



Appendix 2

South Tyneside Council

Item 5b

Digital and ICT Strategy 2026 - 2029

South Tyneside Council
Date 29 May 2026

Executive Summary

This Digital and ICT Strategy sets out how South Tyneside Council will improve digital services and modernise ICT over 2026 to 2029. It responds to rising demand, ongoing financial pressures, growing cyber threats, and rapid changes in technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), alongside increasing public expectations for more responsive, real-time and accessible public services.

The strategy will improve outcomes for residents, support staff and elected Members, and drive value for money through safe, planned and responsible digital change.

This strategy is not about replacing people with technology. Residents will continue to have a choice in how they access services, including the option to speak to a person. Digital will be used where it makes services simpler, quicker and more accessible for residents, with support in place for those who need help to get online.

The approach is informed by resident surveys, officer workshops, engagement with Elected Members, and regional and partner insight, including digital inclusion work across the North East. Residents told us they want:

- Simpler and more mobile-friendly services
- Faster responses and clearer updates
- Joined-up services that reduce the need to repeat information
- The ability to speak to a person when needed
- Reassurance that data and AI are used safely and provide value for money

This strategy will deliver:

- Simpler, easier-to-use digital services that work well on mobile
- Faster responses and reduced repeat contact
- Better access to support, including for those who need help to use digital services
- A more productive workforce using modern tools, data and AI
- Stronger cyber resilience and protection of public data

Together, this will improve experience, increase efficiency, and strengthen trust while maintaining choice and inclusion.

Our vision

To digitally empower and connect our people and communities, enabling inclusive, innovative and efficient access to services that improves outcomes for residents, supports our workforce, and strengthens the Council's long-term resilience.

Strategic priorities (2026–2029)

- **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.

What happens first - priorities for 2026

- Help residents get answers more quickly through better online journeys and improved contact centre services.
- Redesign priority online services to reduce frustration and repeat contact (starting with Waste services).
- Introduce early data and AI projects where they add clear value, with transparent safeguards and human oversight.
- Refresh devices, infrastructure and cyber resilience to strengthen reliability and security.
- Develop practical support for digital inclusion, including working with public, private and voluntary sector partners to reuse suitable devices in the community.

What happens in 2026 - our priorities for the first year

In the first year of this strategy, the Council will focus on practical improvements that residents will notice, while strengthening the foundations needed for longer-term change. This phased approach helps reduce risk, protect essential services and make best use of available resources.

1. Great digital services for everyday needs

- Redesign priority online services (starting with Waste) so they are simpler, clearer and work better on mobile.
- Improve contact centre services so residents get answers more quickly and do not have to repeat themselves.
- Introduce early, carefully controlled use of AI for information and guidance, with clear safeguards and routes to speak to a person.

Why this matters: Residents told us services need to be easier to use, faster and clearer. These changes reduce frustration and repeat contact while keeping human support where it is needed.

2. Digital access for all

- Develop an Assistive Technology approach to support residents and staff with additional needs.
- Work with partners to improve access to devices, skills support and connectivity.
- Improve digital provision in libraries and other community venues as key assisted-digital access points.
- Reuse suitable Council devices in the community and review public Wi-Fi provision.
- Keep working with regional partners to improve connectivity and understand mobile not-spots and areas where connectivity is poor.
- Collaborate with procurement teams and suppliers to maximise social value through contracts, with a particular focus on supporting device donation schemes.

Why this matters: Digital services only work if people can access and use them. Digital inclusion is not only about accessing council services - it also supports wider outcomes including employment, financial stability, health and community participation.

These actions help ensure digital change is fair, inclusive and delivers benefits beyond the Council's services.

3. Empowering our workforce

- Develop a digital skills framework, including data, AI and cyber.
- Expand practical digital learning and support.
- Deliver early data and AI projects where there is clear value and human oversight while measuring the impact and value for money.

Why this matters: Modern tools only improve services if people are confident using them safely and effectively.

4. Building strong digital foundations

- Begin the planned refresh of Council devices to improve reliability and security.
- Develop and deliver a controlled cloud migration roadmap.
- Reduce dependency on legacy technology through prioritised system modernisation including planned replacement of key Finance, Procurement and Housing repairs systems.

