

The background of the slide features a large, light blue outline of the University of Alberta crest. The crest is a shield with a crown on top. The crown has four points, each with a stylized flower. The shield is divided into four quadrants: top-left shows a building, top-right shows a stag's head with a cross on its forehead, bottom-left shows a three-masted sailing ship on water, and bottom-right shows a bird with its wings spread. A banner at the bottom of the shield contains the motto 'ANNE FOR A'.

**Agenda Item 11**

**Council of the Future –  
Digital Communities Project**

Falkirk Council

**Title:** Council of the Future – Digital Communities Project  
**Meeting:** Executive  
**Date:** 5 October 2021  
**Submitted By:** Director of Corporate & Housing Services

**1. Purpose of Report**

1.1 The Digital Communities project is a Council of the Future priority project, established during 2020. It was developed in response to the need to ensure an inclusive approach to digital service delivery, with communities able to access online services and employees able to undertake their work digitally. The project reports to the Innovation Workstream and supports the Council's Corporate Plan priority of Innovation.

**2. Recommendations**

**2.1 It is recommended that the Executive:**

- 1) Note the scope of the Digital Communities project outlined in section 3
- 2) Note the progress made to date and the next steps detailed in section 4
- 3) Agree the objective of moving more services online, using self serve functionality where appropriate, and promoting this option, with the recognition that some citizens will still require direct support from officers
- 4) Agree the savings target set out in paragraph 4.7 and ask the project team to identify further savings as this project develops
- 5) Note the bid that will be made for capital funding to support the work of the project as part of the 2022/23 capital programme

**3. Background**

3.1 The Digital Communities project is a Council of the Future project supporting the Innovation priority of the Council. It is also one of six key ambitions set out in our digital strategy, Digital Falkirk (as agreed by Members in September 2020).

3.2 This is a wide-ranging project and to reflect that, there are four sub-projects focusing on different aspects of delivering our Digital Communities ambitions. The sub-projects are outlined below.

### **Connected Individuals, Households & Communities Sub-Project**

- 3.3 One of the objectives of the project is to minimise and help to ideally eliminate digital exclusion within communities. The Connected Individuals, Households and Communities part of this project is aimed at fulfilling this objective. Digital exclusion can be caused by lack of affordable access to connectivity and devices as well as lack of appropriate digital skills. This sub-project builds on our existing work with community groups and seeks to target support to those who need it most to get online with the appropriate devices and connectivity.

### **Connectivity Sub-Project**

- 3.4 Available and affordable connectivity is essential if we are to minimise digital exclusion in our communities and ensure our employees can work to their full potential. It is also essential for our Connected Falkirk project, ensuring young people have appropriate online access both at school and when they go home. To address this, the connectivity sub-project aims to support the upgrade of connectivity across the Council area, considering other corporate commitments in doing this such as tackling poverty, improving attainment and climate change. There is also a need for the council to move to a self-serve and automated model of service delivery for appropriate services, such as applying for a free school meals/clothing grant, just by way of example. Communities need online access for this to be successful. Scoping work is taking place for potential provision of Wi-Fi connectivity to Council owned properties, for example supported accommodation. The Council can also play a role in signposting to opportunities for support with community connectivity where appropriate such as the Scottish Government Broadband Voucher Scheme.

### **Unified Customer Journey Sub-Project**

- 3.5 Digital Falkirk, our digital strategy, identifies that our customer service arrangements must enable citizens to easily access information and services, engage with the Council and do things for themselves at a time most convenient to them. Our customer services must be designed around our citizens. They must be based on evidence and data. The unified customer journey sub-project is undertaking work to streamline bureaucratic processes that underpin such services. The sub project aims to transform these online services and ensure both ease of access and the same standards of service whichever channel customers choose to use: online, telephone, or face to face. To achieve this, data is being gathered on all customer-facing interactions with a view to providing transformational change to digitally enhance our services, and rationalise the systems utilised within the council.

### **Hybrid Cloud and Modern Workplace Sub-Project**

- 3.6 The Hybrid Cloud and Modern Workplace sub-project aims to modernise the working experience for Falkirk Council employees and the way that we access our systems and data. Over the last few years, the Council has invested in mobile and flexible technology. This has allowed employees to use their desktops, tablets, or laptops remotely to enable Anytime Anywhere working. There is an opportunity to review and change the method by which we achieve mobile working to make it more seamless and be more cost effective. In addition, the adoption of cloud-based technology has changed the role of our data centre and how we access our applications and devices. This presents an opportunity for us to move to a model more suited to modern ways of flexible working using cloud technology. The work we undertake in this sub-project must also support the Council's carbon reduction commitments.
- 3.7 As part of the budget decisions in March 2021, Members also agreed specific funding to appoint a Digital Communities Co-ordinator. This post will support each of the sub projects. It will particularly focus on promoting national connectivity projects for business and the community, and identifying all analogue systems and alarms requiring to be upgraded to digital. The post will also explore the potential for, and benefits of the "Internet of Things" such as smart bins, digital signage, smart sensors and alarms etc.

## **4. Considerations**

- 4.1 A number of the project milestones and actions have been completed. This is however, a long term project with a range of work which still requires to be undertaken if it is to achieve its ambitions and objectives.

