

The Highland Council

**Resources Committee
25th February 2015**

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| Agenda Item | 18(a) |
| Report No | RES/21 /15 |

Digital First Programme

Report by Depute Chief Executive/Director Corporate Development

Summary

This report sets out the Digital First programme, which will deliver £1.3m savings over the next 4 years as agreed in the budget on 18th December 2014. The outcome of the Digital First programme is that all customers will have access to Highland Council's services on-line, with at least 40% of transactions carried out online by April 2017. This will be delivered through redesigning processes, increasing the availability of online services and encouraging more customers to access council services digitally.

1 Context

- 1.1 Scottish Government set out their ambition in Scotland's Digital Strategy, aiming for a digital environment that promotes and supports service delivery and economic growth. To achieve this, "...the public sector will adopt an approach of "digital first" in service design; that means that organisations will deliver online everything that can be delivered online..."¹
- 1.2 Highland Council's 2012-17 Corporate Plan set the strategic direction for the development of digital services by stating that the Council will "...improve public access, including out-of-hours access, to the Council and its services, offering members of the public a range of access points including by phone, online and in person" and "...increase the number of services available on website..."²
- 1.3 The Customer Engagement Strategy 2012-15 also details the Council's commitment to developing online services and providing digital as a choice of channel for customers. "...all service activities (where feasible), should be delivered over multiple channel access – telephone, online and face-to face".³
- 1.4 The Digital First Programme incorporates two activities from the Highland Council Revenue Budget report (18/12/2014) – Digital Services and Entitlements – delivering a total of £1.3m savings over 4 years.⁴

¹ "Scotland's Digital Future: Delivery of Public Services", p3

² "Working Together for the Highlands 2012-17", p26

³ "Customer Engagement Strategy 2012-2015", p33

⁴ "Revenue Budget 2015/16 - 2018/19: Summary of Budget Savings Booklet A", p20-21

2 Digital First

- 2.1 "Digital First" means that online should be the first choice delivery mechanism for services, and should be simple enough and communicated so that customers choose to engage first by digital channels.
- 2.2 Within this report, "Digital" refers to online processes, transactions, payments and communications. Digital services should be available through any online devices, including desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones. With the emergence of tablet and smartphone technology, and their increasing prevalence, it is important that our online services are accessible and suitable for these devices.
- 2.3 The Digital First Programme aims to increase the number of customers who choose to engage with Highland Council digitally. With developments in technology and changes in society, there is increasingly an expectation that public services will be available online, to be used by customers whenever and wherever they choose. There is an opportunity here to realise significant savings by increasing the number of digital transactions and reducing face to face and telephone transactions.
- 2.4 The programme appreciates, however, that some customers do not have access to the internet for a variety of reasons (affordability, lack of skills, accessibility issues) therefore work will also be required to support these customers to make use of council services. There will continue to be a need for face to face and telephone services, although we expect the demand for these to decrease. There has already been a 10% decrease in face to face transactions over the last 12 months.
- 2.5 Progress to date has been good. Technology is now in place to develop and deliver online forms and payments and to link these to our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. This includes the ability for customers to save and return to incomplete forms, and emails to acknowledge that forms have been received. There are currently 34 services available through the Highland Council website with another 37 in development. In 2014, there were 82000 online transactions (including payments) and progress is well underway towards our target of 10% of transactions taking place online this year.
- 2.6 The launch of the revised Highland Council website has provided a more user-friendly, customer-focused platform to support customers accessing information and services online. The improved function and accessibility has been recognised by a recent Sitemorse assessment and by surveys with customers and community groups. The results of these surveys, and areas for further development of the website, are included under agenda item 18b.

3 Benefits

- 3.1 The benefits of adopting a digital approach to customer engagement are:
 - £1.3m savings over the next 4 years.
 - Increased availability of online services, focusing on customer needs and experience.

- Increased number of customers choosing to interact with the council digitally.
- Consistent processing of customer enquiries using online forms e.g. through customer services face to face / telephone contact.
- Increased efficiency of service delivery and reduced follow-up contact from customers.
- Reduction in costs associated with a reduction in staff as a result of automating and improving the processes that support service delivery.

| 3.2 | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | Total |
|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| Budget Reduction | £370,000 | £340,000 | £240,000 | £350,000 | £1,300,000 |
| FTE Impact | 15.4 | 14.2 | 10.0 | 14.6 | 54.2 |

4 Digital First Programme

4.1 The outcomes of the Digital First Programme will be achieved through the following key workstreams:

4.2 Service Redesign

This project will improve the efficiency of Highland Council services, removing double-keying and automating and moving processes online where possible. Through 15/16, this project will review a number of processes, particularly around benefit entitlement and housing applications, and will launch a customer portal, directly linked to Scottish Government Myaccount, that will improve the user experience of forms, payments and engagement with the Council.

4.3 Channel Shift

This project focuses on encouraging and supporting customers to choose to engage with Highland Council digitally, increasing usage of the online forms and payment options. Key tasks within this project include the creation of a Digital Champions network to raise the profile of digital service delivery within the Council, work with partners on improving digital inclusion, and change management and communications to support digital uptake.

4.4 eServices

This project will deliver an electronic billing system, allowing customers and landlords to access their council tax and non-domestic rates bills, and to access benefits information online. Providing online access to accounts and notifications to customers via email and SMS message will reduce the cost of processing and posting paper documents. Although this project is not formally under Digital First, it is very closely related and will raise the profile of the Council as a digital organisation.

