



South Tyneside Council

Item 5a

Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029

This document has been classified as: **Not
protectively marked**

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Council - 30 July 2026

Report to Council

Cabinet Portfolio/Lead Member: Cllr Susan Sybenga, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance and Resources

Report of Stuart Reid, Director of Business and Resources

Subject: Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029

Date: 30 July 2026

Wards affected: borough wide implications

Council ambitions: This report supports the Council's ambitions for efficient and modern services, stronger organisational resilience, improved inclusion and accessibility, and better use of digital, data and technology to improve outcomes for residents.

Does the report and any appendices contain information which has been identified as confidential or exempt?

- No, this report does not contain information identified as confidential or exempt.

For Executive Decisions only:

Is the decision a Key Decision? Yes

Is it included in the Forward Plan? Yes

If not in the Forward Plan is the report: n/a

Relevant Scrutiny Chair: Councillor Ford

Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny? Yes

(If the decision is anything other than any executive decision made by the Cabinet or a Key Decision made by an officer under delegated powers, call-in is not applicable. This should be explained in the report).

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek full Council approval of the Digital and ICT Strategy 2026 – 2029 as the Council's strategic framework for prioritised digital improvement and ICT modernisation over the next three years.
2. To confirm endorsement of the strategic direction, priorities, and delivery approach for digital transformation and ICT modernisation.
3. To ensure alignment with the Council Strategy, Medium Term Financial Plan and transformation programme.
4. The strategy provides the Council's overarching framework for digital improvement and ICT modernisation over the next three years. It sets the strategic direction, priorities and delivery principles that will guide annual planning, prioritisation and governance.
5. Approval of the strategy does not commit the Council to every individual project or investment decision set out in the accompanying strategy document. Specific proposals requiring additional funding or formal approval will be brought forward through the usual governance and decision-making routes.
6. Subject to approval, delivery will be taken forward through annual planning, existing corporate governance arrangements and regular reporting on progress, risk and benefits realisation, with priorities phased in line with affordability, delivery capacity and dependencies.

Background Information

7. The Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029 has been developed to provide a clear and phased approach to digital improvement and ICT modernisation across the Council.
8. The strategy sets out how the Council will respond to:
 - Rising demand and financial pressures
 - Growing cyber risk
 - Rapid changes in technology, including AI
 - Increasing resident expectations for simple, accessible, responsive services
 - Addressing legacy technology challenges
9. These pressures make a clear strategic framework necessary now to support better prioritisation, reduce duplication, strengthen resilience and improve outcomes for residents.
10. The Digital and ICT strategy is an enabling strategy. Supporting:
 - The Council's 20-year vision
 - Council Strategy and financial planning

- Transformation programme
 - Anti-poverty and digital inclusion ambitions
11. The strategy will support service delivery by improving resident access to services, strengthening workforce productivity and capability, supporting digital inclusion, modernising technology and improving resilience and security. Cabinet approval will provide a clear mandate for coordinated Digital prioritisation, annual planning and governance across services, rather than relying on disconnected or service-by-service activity.
12. The accompanying strategy document contains the detailed vision, strategic themes, roadmap, measures and 2026 action plan. This cover report focuses on the decision required, the rationale for approval and the implications for the Council.
13. The key strategic priorities for the strategy are:
- **Great digital services for everyday needs** – simple, joined-up online journeys that reduce repeat contact and improve trust.
 - **Digital access for all** – targeted support so everyone can benefit from digital services, alongside work to improve connectivity, skills and access to devices.
 - **Empowering our workforce** – giving Staff and Elected Members the skills, tools, data and AI to work efficiently, safely and differently.
 - **Building strong digital foundations** – reliable devices, systems and cloud services that keep the Council running.
 - **Protecting trust and security** – cyber resilience and information security embedded into everything we do.
14. The strategy will be delivered through annual planning and existing governance arrangements, with prioritisation informed by affordability, statutory requirements, risk, delivery capacity and the potential to improve outcomes for residents and the organisation.