Why this matters: Reliable technology underpins service delivery, security and value for money.

5. Protecting trust and security

- Develop a multi-year Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF) roadmap.
- Strengthen testing of cyber response and recovery.
- Refresh cyber awareness and information security policies.

Why this matters: Cyber resilience protects services, personal data and public trust.

A detailed delivery plan for 2026 is set out in Appendix A.

1. Why this Digital and ICT Strategy matters now

Residents increasingly expect council services to be simple, joined-up, mobile-friendly and supported by clear communication and timely updates, while still having the option to speak to a person when needed.

At the same time, the Council faces increasing demand, ongoing financial pressures, workforce capacity challenges, growing cyber risks, and rapid advances in technology, including artificial intelligence (AI).

Done well, digital can help the Council improve productivity, reduce avoidable contact (for example, chasing updates), and support better outcomes for residents. It can also strengthen service resilience - including system reliability, cyber security, business continuity and the ability to maintain services during disruption, while reducing the dependency on legacy technology.

Done badly, digital can increase exclusion, frustration and risk. This is why the Council needs a clear strategy and delivery plan for digital improvement and ICT modernisation.

Section 2 explains our starting point and the scale of Digital and ICT, which is why we must deliver this strategy in a planned and phased way.

2. Digital and ICT at South Tyneside - our starting point

Digital and ICT supports the day-to-day running of essential technology and delivers digital change with services across the Council. This includes keeping the councils ICT systems and infrastructure reliable and secure, and improving digital services for residents, staff and elected Members.

The Digital and ICT service was formed in 2018 and has expanded to include cyber security, digital change, service design, digital skills and website management. This gives the Council direct responsibility for service reliability, security and the way digital change is designed and delivered.

- Each year, we manage over 37,000 issues and requests supporting our workforce and elected Members.
- The service delivers over 50 critical digital projects annually, including service improvements, major transformations, regulatory activity and end-of-year activities.
- We manage 27 public-facing websites used by residents, including Council, Housing and Pensions sites attracting over 8.7 million views in the last 12 months.
- We support 90 Council and community sites across the borough, over 4,000 laptops, tablets and smartphones and critical datacentre and cloud infrastructure.
- We host and maintain over 65 council business systems. Many of these systems are essential to delivering statutory services and must remain secure, resilient and available.
- We are planning a controlled move to cloud hosting where appropriate to reduce risk and improve resilience.
- Digital outcomes are delivered in partnership with all service areas, regional partners and following industry best practice, reflecting evolving needs of residents and the organisation.

Because of this scale and complexity, change must be planned carefully. We must balance visible service improvements with the need to keep essential systems running safely and reduce long-term risk through modernisation.

3. How this strategy supports Our South Tyneside

This Digital and ICT Strategy is an enabling strategy. It supports delivery of the Council's 20-Year Vision for South Tyneside, the Council Strategy and Medium-Term Financial Plan, and the Our Council Change Programme. It also reflects the Council's PROUD values and commitment to modernise services while targeting support to make things fairer.

Digital outcomes are embedded across the Council's ambitions, including supporting residents to live healthy, fulfilled lives; improving access to jobs, skills and learning; strengthening communities and connectivity; making best use of public resources; and ensuring the Council remains modern, resilient and fit for the future.

Digital outcomes also support residents to access the financial support they are entitled to, and reducing digital exclusion is a key contributor to the Council's Anti-Poverty Strategy and Financial security ambitions.

This strategy complements other corporate strategies by supporting modern ways of working for staff and elected Members, embedding accessibility and plain English by

design, strengthening data, insight and evidence-led decision-making, and enabling clearer communication through joined-up customer journeys.

4. Purpose and scope of the strategy

This Digital and ICT Strategy sets out the Council's approach to digital transformation and ICT modernisation for the period 2026 to 2029. It describes the outcomes we want to achieve for residents, staff and Members; the strategic priorities that will guide investment and delivery; and the governance, roadmap and measures that will be used to plan, prioritise and track progress.

The strategy covers resident-facing digital services and customer journeys; digital inclusion, connectivity and assisted digital support (help to use online services, by phone or in person); digital tools and platforms for staff and Members; data and AI capability; technology infrastructure and cloud services; and cyber resilience and information security.

