

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILCABINET5 SEPTEMBER 2024Report by Director of Business Operations and PartnershipsUPDATE ON THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet with an update on the achievements of the Digital Transformation Programme during 2023/24 and to give an overview of plans for 2024/25.

RECOMMENDATION

2. It is recommended that Cabinet notes the achievements and future plans across the 3 areas of our Digital Transformation Programme: Customer Experience; Business Systems and Processes and Workforce Productivity.

BACKGROUND

3. Digital Transformation is important in helping us better understand our communities and customers; targeting resource to maximum effect: helping reduce service demand; supporting services to take early or preventative action; changing community and individual outcomes for the better; increasing organisational efficiency; improving performance, spending our budgets smarter; sweating our assets to get the most value out of them; and ensuring we are broadening and developing the skills of our most important asset, our staff.

4. The latest iteration of the Digital Transformation Programme launched in April 2022 in line with the Council's Digital Transformation Strategy for 2021-2024 which was approved by Cabinet in June 2021 and focuses on 3 areas:

- Customer Experience
- Workforce Productivity
- Business Systems & Processes

5. Our services have made substantial headway across 2023/24 to progress our digital transformation ambitions, make efficiencies, improve customer service, and modernise the way we work. Through the various initiatives outlined below this work has impacted many, if not most of the households in East Renfrewshire as a result of work on systems such as Council Tax, Benefits, Customer Services and Housing.

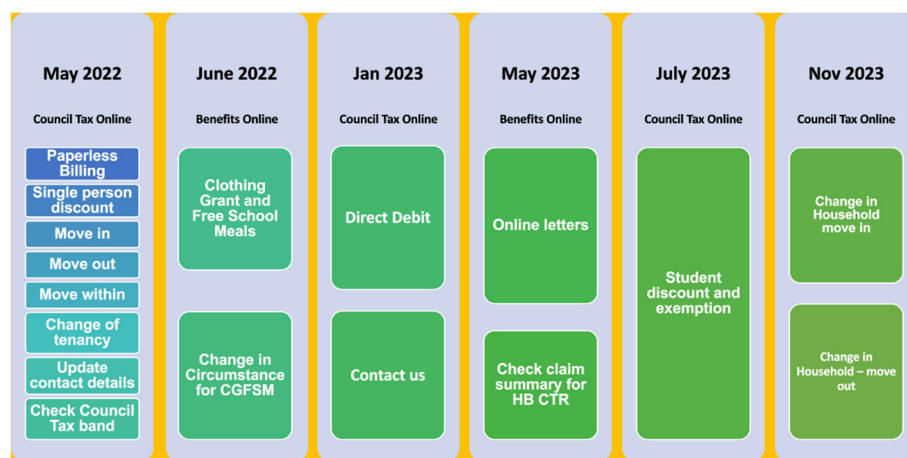
IMPACT ON CUSTOMERS

6. The vision of our customer experience programme is to provide a consistent, efficient customer experience, designed with the user at the heart. In this programme we are expanding access to 24/7 online services, improving the customer experience, and working to provide a seamless end-to-end journey.

Expanding access to online services

7. Over the past year we have made significant progress widening 24/7 access to online services, enabling customers to access services where and when suits them. Key areas of note include:

- Registered users of our customer portal, MyEastRen, grew by 50% to over 22,000. Widening access to a range of online services, including Council Tax, Benefits, and ParentsPortal.
- Our new Council Tax and Benefits online services, which launched in 2022 and expanded its features over time, have had nearly 10,000 customers sign-up. Over 8,000 of the council's 40,000 households have moved from paper to e-bills and 53% of new Council Tax applications are being received online, reducing paper and postage.



