

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-018-2024/25

Date of meeting: 2nd September 2024

Portfolio: Cllr S Patel

Subject: Approach to Digital Customer in partnership with Colchester City Council - Fit for the Future

Responsible Officer: Melissa Kemp-Salt, Shared Director of ICT & Transformation

Democratic Services Officer: V Messenger (democraticservices@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)

1. Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (a) To agree the approach to the Digital Customer Programme which leverages the partnership work in North Essex, and specifically across Epping Forest and Colchester City Councils.
- (b) To agree delegated authority for the Portfolio Holder to approve award of contracts in line with the approach and parameters detailed in this report.

2. Executive Summary:

Within the council's Fit for the Future portfolio is a commitment to improving our customer experience offer under the remit of the Digital Customer programme. This commitment is mirrored in Colchester City council's transformation portfolio. Both council's programmes are sponsored by the shared service Director of ICT & Transformation. A version of this report is being presented to each council's September Cabinet meetings.

Our websites and online services are the front door to our councils and are critical to the overall perception of our organisations as well as the customer experience we provide. As such, the investment in the delivery, accessibility and maintenance of these platforms needs to be a priority for our councils.

This report sets out an approach to progress which will enable the most effective way forward and leverage benefits that particularly arise from working across our councils. These include securing the most advantageous and aligned programme timescales as well as leveraging anticipated cost reductions. The objectives include developing an enhanced customer experience that utilises modern, accessible web and customer platform technologies, delivers measurable improvements in customer experience and ensures a sustainable future.

2.1 Reasons for Proposed Decision:

In the context of North Essex councils' partnership work, and the intention of sharing a digital team as a minimum across Colchester City and Epping Forest District, it follows that many of the benefits anticipated from working together are enabled by a partnership approach to our core technologies, the resources to support those technologies and the change projects to establish them.

Both councils are currently working with online platforms that are not compliant with government accessibility standards, do not provide the level of customer experience and agility we need, and are not sustainable.

The current Epping Forest website is built on a legacy platform which is supported on a best endeavours basis by the supplier and as a result, change is essential.

The current Colchester City website is built on Microsoft Dynamics and Microsoft Power Pages; these tools, whilst subject to continued development by Microsoft, are not specialist web content management systems (CMS) and are subject to changing licensing models which present us with financial risk.

Epping Forest's customer platform and web forms technologies has been in use for many years, is currently subject to yearly renewals, and due to limitations relating to in-house capability and capacity has recently necessitated significant spend on specialist resource to develop required workflows to support council priorities.

Colchester City's online transactions are delivered using Microsoft Power Platform and PowerApps which whilst have delivered an impressive set of capabilities, are increasingly difficult to support and are subject to changing licensing models which present financial risk.

As a result, there is a need to review the market offer for our councils and ensure future platforms offer the best possible customer experience, enable efficiencies in our councils, unification of the support and development teams, as well as an improved ability to be agile to the future needs of our services and communities.

2.2 Other Options for Action:

Do nothing is not a viable option. The current solutions are not compliant with government accessibility standards and due to the risks stated, are not sustainable. In addition, maintaining the status quo would not leverage the economies of scale and improved outcomes sought by our partnership work.

Progressing each programme of work at each council in isolation would be more costly, more time consuming, and would risk resulting in different outcomes, and therefore also present a barrier to the benefits of working together.

3. Report:

3.1 The Fit for the Future Transformation Portfolio (2024-2027) approved at Cabinet on 5th February 2024, included a Digital Customer Programme to align customer strategy and digital investment to maximise the customer experience. The programme was stated to include all contact methods ensuring that complex and urgent customer need was met as a priority and customer satisfaction saw an upwards trajectory.

3.2 To achieve these aims, the Digital Customer Programme comprises three projects - Website, Customer Platform, and Customer Experience:

3.2.1 Website Project

- New content management platform (CMS)
- New approach to content management, including user research

3.2.2 Customer Platform Project

- New dynamic platform
- Upskilling in Digital teams

3.2.3 Customer Experience Project

- Customer experience map for major service areas
- Incremental improvements, learning lessons across our Councils' different service models to inform improvements in all customer channels with particular reference to our telephony functions

3.3 This report sets out considerations with regards to the approach to Website and Customer Platform projects in the context of a joined-up approach to procurement and implementation. It should be noted that the Customer Experience Project will be developed within the overall programme and portfolio governance and work in tandem to inform incremental improvements in existing processes, as well as improvements that leverage and inform the adoption of new platforms alongside the already aligned telephony platforms.