It applies across all Council services and will be delivered in partnership with service areas, corporate transformation and external partners where appropriate.

5. Accessibility, inclusion and choice

Accessibility and inclusion are central to this strategy. Digital will be the default where it works well and meets people's needs, but it will not be the only way to access services. We will design online services to be easy to use by as many people as possible, build accessibility in from the start, and keep clear assisted and non-digital options where needed. We will also target digital inclusion support at residents who need it most.

This approach recognises that people have different needs, skills and access to technology. Inclusion must be built in, not added on later.

6. Context and case for change

The way people live, work and access services has changed significantly. Residents increasingly expect services to be simple, fast, mobile-friendly and joined-up. At the same time, the Council faces rising demand, ongoing financial pressure, workforce capacity challenges, increasing cyber risk, and rapid changes in technology—including AI. This section sets out why a focused programme of digital and ICT modernisation is required over 2026–2029.

6.1 Progress and foundations

Since Digital and ICT returned in-house in 2018, the Council has strengthened its foundations and delivered improvements including:

- **Resident services:** modern online services across Waste, Leisure, Place, Revenues and Benefits, Parking and Trees; and multiple public-facing websites that improve access to information and support.
- **Digital inclusion and skills:** free public Wi-Fi across Council buildings; rapidly expanding full-fibre and gigabit capable infrastructure, partnerships with voluntary and community organisations (VCSE); and digital skills support for staff and Members.
- **Innovation:** early adoption of AI tools such as MS Co-pilot and Magic Notes and practical digital solutions that have been recognised and shared across the sector such as the virtual memory box for children's services.
- **Technology foundations:** modernised infrastructure and devices, support for hybrid working, and strengthened cyber resilience and incident response capability.
- **Borough Connectivity:** Public WiFi available in South Shields Town centre, full fibre coverage increased from 19% to 80% across the borough since 2024 improving the access to high speed broadband for residents.

6.2 Key drivers for change

- **Rising demand and financial pressure:** increasing demand alongside limited resources requires the Council to improve productivity and reduce avoidable contact.
- **Changing expectations:** residents and businesses expect simple, joined-up, mobile-friendly services with clear updates and the option to speak to a person when needed.
- **Legacy technology and complexity:** older systems increase cost and risk, limit integration, and slow down service improvement.
- **Cyber threat and resilience:** the likelihood for significant cyber-attacks across local government continues to grow, requiring stronger prevention, detection, response and recovery.
- **Workforce efficiency and capability:** Staff and Members need modern tools and consistent skills development (including data, AI and cyber) to work effectively.
- **Data and AI opportunities (with safeguards):** better data quality and governance can improve insight, targeting and decision-making; AI can support productivity and improve public where it is transparent, tested and subject to human oversight.
- **Digital inclusion and connectivity:** not everyone can access digital services easily; interventions are needed to improve access to devices, connectivity and skills so digital change is fair.
- **Transformation:** digital outcomes are central to wider organisational transformation and must be delivered in a planned, phased and affordable way.

7. Consultation and insight

The strategy has been developed through a structured programme of engagement with residents, officers, Elected Members and partners. This included:

- a 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 (EDIB) 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 Lead Member on strategy themes including Customer Experience.

This evidence has directly shaped the priorities and delivery approach set out in this strategy.

Key themes from consultation

- Services should be simpler, mobile-friendly and more consistent across service areas.
- Residents want faster responses, clearer updates and end-to-end communication.
- Making digital services simpler to access is a high priority
- AI should be introduced carefully: transparent, tested for accuracy, optional in early phases, and always overseen by people.
- Clear routes to speak to a person (telephone and face-to-face) must remain available when needed.
- Officers emphasised better data quality and sharing, efficiency through digital change, and the replacement of legacy systems.
- Digital Inclusion summit brought partners together to explore barriers, motivation and challenges for residents getting online

This insight directly shapes the priorities and delivery approach set out in the remainder of this strategy.

8. Strategic approach and themes

Delivery is organised around five themes. Each theme includes the outcomes we intend to achieve and the key initiatives that will be prioritised through annual plans.

