



**Resources and Public Realm
Scrutiny Committee**
27 January 2021

**Report from the Strategic Director
of Customer and Digital Services**

A Review of Digital Online Customer Services in Consideration of the Covid-19 Epidemic

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non-key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt:	Open
No. of Appendices:	Appendix 1 - Citizens Online Report
Background Papers:	Brent Digital Strategy 2019-23
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1.0 Purpose of the Report

1.1 To outline the Brent Digital Strategy 2019-2023, with a particular focus on the digital initiatives to support customer access. To outline how the customer access strand of the strategy is being delivered, progress against it, how Covid has affected delivery and progress, and how vulnerable group are being supported and equalities issues addressed.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 That the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee note the report.

3.0 Detail

What we set out to do

- 3.1 The Brent Digital Strategy 2019-2023 sets out how Brent's ambition to become a truly digital borough will be realised through achieving the dual and interdependent aims of becoming a digital place and a digital council. One of the key benefits set out in the strategy is that "customers are able to transact and participate securely, easily and conveniently in a way that meets their needs"; and one of the key principles is that "we will ensure that our services are accessible to everyone".
- 3.2 Central to the strategy is the desire to provide residents with a quick, easy and consistent experience, however they contact the council, and for it to be faster and simpler for them to access services. We are delivering this through a more user-friendly website where customers will be able to quickly and easily find out about and book and pay for services and a single customer portal where residents can access their accounts and track progress themselves rather than make a phone call.
- 3.3 A good digital customer experience is reliant on residents being able to access a borough-wide digital infrastructure providing instantaneous connectivity, with a greater number of residents getting access to full fibre broadband. Complementing this is the aim to develop a training and education framework that nurtures digital skills and expertise, getting residents support to improve their digital skills and get online and working with the voluntary and community sector to improve their digital infrastructure and skills.
- 3.4 To ensure alignment with other strategies, the themes in the Digital Strategy align with those of the Brent Borough Plan 2019-2023. Additionally, one of the key principles of the Digital Strategy is that we "will embed our digital vision within our policies and strategies including HR, Planning, Regeneration, Employment and Skills and ICT. We will also reflect this in our engagement with the community and models of working with the Community and Voluntary Sector".
- 3.5 Delivery of the Digital Strategy is overseen by the Customer and Digital Board and championed by the Deputy Leader of the Council. The Brent Digital Board is chaired by the Strategic Director of Customer and Digital Services – the digital lead for the Council Management Team. Programme benefits are also reported to the Capital Programme Board,
- 3.6 Brent Council works closely with partner organisations on the delivery of the Digital Strategy. The council is:
 - working very closely with other West London Alliance boroughs to create the optimum conditions to stimulate market investment in West London's digital infrastructure

- working with the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation on Local Full Fibre Network project to build full fibre connections to lighting columns in Park Royal
- working with the Greater London Authority and Transport for London to develop grant funded full fibre roll out projects
- sharing good practice and lessons learnt from digital infrastructure and smart cities work through a pan-London officers' network
- putting wayleaves in place with Community Fibre and Hyperoptic who are building full fibre internet connections to Brent's housing stock. This work is also providing social value, including, connections to community buildings, support around digital skills and employment opportunities
- liaising with voluntary and community sector organisations to understand better digital exclusion and pilot ways of tackling it. For example, we are working with Age UK on a pilot which will look at how best to support older people to prevent social isolation and enable them to better access services online
- working with the GLA on their Covid recovery response
- working closely with Microsoft and our development partners Infosys on the delivery of the digital programme, specifically Microsoft Dynamics related projects

3.7 Brent is a founder member of LOTI (London Office of Technology and Innovation) and has been involved in work on digital inclusion and developing common Internet of Things standards. The council is also a signatory of the Local Digital Declaration.

Where we have got to

3.8 The programme to deliver the digital strategy runs until 2023, but there have been some significant achievements so far in regard to customer access and digital inclusion. The programme has enabled:

- Rapid development and delivery of online systems to support the response to the pandemic including online forms and back end systems for shielding, test and trace visitor logs, discretionary business grants and the resident support fund (Brent funding to help residents that need additional help due to Covid-19).
- Support for a smooth transition to home working following lockdown including working with the Shared ICT service (SICTS) to roll out and support staff in using Teams, supporting work to develop use of Zoom for council meetings, developing and sharing tools and techniques to help managers and staff work effectively from home. In last 90 days (7 Oct 2020 to 4 Jan 2021) there have been 2,993 active users on Teams and 54,534 total meetings. The first public virtual meeting was held at the end of April and between then and mid-November, 69 council meetings have been run virtually. The average number of users logging in remotely to the Brent system is approximately is currently around 2,100 per day.