4.5 Payments Project

This 6-month project will review how payments are processed online, by telephone and face to face, with the aim of creating a secure, consistent and replicable process that can be used to take any payments e.g. council tax, bulky uplifts etc.

4.6 2015/16

The following process will be reviewed and improved in 2015/16.

| 2015/16 | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Process | Service |
| Entitlements | Finance |
| Housing Repairs | Community Services |
| Housing Applications | Community Services |
| School enrolments / lets | Care and Learning |
| Community services issues / repairs | Community Services |
| Registration (births, marriages, deaths) | Corporate Development |
| Pre-application advice (high hedges etc) | Development and Infrastructure |

5 Principles

5.1 The following Digital First principles have been developed that will form the basis of the Digital First work going forward.

- All customers will have access to Highland Council's services.
- All new and redesigned processes and services will be delivered digitally with telephone, face to face and paper options to help customers who require support.
- Design of online processes and systems focuses on the customer needs and experience.
- Email / SMS will be used to communicate with customers whenever possible.
- Services will nominate Digital Champions to promote Digital First and highlight opportunities for digital communication.
- Highland Council will work in partnership with other agencies to support customers who find digital engagement challenging.

5.2 ***Members are asked to agree the Digital First Principles.***

6 Digital Inclusion

6.1 While the move to digital services will be welcomed by many, some of Highland Council's customers will find it challenging (and in some cases impossible) to access services online. This may be due to a lack of skills and/or confidence, lack of internet access or device, or a disability. It is important to consider how these customers could be supported to use digital services.

6.2 For those customers who already have digital access, the services will be developed so that customers prefer online services to face to face or telephone and choose to engage with us digitally 40% of the time. For customers who are not currently online, Highland Council is engaging with partners, particularly Citizens Online and High Life Highland, to provide training and support, either helping customers to get online independently or accessing services through telephone, face to face or supported self-service.

6.3 Online services will be provided in addition to the existing face to face and telephone services. Although the premise is to replace paper forms with online forms, paper copies will still be available on request if necessary.

- 6.4 Housing team are proposing a project to look at financial and digital inclusion which will explore options for supporting customers who cannot access Highland Council services. This also links to work on employability, supporting people to find work, and work related to Welfare Reform presented on agenda item 8.

7 Digital Champions

- 7.1 An important element to maximising the benefits from and rolling out Digital First is communication and engagement within the Council. It is vital that all areas of the organisation understand that digital should be the primary method for communication and service delivery, and are aware of the opportunities and support available to achieve that. It is also important that issues, concerns and feedback are gathered from across the Council to support the further strategic development of digital delivery. To achieve this, a network of Digital Champions is proposed.
- 7.2 Internally, services will be asked to nominate Digital Champions who will help provide that engagement by promoting the digital agenda, ensuring any new or revised processes are delivered digitally and representing the views of their services in the development of the digital programme going forward.
- 7.3 Externally facing, Digital Champions within customer services and service points will help promote the availability of online services to colleagues and customers.
- 7.4 It is also proposed that some elected Members should be nominated as Digital Champions to assist with promoting Digital First within the council and wider community. It is suggested there are up to six Member digital champions to ensure that the breadth and range of Highland Council area is represented.
- 7.5 ***Members are asked to nominate up to six elected member digital champions.***

8 Risks

- 8.1 There is a risk that should the digital uptake target of 40% not be achieved, the Programme may not achieve anticipated savings. This risk is being mitigated through the production of a communications plan, the rollout of targeted promotions and the use of a variety of media (including social media) to communicate with customers. Customer services staff will become digital champions and will direct customers to digital channels. This target will be monitored very regularly to ensure that action is taken early.

9 Resource Implications

- 9.1 There is currently a dedicated team working on the Digital First programme, led by a Project Manager and Business Change Manager. Recruitment of two technical business analysts needs to take place in April to continue to support this project. Funding for these posts, on a temporary basis for two years, is requested from the Strategic Change & Development Fund at a total cost of £138,000.
- 9.2 There is also a project board in place to provide governance, sponsored by the

Depute Chief Executive and involving representatives of all the services.

10 Legal Implications

10.1 There are no current or anticipated legal issues.

11 Equalities and Rural Implications

11.1 The availability of online forms is improving the accessibility of Council services for customers particularly in rural areas, allowing them to access forms and services wherever and whenever they choose. The rollout of superfast broadband in the Highlands will support quicker and smoother access to the online services, providing an opportunity to further increase digital uptake.

11.2 The online services are being provided in addition to existing telephone and face to face services, allowing customers who are not currently online or who find online challenging to continue to access council services as they do currently. Digital services will also provide opportunities for some customers with disabilities to access services more easily, making use of accessibility functionality available online.

12 Climate Change / Carbon Clever Implications

12.1 There are no current or anticipated climate change / carbon clever implications

13 Gaelic Implications

13.1 There are no current or anticipated Gaelic implications

14 Recommendations

14.1 Members are asked to

- Agree the Digital First principles
- Agree to nominate up to six Member Digital Champions
- Agree £138,000 from the Strategic Change & Development Fund to fund the cost of two temporary officers to work within the project team.
- Note the outcomes, activity and benefits to be delivered by the Digital First Programme.

Designation:

Depute Chief Executive

Date:

12/2/15

Author:

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