8.1 Great digital services for everyday needs

Simple, joined-up services that work first time

Outcomes: Residents can complete common tasks easily and confidently online; services are accessible and mobile-friendly; residents receive clearer updates; avoidable contact is reduced; and staff have better visibility of customer journeys.

Key initiatives (2026–2029):

- Redesign priority end-to-end journeys to be simpler, clearer and mobile-first, using user insight and service performance data.
- Modernise customer contact capability to join up digital and telephone channels, improving resolution and reducing repeat contact.
- Introduce an AI-enabled “front door” for information, advice and guidance where appropriate, with clear safeguards and routes to a person.
- Improve content, accessibility and consistency across Council websites and digital communications.
- Progress towards a more joined-up single account across digital services where feasible.

8.2 Digital access for all

Fair access, skills and support so no one is left behind

Outcomes: More residents have the connectivity, devices and confidence to use digital services; support is targeted to those who need it most; and digital change is inclusive by design.

Key initiatives (2026–2029):

- Develop an Assistive Technology strategy to support residents live independently.
- Work with partners (including the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)) to address digital exclusion through skills support, assisted digital provision and community-based interventions.
- Establish practical device re-use and donation schemes, including repurposing Council devices where appropriate.
- Review and evolve public Wi-Fi provision across Council buildings and community venues.
- Develop insight on broadband and mobile coverage gaps and work with suppliers, the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) and partners to improve connectivity.
- Strengthen social value in procurement by building digital inclusion requirements into contracts (for example skills support, device donation/re-use, community delivery and volunteering - linking providers up with the South

Tyneside Pledge network to prioritise local impact), with clear measures, reporting and contract management, while showcasing examples of best practice.

8.3 Empowering our workforce (Employee Experience)

Modern tools and skills to enable Staff and Members to work smarter and safer

Outcomes: Staff and Members have modern tools and skills to work efficiently; data is used more effectively to support decisions and interventions; AI is adopted in a consistent, safe and trusted way; and digital ways of working are supported through strong change management.

Key initiatives (2026–2029):

- Develop a digital skills framework for staff and Members (including AI, data and cyber) with clear learning pathways.
- Expand and target the digital learning offer (for example clinics, bite-size learning and role-based support).
- Deliver phased data and AI projects that improve productivity and service insight, focusing on clear use cases and measurable benefit.
- Strengthen data and AI governance through policies, guidance and forums to ensure transparency, accountability and safe use.
- Improve data quality, sharing and reporting capability to support evidence-led decision-making.

8.4 Building strong digital foundations

Reliable technology that services can depend on

Outcomes: Technology is reliable and resilient; services have platforms that are fit for purpose; ICT investment is planned and sustainable; and infrastructure supports modern working and transformation.

Key initiatives (2026–2029):

- Deliver planned lifecycle refresh programmes for end-user devices and core infrastructure to improve reliability and security.
- Develop and implement a controlled cloud migration roadmap to modernise hosting, improve resilience and enable service continuity.
- Reduce dependency on legacy technology through prioritised system modernisation and planned replacement.

- Strengthen libraries and community digital provision (devices, guest Wi-Fi and printing) as part of assisted digital support.
- Standardise and simplify technology where possible to reduce complexity, cost and support demand.

8.5 Protecting trust and security

Keeping services running and information safe

Outcomes: The Council prevents, detects and responds to incidents more effectively; can recover quickly with minimal service disruption; maintains trust through strong information security; and embeds “secure by design” into all digital change.

Key initiatives (2026–2029):

- Develop and deliver a multi-year roadmap aligned to the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF).
- Regularly test our ability to respond, recover and continue delivering services against the risk of significant cyber-attacks on council systems while strengthening assurance and learning lessons.
- Refresh the council’s annual cyber awareness programme to reduce human-risk exposure and support safe behaviours.
- Maintain and refresh information security policies and standards to remain current, clear and auditable.
- Embed security requirements into procurement, solution design and delivery.

9. Strategic delivery principles

These principles will guide decision-making, prioritisation and delivery across the three-year period.