- Improvement in Brent’s web performance in the Sitemore Local Government league table published in June 2020. Brent’s website is now placed at 54 (up 154 places over the last year), and is second in London. At the same time, significant progress has been made in designing a framework for a new council website, which will be launched in 2021, and progress has also been made to implement the 2018 public sector body accessibility requirements.
- In the last 12 months the recycling and waste chatbot (software that simulates human like conversations with users via text) has had 2,293 users and the numbers have increased during the course of the year
- Improved full fibre to the premises access in Brent, including connections to circa 8,300 social housing properties and free connections rolled out to community assets, including the South Kilburn Hub, SUFRA foodbank, two Family Wellbeing Hubs and tenant meeting rooms.
- Delivered social value gains for residents through the digital infrastructure programme estimated at £2,573,000

3.9 Very recent achievements include:

- A new resident feedback and complaints system went live in November 2020 and allows residents to track the progress of their complaints without phoning the council
- The move to a new “My Account” customer portal in December 2020 allows residents to reset and manage their account and enables Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA). This is part of our ongoing effort to ensure that we keep our customer data safe and secure. MFA is an additional layer of security to ensure the person logging into an online account is who they say they are. This is the first phased of a project which will result in customers being able to access more services in one place with a single account. Since the new MyAccount portal went live on 7 December 2020; over 19,000 residents have registered
- Council Tax and Housing benefits portals went live at the same time, allowing people to manage their council tax and housing benefit at a time that suits them and see live status updates on service requests.

3.10 The Digital Strategy recognises that while many residents would prefer to interact quickly and conveniently with the council via digital channels, there are others who find it difficult to access online services, including those with more complex needs. Community hubs are an integral part of our offer and provide face to face and telephone support to residents who are vulnerable, digitally excluded and have issues cannot be dealt with via a simple transaction.

3.11 In terms of pre-existing channels, in 2020, the council received an average of 18,409 phone calls a month (10.8% increase on same period 2019). 3,546 people visited community hubs (in person or via the phone) during the first three quarters for 2020. During 2020, the website has had 2,006,521 users; 1,952,225 new users and 4,502,322 sessions. It is most used by people under 44 and least used by over 65s. 52,512 emails were received by the Contact

Centre, including Adult Social Care, in 2020. As part of the Digital Programme, we are working to rationalise and improve the forms on the website. In 2020, there were 244,826 unique viewings of forms¹.

- 3.12 Further improvements to the website are planned for 2021 and the new site is scheduled for the summer of 2021. A wide range of user research has taken place over the past few months, despite the challenges of Covid-19. This is being used to inform the development of the improved site. Activities included benchmarking of council websites, Google Analytics data, results from a six-month user experience survey that we ran on our website (over 2,500 responses), feedback from an internal staff survey and the outputs from a number of staff surgery sessions conducted pre-lockdown. We also conducted interviews with Brent frontline staff and reached out to staff residents, Members, landlords and charity partners. In the summer of 2020, we recruited almost 100 external participants, via a shout out in the weekly Your Brent email newsletter. Finally, using the Brent Connects network, we invited local residents to give us feedback in a series of one-to-one video interviews.

Impact of the pandemic

- 3.13 In terms of progress against the Digital Strategy, although there has been some slight slippage as a result of Covid in terms of go live for a small number of projects, significant progress has been made on planned activities alongside a range of additional work to develop forms and systems to support the response to the Pandemic which have supported the council in making grants and other support quickly available and accessible for residents and businesses.
- 3.14 The infrastructure put in place to deliver the programme has made it possible to develop rapidly a number of systems to support the council's response to Covid-19, for example the Covid-19 resident support fund, shielding and inbound calls questionnaire and business grant form. The epidemic has also probably accelerated partnership working as all public sector organisations are confronted with similar challenges and a sense of urgency.
- 3.15 The restrictions in place in response to the Covid outbreak have magnified the importance of ensuring that Brent has effective digital services in place for customers who find themselves suddenly unable to access face-to-face support. Covid has meant the closing of face-to-face services during all three lockdowns. Phones became the preferred mode of customer contact, but there was a general channel shift to digital, with online death registration and death certificates ordered online as an example. From the start of April to the start of November 2020, 1,993 deaths were registered online. Support for the most vulnerable via the hubs has also continued to be provided by phone when face to face services have not been available.