- East Renfrewshire has the highest level of Parent Portal engagement in Scotland. We now have 11,300 Parents Portal accounts covering 15,750 pupils. Almost 50% (7,875) of school annual data checks are now completed online, over 18,000 individual online permission consents have been granted and almost 4,000 applications for under-22 bus travel received. A recently launched mobile app has further enhanced accessibility, receiving positive early feedback.
- 95% of appointments to register a birth were made online by customers through a new booking system. This year it has been expanded to Marriage/Civil Partnership appointments, with 85% of appointments now booked online, over half of which are made during evenings and weekends when offices are closed. The booking system has also been adapted and rolled out for ranger events at Dams to Darnley Country Park, further broadening our online service offer.
- A new Housing Online Portal was launched in March 2024 and new customer functions will roll out over time. It will enable customers to apply and bid for housing, view their rent accounts, balances and statements, raise repairs requests and make rent payments. With around 3,000 tenancies in East Renfrewshire, over 300 (10%) tenants have registered for this service already with a larger uptake anticipated as additional features are released.
- 96% of 318 commercial waste customers have signed up to a new system, launched in September 2023, which automates financial processing, streamlines renewals, provides schedule information and payment management.

Modernising our customer contact arrangements

8. One of the top priorities this year has been to implement a new modern telephony platform that allows our customer services team to handle and route enquiries via phone and email. The new system improves real-time queue visibility, enabling quicker decision-making

and customer messaging to manage customer contacts more effectively. Call recording functionality assists with complaint handling as well as ongoing staff training.

9. Future phases of this project will permit our customer service agents to access the solution from any location, ensuring resilience for business continuity, particularly in the face of extreme weather events and illnesses when staff may need to work from other locations. The platform will intelligently route customer enquiries using chat bot capabilities and extend our communication channels to include live chat. The new platform will include improved reporting capability and access to data which will be used to provide better insights to enhance customer experience.

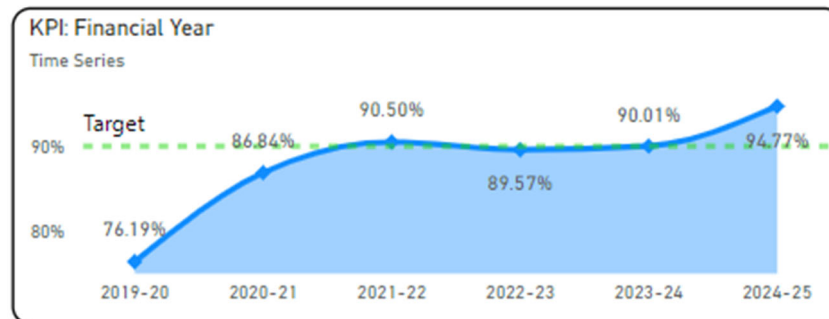
IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY AND BUSINESS PROCESSES

10. Our Workforce Productivity Programme aims to integrate data and utilise business intelligence, automation and artificial intelligence to improve outcomes for communities and individuals, and increase staff productivity, performance and effectiveness.

Using Data to Improve Service Performance

11. There has been significant progress made by the Management Insight project over the last year delivering a range of dashboards built on secure and automated data feeds, with near-time visuals which allow authorised staff to self-serve the information they require. These have included:

- Our Invoice Payment dashboard, which is helping the Accounts Payable team and departmental staff to track and manage invoice payments approaching the 28 day payment target. The chart below shows the new tool is helping the team to improve the percentage of invoice payments made within 28 days above the 90% target.



- CMT and key HR staff have access to a staff absence analysis dashboard that provides insights into absence reason, location and roles, and monthly tracking of our absence rate. This information can be used to identify areas for improvement and potential preventative activities and actions.
- Our Cost of living dashboard continues to evolve giving localised insights on financial wellbeing and trend analysis since the pandemic, to help to target resources on poverty and financial vulnerability.
- School attendance and attainment dashboards have been built to support school quality improvement journeys and work to close the poverty related attainment gap.
- A staff training dashboard is giving managers specific information about the mandatory training and due dates required of their employees to help them proactively ensure data protection, information and cyber security and fire awareness is up to date across our workforce. This helps keep our employees safe and reduces the risks of data and cyber security incidents.
- A new Freedom of Information (FOI) requests dashboard is helping to manage FOI response times and identify opportunities to reduce the number of FOIs.