- **Value and impact focused:** We will prioritise the work that delivers the greatest benefit for residents and the organisation, makes best use of available resources, and avoids technology change that does not have a clear purpose. We will learn, iterate and improve as delivery progresses.
- **Designed around people’s needs:** We will design services around real needs and lived experience, supported by insight, performance data and evidence. Services will be intuitive, accessible, inclusive and consistent.
- **People and communities focused:** We will invest in support to build digital skills and confidence for residents, Staff and Members so that digital change is adopted successfully and no one is left behind. Working with regional and local partners including Voluntary Sector and regional Local Authorities we will codesign initiatives to support our communities.
- **Secure by design:** Cyber resilience and information security will be embedded into all new services, technology and change activity, protecting residents, staff and public money.

9.1 Prioritisation Principles

The Council recognises that capacity, funding and delivery constraints may vary over the strategy period. Where difficult trade-offs are required, decisions will be guided by the following principles. These are considered together rather than applied in strict order, with decisions based on evidence of need, risk, statutory requirement and resident impact.

- **Safety, resilience and statutory assurance** – cyber resilience, information security, business continuity and any change required to maintain safe delivery of statutory services.
- **Resident access and service continuity** – Protecting access to essential services, reduce failure demand and avoidable contact, and maintain assisted and non-digital routes where required.
- **Affordability and productivity** – activity that reduces cost, avoids future cost, or releases staff capacity through simplification, automation and better use of data.
- **Foundations for future change** – lifecycle refresh, platform stabilisation, and enabling work (standards, integration, cloud planning) that reduces long-term risk and cost.
- **Innovation and optimisation** – new or emerging opportunities (including AI and smart place initiatives) will proceed where benefits are clear, risks are controlled, and delivery does not compromise the priorities above.

Decisions will be informed by evidence of need and benefit, delivery readiness, risk, dependency, and the impact on equality, accessibility and inclusion.

10. What this means for people

10.1 For staff and Members

- Modern, reliable digital tools that reduce time spent dealing with systems and increase time spent supporting residents.
- Better information, insight and reporting to support faster, more informed decisions.
- Targeted digital skills development, including safe and effective use of data and AI.
- Clear guidance and governance for consistent, trusted and responsible use of emerging technology.

10.2 For residents and businesses

- Simpler, clearer and more accessible online services, designed to work well on mobile devices.
- Better communication and visibility of progress, reducing the need to chase and repeat contact.

- Choice and support: clear routes to speak to a person when needed, supported by assisted digital options.
- Improved connectivity and access to devices and digital skills support, working with partners in communities.
- Safer online experiences through strengthened cyber resilience and responsible use of data and AI.

11. Governance and delivery approach

We will deliver this strategy through existing corporate governance and as part of the Council's wider transformation programme. Digital and ICT will work with service areas to agree priorities, design solutions, deliver change and track benefits.

- **Strategic oversight:** Regular reporting to corporate boards including the Councils Transformation Board and Cabinet.
- **Prioritisation:** An annual planning cycle will confirm the delivery plan for each year, balancing statutory requirements, risk, service demand, affordability and capacity.
- **Programme and project delivery:** Work will be managed through clear programme and project controls, with named owners, benefits tracking and risk management.
- **Data and AI governance:** Policies, guidance and appropriate forums will set guardrails for safe, transparent and accountable use.
- **Cyber and information security:** Cyber security underpins service resilience, public trust and safe digital transformation. The Council will apply security and information assurance by design across procurement, solution development and delivery, backed by testing, assurance and ongoing review.
- **Regional Alignment:** Where relevant, delivery will align with and contribute to regional programmes and governance arrangements, including those led by the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA).

Digital and ICT will work with services from the outset of service planning to understand future demand, dependencies and opportunities for digital change. This will ensure alignment with corporate priorities, transformation programmes and emerging external requirements while supporting a planned and coordinated approach to delivery.

11.1 Change management and engagement

Successful digital change depends on people, culture and adoption. Delivery will be supported through strong change management, service design capability, and ongoing engagement with Residents, Staff, elected Members and Partners. Feedback will be gathered through surveys, workshops and community engagement and will be used to iterate and improve services.

This will include learning from previous change programmes and ensuring communication and engagement plans are robust and support successful adoption.