Main issues and Options to be Considered

15. Option 1: Approve the Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029. This option provides the Council with a clear strategic framework for digital improvement and ICT modernisation, aligned to wider organisational priorities and supported by a phased delivery approach.
16. Option 2: Do not approve the strategy at this time. This would leave the Council without an agreed strategic framework for coordinating digital and ICT priorities, weakening clarity over direction, sequencing and governance, and increasing the risk of fragmented investment, slower transformation and missed opportunities to improve services, resilience and productivity.

17. Option 1 is recommended because it supports a planned and affordable approach to digital change, strengthens governance and prioritisation, and provides a clear basis for annual delivery planning and reporting.
18. Following approval, the strategy will be implemented through annual delivery plans and existing governance arrangements. Specific projects, investments or policy decisions arising from the strategy will be brought forward separately where further approval is required.

Implications

19. The strategy provides a framework for planning and prioritisation and does not in itself approve all individual projects, procurements or investment decisions. The main implications of approving the strategy are set out below.
20. Stronger prioritisation and coordination – establishes a single framework for aligning digital and ICT activity across services, reducing duplication and fragmentation.
21. Phased, controlled delivery of change – enables structured annual planning aligned to affordability, capacity and dependencies rather than ad hoc delivery.
22. Improved resident experience – focuses investment on simpler, joined-up services and better access, reducing repeat contact and improving trust.
23. Increased organisational productivity and capability – supports workforce efficiency through digital upskilling, better tools, data and use of AI.
24. Stronger resilience and security – embeds cyber resilience, modern infrastructure and governance into delivery.
25. Clear governance and accountability – ensures delivery is monitored through existing governance with ongoing reporting on progress, risk and benefits.

Financial and Resources

26. Approval of the strategy does not in itself create an immediate additional financial commitment and does not approve unfunded expenditure. Delivery will be managed through existing service planning, prioritisation and approved resources where possible.
27. Delivery over the strategy period will need to reflect affordability, organisational capacity and annual budget-setting decisions across both Digital and ICT and service areas.

28. Where specific projects or proposals require additional investment, procurement activity or staffing implications, these will be brought forward separately through the appropriate business case, budget-setting and approval routes.

Legal and Governance

29. The strategy provides a strategic framework for digital improvement and ICT modernisation. Implementation will continue through existing corporate governance arrangements and must comply with the Council's constitutional, procurement, information governance, data protection, cyber security, accessibility and decision-making requirements. Any future proposals arising from the strategy will be subject to the appropriate governance, assurance and approval processes.
30. The strategy and delivery approach also supports the delivery of Council statutory services and compliance obligations.

Risk

31. The strategy is intended to strengthen the Council's approach to managing digital and ICT risks through clearer prioritisation, governance and phased delivery. Key risks include cyber threat, legacy technology challenges, affordability, supplier dependency, data quality, delivery capacity and adoption of change across services.
32. There is also a risk that intended benefits will not be fully realised if services do not have sufficient capacity, ownership and change support to adopt new ways of working.
33. These risks will be managed through business planning, prioritisation, business cases where required, robust governance, benefits tracking, cyber assurance and project-level controls.
34. There is also a risk in not approving the strategy, as this would reduce clarity over priorities, sequencing and oversight of digital modernisation across the Council.

Equality and Diversity and Community

35. A full Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the strategy and noted in paragraph 39 that this will be an ongoing consideration for individual projects during delivery of the strategy.

- 36. The strategy is intended to have a positive impact by supporting accessible, inclusive and user-centred service design and by strengthening digital inclusion activity across the borough.
- 37. It does not propose removal of non-digital access routes and supports maintaining choice and assisted support where needed.
- 38. Inclusive design, accessibility, support for residents with additional needs and careful implementation of AI and digital tools will be important to ensuring benefits are realised fairly across communities.
- 39. Equality implications arising from individual projects, service changes or policy decisions will be considered through the relevant assessment and decision-making processes.

Environmental and Sustainability

- 40. The strategy may contribute positively to sustainability through digitisation, reduced paper use, improved process efficiency, reduced travel and more sustainable management and reuse of technology where appropriate.
- 41. Digital infrastructure, devices and AI also have environmental impacts, including energy use and supply chain considerations. These factors will need to be considered in future procurement, design and implementation decisions.
- 42. Overall, the strategy supports a practical approach to digital modernisation that can contribute positively to sustainability when implemented responsibly.