Improving Business Processes & Increasing Employee Productivity

12. A key focus of these workstreams is using digital tools to make our staff more productive by saving time and/or money. This year workforce productivity projects have saved over 10,000 hours of staff time (equivalent to over 6 FTE or £250k worth of employee time) across the organisation. Such productivity gains are utilised as part of the budget process to offer up savings from services or are sometimes redeployed to meet other business demands or increased workload.

13. The introduction of Microsoft Teams during the pandemic, reduced the number of in-person meetings leading to lower staff mileage and travel expenses claimed. While face-to-face collaboration remains important and valuable, since the pandemic our mileage and travel expenses have reduced by a total of £269k across the years 20/21 to 23/24.

14. The Education Department has finalised the implementation of a digital Education Psychologist case management system. This enables the Educational Psychology Service to work across educational establishments, ensuring ongoing access to often very sensitive information and data in a secure, managed way. The new system has reduced administrative support for the service by 1 FTE, which was redeployed to support emerging business demands elsewhere across the Education Department.

15. There have been a number of productivity efficiencies delivered by the HR & Payroll development team through the council's HR & Payroll solution (iTrent):

- In March 2024 staff leave was transitioned from an existing legacy system with approximately 1500 staff now managing their annual leave and flexitime within iTrent.
- The changes to flexitime have removed the need for miscellaneous time adjustments, of which there were approximately 20,000 each year. Each adjustment took approximately 5 minutes, this has created a staff time saving efficiency in the region of 230 days each year.
- Staff from within the Education Department now use iTrent to record sickness absence information ensuring a standard way of reporting. This reduction in manual keying has saved the Payroll team in the region of 420 hours per annum.
- The new leave management module has reduced the creation of duplicate information in HR and Business Support teams and allowed for a saving in the costs associated with the legacy system used to administer leave. Other teams from across the Council who manually manage leave with leave cards and spreadsheets now have the functionality to record leave in iTrent ensuring a more standardised approach across the council.

16. Our ongoing focus on identifying process automation opportunities within the Customer Experience Management system has yielded significant productivity gains. Process automation allows us to use technology to automate repetitive and manual tasks identified in our business processes. It's estimated that automating the task of managing our data retention schedules alone has allowed us to avoid new costs in the region of 1,200 staff days per year, equivalent of approximately five full-time employees (FTEs).

17. As mentioned in the customer section above, improvements made to customer experiences have also had staff productivity or cost benefits:

- The new Housing Management System replaced two previous systems netting an annual saving of £5,400. It is anticipated that the additional Housing Online modules will result in an increase in customer satisfaction and a further staff efficiency saving of 1.2 FTE as a result of automated workflows.
- The total efficiency savings from the new Commercial Waste Management System project equate to 600 hours per year.

- Online bookings for our birth registration and Marriage or Civil Partnership appointment services has saved in the region of 63 hours each year processing phone calls or emails relating to marriage bookings and approximately 8 hours per year for birth registrations.

18. The Council has moved from traditional analogue telephone lines to digital lines generating savings of £10,460 each year.

19. Our new Digital Telecare platform continues to ensure our circa 3,000 vulnerable telecare customers benefit from their lifeline community alarm system. The new system has reduced calls through use of a mobile app as telecare responders receive next-client routing information direct to the app, freeing-up call-handlers from manually calling round responders. East Renfrewshire has been at the forefront of implementing digital telecare and is on track to achieve a Platinum Digital Telecare Implementation Award, the highest level, from the Scottish Digital Office. Phase 2 will focus on updating equipment in sheltered housing complexes and replacing 2,500 analogue alarms with digital ones.

20. The Community Learning and Development Team has digitised the (previously paper) registration process for young people and adults registering for the groups they run, saving at least 260 hours of staff time each year which is being freed up to deliver front-line services.

21. As well as the time efficiencies outlined above, the transition away from legacy systems has also addressed a number of potential public services network (PSN) security vulnerabilities. We need ongoing PSN accreditation to be able to access several critical national systems.