In addition to supporting internal change, a clear and consistent approach to communication with residents and businesses will be essential. As services are redesigned and more digital options are introduced, the Council will explain changes in plain English, focusing on what they mean in practice and the benefits for residents. This will include encouraging take-up of digital services through positive engagement and clear examples of improvement, while maintaining choice, including face-to-face and telephone access where needed. This approach will help build confidence, support behaviour change over time, and ensure digital transformation is understood, trusted and inclusive.

12. Roadmap 2026–2029

The strategy will be delivered through phased, affordable plans. The first year focuses on strengthening foundations and delivering visible improvements, reducing risk and avoiding a “big-bang” approach. Subsequent years build on those foundations, scaling successful approaches and progressing wider modernisation.

12.1 2026: Strengthen foundations

- Improve resident experience through redesigned priority online services and modernised contact capability.
- Deliver early data and AI use cases that provide clear value, with transparent safeguards and human oversight.
- Strengthen digital inclusion interventions with partners, including device re-use and assistive technology planning.
- Refresh devices and infrastructure and build a controlled cloud migration plan.
- Advance cyber resilience through the national Cyber Assessment Framework(CAF) roadmap, testing and refreshed awareness activity.

12.2 2027–2028: Scale and modernise

- Scale redesigned service journeys across additional priority services, improving customer journeys, reducing avoidable contact and improving satisfaction.
- Progress towards a joined-up customer digital account where feasible, improving consistency across services.
- Expand data and AI capability into business-as-usual with consistent governance, training and assurance.
- Progress cloud migration and system modernisation to reduce legacy risk and improve resilience.

- Develop and deliver “Smart Place” opportunities with services and partners (including the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)) where they provide clear value and remain inclusive and evidence-led.

12.3 2029: Embed and optimise

- Embed consistent, accessible digital service standards and continuous improvement practices across the Council.
- Optimise platforms and processes, using insight and data to target further efficiency and quality improvements.
- Continue planned replacement and resilience investment, ensuring technology remains modern, sustainable and secure.
- Review and refresh the strategy and roadmap for the next planning period based on outcomes, performance and emerging need.

13. Measures, benefits and reporting

Progress will be measured through a combination of delivery milestones, service performance and benefits realisation. Measures will be agreed for each annual delivery plan and reported through governance boards and to Members through established reporting arrangements.

- **Customer experience:** completion rates for key online journeys; reduction in avoidable contact; response times; customer satisfaction measures where available.
- **Accessibility and inclusion:** accessibility compliance for priority services; uptake of assisted digital support; engagement with inclusion interventions.
- **Workforce capability:** completion of digital learning pathways; adoption of modern tools; reduction in time spent on manual processes for targeted use cases.
- **Technology resilience:** device refresh progress; platform availability; service continuity measures; reduction in high-severity incidents.
- **Cyber resilience:** delivery of CAF roadmap milestones; phishing and awareness indicators; results of testing and assurance activity.
- **Value for money:** benefits realised (cashable and non-cashable), including productivity, reduced failure demand and reduced risk exposure.
- **Social value and partnerships:** delivery of agreed social value outcomes in relevant contracts (for example number of devices re-used/donated, people supported through digital skills sessions, community sessions delivered), and progress against partnership initiatives supporting digital inclusion.

Key performance Indicator scorecards will be developed to show progress across the strategic themes and support corporate performance monitoring.

14. Risks, dependencies and assumptions

Delivering this strategy successfully depends on sustained organisational commitment, effective prioritisation and robust governance. Key risks and dependencies include:

- **Capacity and affordability:** delivery is dependent on having sufficient skills, funding and capacity across Digital and ICT and service areas.

Mitigation: phased planning, clear prioritisation and benefits-led business cases.

- **Change adoption:** new processes and tools will only deliver value if adopted.

Mitigation: change management, training and clear communications.

- **Legacy technology constraints:** older systems can limit integration and improvement.

Mitigation: planned modernisation and targeted replacement.

- **Data quality and access:** poor or inconsistent data reduces insight and limits AI use.

Mitigation: data quality improvement and governance.

- **Cyber threat:** cyber incidents can disrupt delivery and services.

Mitigation: secure-by-design controls, CAF roadmap, testing and resilience planning.

