automated workflows across service areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase online availability which includes access to accounts balances and payments 24/7 • Create a truly Digital service , when a form is submitted it automatically triggers the appropriate action required to fulfil the customer’s request – right first time
	Realise efficiencies- invest to save and also invest to improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce post and print cost as a result of increasing electronic solutions • Release capacity within the workforce to direct to digital enquiries, high value tasks and support customers who need it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driving towards being carbon neutral by 2030 – in line with Climate Change action plan • Provide resource to drive forward with digital channels
ACCESS <i>Digital</i>	Analyse the digital access data across the alliance and identify those accessing council services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare the digital access and council access data and identify the differences – for example access / facilities available • Consult and involve hard to reach groups • Set up focus groups to assist those who cannot access services online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All service areas identify barriers and provide support to customers

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
	Identify the groups vulnerable to digital exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with community organisations to deliver services to meet the needs of the community • Liaise with SCC and DCC Digital Assistance and identify and promote the Community Help points available across the District/Borough • Explore options of a device loaning scheme • Staff provide customer support and provide bookable dedicated training sessions for customers to access mobile phones tablets laptops • Encourage members to promote digital access and signposting of residents to digital resources and support where possible (particularly in areas with higher risk of digital exclusion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced 'digital divide'
	Identify the barriers by which people are excluded		
	Digital by design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • React to new demands /national gov changes - have the ability to build forms and make changes in house • Increase availability of online forms across service areas • Enhance facility for customers to upload evidence and documents online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paperless environment • Respond to changes in timely manner
	The Future Of Digital & Self-Service- Digital never stands still	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource required for continuous improvement and innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative council leading the way in digital access
	Channels available to suit needs of customer and business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing expectations when customer transact digitally • Service requests accessible 24/7 via multiple devices • Explore alternative channels- webchat , Whatsapp, Instagram 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility to introduce alternative access channels to meet the needs of the customer and the business

Theme	Understanding (Inputs)	Developing (Actions)	Delivering (Outcomes)
Alternative Channels	Telephony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review opening times of the call centre to meet demands and allow focus on digital methods of contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilise time for staff training providing staff with skills and knowledge to respond to the more complex enquiries
	Face to Face	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review opening times and assistance at receptions, build on the positive legacy from COVID 19 lockdown to identify the services that need a face to face service Floor walkers to greet customers and after establishing enquiry signpost customers to self-serve device, free telephone or support from staff as required Appointments available for those who require assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain and enhance the face to face service for the vulnerable and more complex cases