Council Ambitions, Policies, Strategies and Plans

- 43. The strategy is an enabling strategy that supports delivery of the Council's wider ambitions and plans by providing a clear framework for digital improvement and ICT modernisation.
- 44. It supports the Council's priorities for efficient and modern services, stronger organisational resilience, improved access and inclusion, and better use of data and technology to improve outcomes for residents.
- 45. It also aligns with the Council's wider transformation activity, information governance and cyber resilience responsibilities, workforce modernisation, and the need to target investment where it can deliver the greatest value and benefit.

Consultation

- 46. The strategy has been informed through engagement undertaken during its development with officers across the Council, Resident insight, engagement with

Elected Members, discussions with Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging networks, and regional partner input.

- 47. This engagement highlighted the importance of simpler and more joined-up services, faster responses and clearer communication, strong routes to speak to a person when needed, improved digital inclusion support, and careful, transparent use of data and AI.
- 48. The feedback gathered through this process has informed the priorities, delivery principles and implementation approach set out in the strategy.

Recommendation

- 49. Cabinet is recommended to approve the Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029.
- 50. Note the phased delivery approach, starting with 2026 priorities focused on strengthening foundations and improving resident experience.
- 51. Agree that progress will be reported through existing governance arrangements, including Transformation Board and Cabinet.

Lists Of Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Equality Impact Assessment
- Appendix 2 – Digital and ICT Strategy 2026 - 2029

Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029

The following documents were relied upon in the preparation of this report:

Background Paper	File Ref:	File Location
Digital and ICT Strategy 2026-2029	Appendix 2	Attached to Cabinet report

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

All public authorities are required to, in carrying out their functions, show due regard for the need to: eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity between people who shared a protected characteristic and those who don't; and foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not (Equalities Act 2010).

Services are responsible for ensuring that EqIAs are completed to help inform decision making on all relevant Key Decisions, new or revised policies and any substantial proposed changes to services.

This process helps decision makers to assess, and evidence that they have assessed, the potential implications of a proposed policy or service change on service users with protected characteristics. It supports reflection on implications for different groups and prompts the identification of any mitigation activities that may need to be taken to minimise potential inequalities that could result from the proposal.

Directorate	Business and Resources	Service	Digital and ICT
Responsible Officer (Title)	Assistant Director of Digital and ICT	Date of Assessment	10 June 2026
Brief description of the proposed new or altered policy or service?			
This EqIA relates to the Digital and ICT Strategy 2026–2029. The strategy sets out the Council's approach to digital transformation and ICT modernisation over the period 2026 to 2029. It covers resident-facing digital services and customer journeys; digital inclusion, connectivity and assisted digital support; digital tools and platforms for staff and Members; data and AI capability; technology infrastructure and cloud services; and cyber resilience and information security. The strategy applies across all Council services and will be delivered in partnership with service areas, corporate transformation and external partners.			
Who are the main customer or employee groups affected by this new or altered policy or service?			
• Residents and businesses across South Tyneside • People who need support to use online services • Residents with additional accessibility needs • People affected by digital exclusion • Low connectivity or low device access • Staff and elected Members who use the Council's systems and digital tools • Service areas delivering Council services and partner organisations supporting delivery.			
What evidence and engagement has been considered to inform this assessment?			
• Resident survey covering online services, digital inclusion, connectivity, AI and data. • Workshops with officers across the five strategic themes. • Engagement with Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging networks.			