- **Supplier and partner dependencies:** delivery relies on supplier performance and partnership working (including regional partners).

Mitigation: robust procurement, contract management and shared planning.

Appendix A: Detailed 2026 action plan

This appendix provides the detailed delivery view of the 2026 priorities summarised in the section ‘What happens in 2026 - our priorities for the first year’. In 2026, delivery will focus on strengthening foundations rather than large-scale transformation. Priorities centre on improving customer experience, building digital skills, modernising technology, and strengthening cyber resilience.

What we are doing in 2026	Why it matters
Great digital services for everyday needs	
Implement an AI “front door” for contact centres to help with information, advice and guidance queries.	Helps residents receive answers quickly for straightforward queries, while protecting capacity for complex and vulnerable cases. Supports the feedback theme of faster responses and safe, transparent AI use.
Migrate contact centres to a modern cloud-based customer experience platform joining up digital and telephone channels.	Creates a joined-up experience so residents do not have to repeat themselves and progress can be tracked properly. Improves resilience and provides better insight into demand and performance.
Start redesigning key online services (beginning with Waste services).	Directly addresses resident feedback on simplicity and mobile usability, reducing avoidable contact and improving trust.
Digital access for all	
Create an Assistive Technology strategy.	Supports vulnerable residents to live independently in their own homes through use of innovative technology and data.
Understand broadband and mobile provision gaps and work with suppliers and partners to improve coverage.	Connectivity underpins access to services and economic growth and supports regional work to address broadband and mobile gaps.
Redistribute used Council devices into the community (with partners).	Practical support for residents who are digitally excluded, helping access essential services, learning and work opportunities.

Review free public Wi-Fi provision (including opportunities aligned to neighbourhood and regeneration programmes).	Public Wi-Fi supports access to online services and learning in community venues, reducing barriers for those without reliable home connectivity.
Explore “Smart Place” opportunities with partners (including the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)).	Enables targeted, evidence-led innovation that can improve place-based services and efficiency, linked to assistive technology, housing and environmental outcomes.
Develop and implement a social value approach in procurement linked to digital inclusion, including a standard set of contract clauses/KPIs, an agreed supplier offer (for example skills sessions, devices and connectivity support) and an approach to monitoring and reporting delivery.	Strengthens outcomes from supplier commitments (skills, devices, career development) and widens the support offer.
Work with the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) and partners to improve insight, align digital inclusion and smart place priorities, and develop joint interventions and funding opportunities.	Helps design joint interventions, attract external funding and widen reach, recognising the Council cannot tackle inclusion and connectivity challenges alone.
Empowering our workforce	
Develop a digital skills framework for staff and Members (including AI, data and cyber).	Builds confidence to adopt modern tools safely and supports improved use of data and evidence.
Strengthen the digital training offer (Digital Clinic, bite-size learning).	Develops capability in core and emerging areas (including AI), improving efficiency and reducing operational overhead.
Implement phase 1 data and AI projects (including social care transcription, Families First data platform and Microsoft Copilot).	Delivers early productivity and insight benefits while respecting expectations around accuracy, transparency and human oversight.
Strengthen AI and data governance through guidance, policies and forums.	Builds trust and reduces risk, ensuring accountability and consistent safe use of AI.
Building strong digital foundations	
Phase 1 of Council PC refresh (replace approximately 800 devices through 2026).	Improves reliability, security and user experience, reducing downtime and support demand and enabling modern working.

Develop a cloud migration roadmap.	Creates a controlled plan to modernise hosting, improve resilience and support service continuity.
Redesign public libraries digital provision (devices, guest Wi-Fi and printing).	Libraries are a key assisted-digital access point supporting inclusion, skills building and access to services.
Protecting trust and security	
Develop a multi-year Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF) roadmap.	Retains cyber as the foundation of digital change and strengthens prevention, response and recovery.
Strengthen testing of response and recovery capability.	Provides assurance the Council can recover quickly and safely from incidents, reducing service disruption and harm.
Refresh the Council's cyber awareness programme.	Reduces human-risk exposure and supports safe behaviours across the organisation.
Refresh information security policies.	Keeps standards current and clear so the organisation is consistent and auditable.