Maintaining & Improving Key Systems

22. Our Business Systems & Processes (BS&P) Programme aims to maximise the value from the Council's key technology platforms and efficiently prioritise and manage the small staff and technology base required for implementing complex, large-scale system change.

23. In February 2024, the BS&P Finance/Procurement development team successfully completed a major upgrade of the Finance & Procurement system, ensuring our systems are robust and secure. The upgrade has also helped improve the invoicing and recharge processes between the Council and the Culture & Leisure Trust. Purchase Order and Invoice information is now visible across multiple system modules thus saving employees' time.

24. The development team has been onboarding eligible suppliers to electronic invoicing. The team has also introduced standard invoice templates and scanning software which has improved invoice processing performance, reduces errors and rekeying of invoice details. 22% of the total invoices processed by the council in 2023/24 utilised one of two new automated processing arrangements.

25. Development has continued with changes to some system configuration that has allowed payroll processes to be automated, reducing manual interventions and errors. The improvements made so far allowed the Council to process the 23/24 pay award, including a significant proportion of back pay to staff, in their December 2023 wage. East Renfrewshire Council were one of the few Scottish councils able to process the pay award ahead of Christmas 2023. This payroll improvement project will continue next year to drive out further process efficiencies.

OUR FUTURE PROGRAMME

26. East Renfrewshire Council will continue to focus on digital transformation to become more efficient, accessible, and modern; making improvements to better serve our community. As outlined above the current iteration of the Digital Transformation Programme launched in

April 2022. Work will be undertaken in 2024/25 to begin to refresh the strategy, taking account of the SOLACE, Improvement Service and Digital Office work on the “Council of the Future: Digital ‘To Be’ State”. We will need to balance the delivery of our transformation workstreams with the substantial work being planned to improve our digital infrastructure over the next 12-24 months.

27. Whilst challenges continue to be faced in terms of capacity versus ambition and complexity of many of these programmes of work, we are more conscious than ever of the importance of prioritising this work to achieve best use of scarce resource. We will continue to leverage agile project methodologies to deliver incremental changes based on user needs and to get value to those who use the service as quickly as possible.

28. Through the Digital Transformation Programme, Departments are continually engaged in a process of project prioritisation looking at what the Council needs to do and wants to deliver as part of its digital transformation journey. The ongoing review of projects in this manner helps us assess the linkages and sequencing of initiatives; the scope for use of national platforms or solutions wherever possible; plan resources; identify gaps or challenges and ensures a balance of delivery and benefits realisation across the 3 fronts of our digital transformation strategy.

29. Under the Customer Experience programme, we will:

- Take the next steps in modernising our customer contact platform by enabling remote working for our Customer First team ensuring resilience for business continuity and expanding our communications channels to include live chat and chat bot capabilities.
- Streamline and modernise licensing processes through a new online portal for customers to process their applications.
- Build on the success of current online processes by extending the online application process for all nursery children, including those aged under 3 years.
- Continue to promote and drive-up sign-ups and adoption of online platforms for customers.

30. The focus of the Business Systems & Processes programme will be to:

- Oversee the implementation of work to modernise and refresh the Council’s ICT infrastructure arising from a 2024 review.
- Leverage the new income management system to broaden customer’s ability to pay money to the Council.
- Improve processes for employees as they join the Council, move posts, change circumstances, or leave the organisation.
- Streamline payroll processes, reduce manual recording and checking of pay related matters, and create capacity within Payroll teams through automation.
- Pilot cashless payment services to libraries and then widen out across the authority.

31. Within the Workforce Productivity programme we will:

- Bring forward new workstreams that match and integrate our key data sets, automate business processes and start to utilise artificial intelligence in low-risk, ethical ways that will enhance staff productivity.
- Continue to develop business intelligence dashboards that will improve efficiency and performance.
- Drive further business benefits from use of M365, including OneDrive, Planner, Bookings and Lists and encourage and support new ways of working for staff.
- Continue to enhance information and cyber security within the council.
- Migrate our corporate devices to Windows 11.