3.4 It is anticipated, informed by officer research, that the alignment of our approach to platform procurement will result in supplier discounts as well as providing an ability to share resources to form an excellent cross-council delivery and support team, in the same way that is being leveraged for the Finance systems projects for our councils, and in-keeping with considerations around HR and Revenues and Benefits teams

3.5 The approach will also review the over 7,000 pages of web content across our councils, challenging the need for difference, and aligning wherever possible in line with our partnership objectives.

3.6 The proposed approach includes harnessing modern methods of delivering digital change, including incorporating user research and agile delivery, meaning we will make change over time through a test and learn, rather than 'big bang' approach. This work, and the delivery team, is expected to be

supported by a web development partner in line with successful approaches taken by other councils.

- 3.7 Whilst our digital strategies are still being formed in the context of our partnership, the existing strategies of our councils recognise the importance of online services that our communities, businesses, and visitors can transact with us 24/7 in a way that suits them.
- 3.8 We have an aspiration to build online services so good that they are of preference to a telephone or face-to-face transaction, freeing up officer time to support those more in need. Whilst there are several differences with the models for delivering customer services at our councils that need more detailed consideration, several of our online services do not cater for the way most users would prefer to deal with us, i.e., over mobile devices. This principle will also be foundational to the requirements and implementation approach.
- 3.9 Adding new digital services is currently difficult and costly, hence the proposal is to shift to a platform that includes pre-built services which enable speed of deployment and modification of digital services and provide easier development and support.
- 3.10 The projects will deliver improvements in accessibility for our communities. The Government's latest Web Content Accessibility guidance, WCAG 2.2, launched in October 2023 and compliance with which is due to be required from October 2024, with councils being assessed over their adherence to these standards.
- 3.11 At present neither council is compliant with WCAG 2.2 standards, and both only partially compliant with the previous WCAG 2.1 standards, as reflected in the required Accessibility statements on each website.
- 3.12 The WCAG 2.2 standards state that to meet government accessibility requirements, digital services must:
- meet level AA of the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG 2.2\)](#)
 - work on the most commonly used [assistive technologies](#) - including screen magnifiers, screen readers, and speech recognition tools
 - include disabled people in [user research](#)
 - have an [accessibility statement](#) that explains how accessible the service is.
- 3.13 Similar programmes in other councils have taken two or more years to complete, and as such, we need to progress urgently and effectively with our aligned approach, progressing resourcing, detailed planning, and procurement.
- 3.14 Following advice from procurement colleagues at our councils, the approach proposes utilising existing procurement frameworks to identify and engage preferred suppliers, rather than a lengthy tender process.

3.15 Key Decision thresholds differ at our councils. Epping Forest's constitution sets a limit of £250k, and Colchester City £500k. This report seeks delegated authority to the portfolio holder for award of any contracts above officer authority limits. Contracts awarded via delegated authority will be supported by reports to the relevant portfolio holders.

3.16 Governance of the programme is covered within each council's respective Fit for the Future governance, as well as within a new executive digital group, chaired by our chief executives, which has the role of overseeing our shared approach to digital.

3.17 Portfolio holders from our councils have been individually and collectively briefed to ensure sovereign and partnership considerations are discussed, and to-date, have been very supportive. These briefings will continue throughout the course of the programme.

4. Financial Implications

The proposed budget allocation for the projects is set out below. There will be a requirement for some dual running of platforms, the detail of which will not be known until further engagement with suppliers commences, and with the engagement of delivery resources proposed in this paper.

It is proposed that Cabinet agrees the overall approach to seeking solutions within our existing budget envelopes, and any overlap is a matter dealt with by officers and the portfolio holder as appropriate, to ensure value for money and appropriate allocation of budgets.