- Regional collaboration through DigiNet and Digital Inclusion partnerships. - A Digital Inclusion Summit focused on barriers, motivation and community-based support. - Benchmarking against approaches used by other councils. - Engagement with Council Cabinet and the Lead Member on strategy themes including Customer Experience.		
Identification and description of impact. Please identify where there is a positive, neutral or negative impact.		
The Nine Protected Characteristics (as identified by the Equalities Act 2010)		
Age	Positive	Likely to benefit older and younger residents through improved access, clarity and support. A residual risk remains for some older residents if support, non-digital routes and assisted access are not consistently available.
Disability	Positive	Accessibility and inclusion are central to the strategy, with accessibility built in from the start and an Assistive Technology approach planned. There remains a residual risk if individual services, interfaces or communications are not fully accessible in practice.
Sex	Neutral	No direct differential impact by sex is identified. Benefits from simpler services, flexible access routes and clearer communication are expected to apply broadly.
Sexual Orientation	Neutral	No direct differential impact is identified at strategy level. The overall intent to improve fair access, choice, trust and consistent service standards is neutral to positive, subject to respectful service design and implementation.
Gender Reassignment	Neutral	No direct differential impact is identified. The strategy's focus on safer digital services, trust, privacy, secure-by-design approaches and staff capability is relevant to safeguarding confidence in service use.
Marriage or Civil Partnership (in employment only)	Neutral	No direct employment-related differential impact is identified. Workforce elements focus on skills, tools and support for staff and Members generally.
Pregnancy and Maternity	Neutral	No direct differential impact is identified. Simpler mobile-friendly services, clearer communication and maintained face-to-face or telephone routes may support access, but implementation should remain flexible where people require alternative routes or timings.
Race (including colour, ethnicity, nationality or national origin)	Positive	Improved accessibility, plain English, clearer communication and multiple access channels should support residents from different backgrounds. A residual risk remains where language or communication barriers affect access to information or digital services.

Religion or belief	Neutral	No direct differential impact is identified. The strategy is neutral overall, with implementation expected to preserve fair access and inclusive communication.
Other Groups		
Care Leavers	Positive	Digital inclusion, device reuse, connectivity, skills and assisted support are likely to benefit care leavers where access to digital tools and confidence may otherwise be a barrier.
Armed Forces Veterans	Positive	Likely to have a positive effect through simpler access routes, improved communication, device and connectivity support, and assisted digital provision where needed.
Those at risk of socio-economic disadvantage	Positive	The strategy links reducing digital exclusion to employment, financial stability, health and community participation, and includes device reuse, connectivity work, social value in contracts, public WiFi and community-based support.
Please indicate what actions you intend to take to mitigate negative impact, where it has been identified		
• Retain clear non-digital and assisted-digital routes, including telephone and face-to-face access where required. • Apply accessibility-by-design standards to priority service redesigns, websites and digital communications, and test with users who have different accessibility needs. • Use the planned Assistive Technology approach to support residents to live independently. • Target digital inclusion support at residents who need it most, including access to devices, connectivity, skills and support through libraries and community venues. • Ensure communications about service changes are in plain English and use appropriate channels so people are not excluded from important information. • Use AI governance commitments so any AI-enabled service change is transparent, tested, subject to human oversight and reviewed for equality implications before rollout. • Build digital inclusion and social value requirements into procurement so suppliers contribute to skills support, device reuse or donation and community benefit. • Require project and service-level EqlAs for major delivery initiatives within the strategy.		
Are there any negative impacts that cannot reasonably be avoided?		
No unavoidable negative impacts are accepted at strategy level in this draft assessment. However, there are residual risks associated with increased digital delivery and AI-enabled change if mitigations are not implemented consistently. On balance, it remains appropriate to proceed because the strategy commits to maintaining choice, including routes to speak to a person, building accessibility in from the start, targeting support to residents who need it most, applying		

transparent safeguards and human oversight to AI, and delivering improvement in a phased and controlled way.

Any future service or project proposals that identify unavoidable negative impacts should record these separately in project-level EqlAs with a clear rationale and additional mitigations.

How do you plan to monitor ongoing impact and the effectiveness of any identified mitigation activities?

- Monitor delivery through the strategy's measures and reporting framework, including customer experience, accessibility and inclusion, workforce capability, technology resilience, cyber resilience, value for money and social value outcomes.
- Track accessibility compliance for priority services and websites, and review uptake of assisted digital support and digital inclusion interventions.
- Review customer feedback, complaints, service performance and engagement activity to identify whether particular groups are experiencing barriers or lower take-up.
- Use annual delivery planning and governance reporting to review whether equality, accessibility and inclusion commitments are being implemented as intended.
- Refresh this EqlA as the strategy is translated into annual plans and as major workstreams or service changes are developed.
- Undertake a formal review after implementation milestones, for example annually and at strategy refresh points.

Responsible Officer Title & Sign-Off Date		Head of Service Title & Sign-Off Date		Lead Member & Sign-Off Date	
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