IMPLICATIONS

32. Change and digital transformation across an organisation as diverse as a Council (and HSCP and ERCLT) is a complex area. There is a complicated ICT system architecture and network of operational processes that sit behind the services that our residents interact with on a day-to-day basis. We must plan carefully to ensure that we are focusing on improving our high-volume processes whilst undertaking the routine work to keep our systems up to date, secure and integrated.

33. Budget challenges mean we must clearly prioritise our activities and resources to ensure we deliver benefits from projects, that they contribute to future savings opportunities and improve the experiences of residents and reduce bureaucracy. Learning from others' successes (and failures) will also help transition quicker and save rework.

34. Recruiting, retaining and, where possible, growing the right skills and experience is essential to the success of our digital transformation journey. Digital, data, technology and service design skillsets are in significant demand nationally and it is a challenging marketplace. Programmes routinely have gaps in key skillsets which means the need to prioritise resource to achieve the best collective benefit – this is a key function of the 3 Programme Boards, which must work together to make decisions and recommendations. We have also developed close links with the Scottish Local Government Digital Office and Scottish Digital Academy to ensure we can develop and enhance our digital, data and technology skillsets.

FINANCE & EFFICIENCY

35. Whilst significant benefits have already been realised, the Council will continue to face very challenging financial circumstances for the foreseeable future. In recent years, the Council has seen its digital transformation programme as a key mechanism to drive change and help deliver savings across all services. The Revenue Estimates for 2024/25 concluded that £0.652m for 2023/24, and £1.122m, for 2024/25, of the Council's savings proposals related to efficiencies or to the Council's digital transformation programme and the focus on the Council's 3 capabilities (i.e. prevention; empowering communities and digital change). And, as set out above, digital transformation is supporting over 10,000 hours of employee productivity gains.

36. The key principles behind the programme that will lead to budget savings are:

- improving customer end-to-end experience and expanding access to 24/7 online self-service;
- Increasing employee productivity through automation, data integration, business intelligence insights and artificial intelligence;
- maximising the use of key business systems and capabilities; and
- An increased focus on user engagement in service design and more community empowerment to provide services which put customers at the heart of provision, improving services and potentially lowering costs.

CONSULTATION & PARTNERSHIP WORKING

37. The progress and ambitions outlined in this paper relate not only to the Council but also to the wider 'family' organisations of the HSCP and the Culture and Leisure Trust. We will continue to work together to progress the key priority areas for digital transformation and to share lessons learned and plan resources.

38. We will continue to work in partnership with the Improvement Service and Scottish Local Government Digital Office to share knowledge and learn from other areas of best practice.

User engagement in service design, internal as well as external, is a key principle of our digital transformation journey. We will utilise the Scottish Approach to Service Design wherever possible to put users at the heart of change.

CONCLUSION

39. In summary the Digital Transformation programme and platforms are expanding 24/7 access to online services to thousands of customers, increasing staff productivity, helping to reduce costs, generating data insights to improve outcomes, targeting support at the most vulnerable; and supporting improvements in performance.

40. The pace and scale of change across the Council and HSCP remains significant. This is driven by pressures on budgets; statutory and contractual obligations and our own ambitions for digital modernisation and improved user experience. Prioritisation, resource management and good governance will continue to be key to the next stages of our digital transformation journey, with a focus on customer experience, our business systems and processes and the productivity of our workforce.

RECOMMENDATION

41. It is recommended that Cabinet notes the achievements and future plans across the 3 areas of our Digital Transformation Programme: Customer Experience; Business Systems and Processes and Workforce Productivity.

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May 2024

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

- [Local Government in Scotland Overview 2023, Audit Scotland, May 2023](#)
- [Financial Planning 2024-2030, Council 28 February 2024](#)
- [Strategic Impact of the Financial Settlement, Council, 1 March 2023](#)
- [Revenue Estimates 23/24, Council 1 March 2023](#)
- [Revenue Estimates 2024/25, Council 28 February 2024](#)
- [Update on the Digital Transformation Programme, Cabinet 19 June 2023](#)