4.1 Epping Budget breakdown

Cost Item	Year 1 Estimated Capital Costs	Year 2 + Estimated revenue costs
Website platform	£75k per council (development partner)	£20k per council (hosting and support)
Customer platform	£90k per council	£90k per council
Project team costs	£200k over 2 years per council	
Budget source EFDC	Existing ICT Capital funds earmarked for these technologies £393k for 24/25+	-Existing budget for website hosting £21k -Existing customer platform budget £55k -Other app rationalisation to achieve remaining £35k from within existing budgets
New budget requirements	None (Contingency capital of £28k)	None

4.2 Colchester Budget breakdown

Cost Item	Year 1 Capital Costs	Year 2 onwards revenue costs
Website platform	£75k per council (development partner)	£20k per council (hosting and support)
Customer platform	£90k per council	£90k per council
Project team costs	£200k over 2 years per council	
Budget source CCC	Existing ICT Capital funds of £300k in 24/25	Existing budget for website/customer platform £70k Other app rationalisation £20k
New budget requirements	£65k of the expected £1m IT Capital for 25/26 to be allocated to customer solutions	None

4.3 The estimated total contract values required for both councils is below and assumes a four-year term. Advice will be taken with regards to the required structure and ownership of contracts that deliver for both our councils.

Component	Total Contract Estimate	Per council estimate	Delegated authority requested*
Web development partner	£150,000	£75,000	N/A – expected under officer limits
Web hosting	£160,000	£80,000	N/A – expected under officer limits
Customer platform	£720,000	£360,000	Up to £500,000 per council; £1m joint contract.

*headroom is requested in the delegated authority to derisk any market or requirements changes pre-procurement, and to allow for flex in contract for optional add-ons as and if required.

4.4 Living within available budgets – Our councils will be able to decommission legacy applications, licence and maintenance fees, and replace them with solutions built within the platforms.

4.5 Reduction in future costs – Whilst difficult to quantify, this proposed investment would also reduce costs currently faced where there is a need to develop new digital service. These costs include development time of our own resources, the potential sunk cost of upgrading current platforms, and the variable licencing costs we currently experience in our platforms at Colchester that present a real risk to sustainability of the solutions. The confidential appendix further refers.

4.6 Reduction in third party costs - This includes consultants and external developers who are employed from time-to-time to develop or enhance existing applications and services.

5. High Level Scope

The high-level scope

- Replacement of existing platforms and services
- Development of Member case management capability
- Prioritisation of main council websites, followed by microsites and intranets
- Training in-house teams
- Technology projects that dovetail with Customer Experience project

6. Scrutiny Comments

This proposal has not been presented to a scrutiny panel; however, briefings on the approach have been held with the portfolio holder and cabinet.

7. Resource Implications:

These initiatives require a cross-council effort, from service teams, customer teams, and communications teams, as well as project delivery and technical resources. Precise resource requirements will require further planning, and there is a need to establish programme / project management resources swiftly in line with the budget set out in section 4 to take the programme to the next stage.

Detailed resource requirements will be contained in the appropriate project documentation and be shared within programme governance forums at each council as well as with the new shared officer group.

8. Legal and Governance Implications:

The Council's procurement rules allow a Portfolio Holder to approve a contract to the value of £500K to £999,999K. The contract price for the Council's element of the requested delegated authority is within this authority limit.

All procurement will be undertaken in line with the respective council's procurement rules and Public Contract Regulations and in consultation with respective Procurement teams.

9. Safer, Cleaner, and Greener Implications:

The current Epping Forest District Council website is rated good in terms of carbon emissions eppingforestdc.gov.uk - Website Carbon Calculator. Whilst this data is an approximation, this programme will include a focus on limiting our carbon impact wherever possible.

10. Consultation / Scrutiny Undertaken:

None for this report.

11. Background Papers:

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Existing Risk Factors (Confidential)

12. Risk Management:

Barring the risks outlined and referred particularly in sections 2 and 4, there are no risks identified regarding this report.

13. Equality:

At this stage there are no direct implications. A full Equality Impact Assessment will be conducted at a programme/project level as appropriate.