¹ This does not include all forms as some forms come up as webpages when we assess website usage.

- 3.16 In regard to website usage, the figures for 2020 are slightly higher than 2019. There were 1,971,099 users and 1,864,716 new users for 2019, with 4,543,888 sessions. This compares to 2,006,521 users, 1,952,225 new users and 4,502,322 sessions for 2020. It should be noted that Wembley events days typically account for a lot of traffic to the site and the pandemic reduced these, so users accessing the site for Council services are likely to have increased.

Digital inclusion

- 3.17 Digital inclusion has been recognised as a significant issue which has become even more key during the Pandemic. Since before Covid-19, the Digital Programme has been working with Citizens Online to review digital skills and access across the borough and map that against need. The work resulted in a report on digital inclusion in Brent which is available at Appendix 1. In November 2020, the council held a workshop attended by over 80 representatives from the voluntary and community sector to feed back on the recommendations from Citizens Online report and gain views and buy-in for the way ahead.
- 3.18 Following this workshop, the Digital Inclusion Action plan is being developed and it applies across Council teams; CVS organisations; Registered Providers and Health. Its themes are:
- Champions – recruitment; platform / consistency; support for champions; models for remote support; sustainability/funding; support for voluntary sector organisations
 - Bespoke offers – Disability; older people; neurodiversity; coaching
 - Hosted network – good practice; opportunities
 - Service mapping - creation; where it goes; how to maintain it
 - A placed based pilot
 - Access - devices / connections /skills
 - Supporting SMEs
- 3.19 In light of the increased need to support Brent businesses, particularly SMEs, as part of the recovery process, the scope of the Citizens Online work has been widened to include them. The Digital Team is also supporting a project led by the Young Brent Foundation that is looking at inter-generational digital inclusion for residents living in social housing in the Borough.
- 3.20 While the Digital Inclusion Action Plan is being finalised, in response to Covid, the programme had undertaken a series of digital inclusion pilots including:
- CCG/NHS pilot for residents who have complex health needs to ensure they can interact with their GPs digitally
 - Pilot with Age UK for elderly residents
 - Pilot with day care centres to ensure that residents can retain their quality of life in spite of the pandemic

- Working with Citizens Online to roll out devices to residents who have specific learning disabilities

3.21 The Digital Programme was enabled the fibre to the premises (FTTP) coverage in Brent to increase to 25% (8,300 more properties connected) and has supported the development of Digital skills in the borough. The council is developing a digital skills inclusion programme with Microsoft that will provide free training for both staff and residents.

3.22 Currently, with the closure of schools to most pupils it is essential that children who need to learn from home have access to the internet. Schools can secure internet access for some pupils through schemes run by the Department for Education (DfE). However, so that pupils who still need support with internet access for home learning do not fall through the net, we are putting additional arrangements into place for Brent residents. Schools will be able to refer children unable to access the DfE schemes to the Brent Residents' Support Fund. If a home is able to benefit from a Community Fibre, full fibre fixed broadband connection, the family will be provided with one, free of charge, for 12 months. Where properties are not served by Community Fibre, eligible residents will be sent a mi-fi device and unlimited data for a period of 12 months.

4.0 Financial Implications

4.1 An improvement in digital technology and digital customer services requires investment. On 14 October, Cabinet approved Brent's Digital Strategy 2019 - 2023 and the outline business case to support it. Progress on delivery is reported to the Customer and Digital Board and financial benefits are reported to Capital Programme Board quarterly.

5.0 Legal Implications

5.1 Legal implications will be considered for new individual projects that make up the Digital Programme at the appropriate time.

6.0 Equality Implications

6.1 An equality impact assessment (EIA) was complete alongside the Brent Digital Strategy 2019-23. Individual projects within the programme have also undertaken EIAs and accessibility audits have been completed. Equality implications are key to both the customer access and digital inclusion strands of the programme.

7.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders

7.1 Engagement has included two Member Development sessions on Customer Access and Digital, the most recent in December 2020. Members are provided with updates via the Members' bulletin and have also been engaged in specific projects such as the website development project.

REPORT SIGN-OFF

Peter Gadsdon

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