### **Achievements to date**

- 4.2 There are a range of successes which have been achieved already, despite this project only being in existence for the past year.
- Engagement has been undertaken with communities to determine how we can support them and improve online accessibility
  - 1428 packages of devices/connectivity and support have been provided to individuals/households across the Falkirk area
  - 714 individuals/households were provided with funding to support them to stay connected during Covid restrictions through our Data and Connectivity top-up fund, available to low-income households - payments were also made to digitally excluded individuals living in temporary accommodation facilities as well as young care leavers (further detail is included at Appendix 1 below)
  - 75 people will receive intensive additional support to get online, delivered by AbilityNet and supported by the Health and Social Care partnership and Community Learning and Development team
  - Options to support provision of connectivity in Council homes are being explored by a multiservice working group, with demonstrator sites identified to test the benefits

- Digitally disadvantaged school pupils struggling for access to technology were identified and a total of 1,500 devices and 600 unlimited data connectivity packs were supplied to support their education by providing them with the tools needed to engage with online learning when schools were closed during lockdown
- Connectivity for the Foundry is now in place
- Back up generator for the Foundry is now in place
- Work has been undertaken on the customer facing systems and digital transactions to assess what we have in place, to what standard and what gaps we have
- 1,318 laptops and 1,838 monitors have been provided to employees to enable effective working from home
- We are moving employees away from using our legacy virtual desktop system, providing more direct access to the Council's systems and applications, improving their ability to work remotely – we aim to complete this for all employees before the end of 2021
- Automation of processes for applying for free school meals and clothing grants, benefits processing and reporting of Anti-Social Behaviour
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- Several education applications have been moved online including pupil admissions, placing requests, education benefits applications, school meals and expense payments (further detail is included at Appendix 2 below)

#### **Future Benefits of the projects**

4.3 There are a number of actions which require to be progressed in the next phase of this project. These include:

- In the short term we will continue to support the provision of devices, connectivity and support to people at risk of digital exclusion across Falkirk with a target of 2000 individuals/household by end of March 2022
- Providing connectivity in some Council owned residential properties to allow us to evaluate the benefits of this approach
- Following on from the AbilityNet project we will develop a proposal to make sure people have access and support to get online, meeting the needs of a range of individuals
- Work will be undertaken to ensure appropriate connectivity for the employees moving to Falkirk Stadium as part of the Office Accommodation project
- A significant development over the next few years will be the transition of our technology from analogue to digital services across all areas of service provision. This includes systems such as fire, intruder & panic alarms, door entry/barrier systems, building management systems and the exploring the possibility of "Internet of Things" e.g. sensors for air quality, flooding alarms, traffic lights, street lighting, smart bins and digital signage.

- A further significant area of work is the enhancement of our online service delivery, linking in with the CCTV, MyFalkirk and Automation projects, to ensure we achieve the online ambitions of the project and continue to improve our online service delivery to provide access for our customers when it suits them best.
- We will also undertake a review of our customer management systems, including those that collate and gather data on customer requests, complaints and information, to ensure these are fit for purpose and make decisions on future service design and delivery based on data
- We will review the IT equipment available in offices to make it more effective for hybrid ways of working when employees require to visit the office using the kit they have for working from home
- We are working to move more of our systems onto cloud-based technology and cloud servers

- 4.4 By undertaking this work, we will be improving the digital services we deliver for and with our communities. Key to this is the move towards self-serve where possible, recognising that some members of our community, will still require face to face support. By facilitating self-serve and improving our offering for those who can, it enables us to free up employee time to support those who are unable to do so or who require additional support.
- 4.5 We also aim to streamline and standardise service requests from customers which will reduce/eliminate the need for customers to make multiple contacts with the Council. Through this work we will aim to provide them with timely responses and updates regarding the progress of their requests. An example of current good practice is when reporting a road defect online, our systems automatically inform customers when the issue has been investigated and then resolved.
- 4.6 This project must also link directly to the work of other projects such as the automation project, the CCTV project, office accommodation project, and importantly with our communities workstream to ensure we are delivering in the way that our communities need us to.
- 4.7 This transition to improved digital services, self-serve and better online accessibility will support the delivery of c£145k of savings in 2022/23 financial year, identified through this project (subject to the impact of any future capital investment decisions as set out in paragraph 5.1). These initial savings are reflected in the Medium Term Financial Plan of our Business Plan. We aim to identify further savings as this project develops. These savings are linked to a reduction of 5 FTE in Customer and Business Support in the delivery of services which can be achieved through improved online and digital services. It must be stressed that all staff reductions are being made on a completely voluntary basis through the use of vacancy management and voluntary severance.
- 4.8 Whilst savings have been identified, it must be stressed that the digital services being delivered as a result of this work will improve the services currently on offer.

## Measures of Success

4.9 Over the course of this project, we aim to deliver on a number of key indicators including the following, in the initial years:

- 2,000 households who were digitally excluded, now having online access through the provision of a device, connectivity and support to get online
- 500 individuals/households being supported to stay connected online through the provision of a £25 top up payment for those on low income
- 3,300 employees to be moved off virtual desktops and on to direct access to Council applications and systems
- 100% of our Council service delivery processes that are capable of being delivered online to be available online over the course of this project (subject to resources to be available to achieve this)

## 4.10 Milestone Plan

Milestone Description	Due date
Complete 1st phase of engagement with the communities	28/02/2021
Ensure 500 individuals/households supported with cost of staying connected during pandemic restrictions	31/05/2021
2000 digitally excluded households from Falkirk online (In addition to devices delivered through Connected Falkirk)	01/07/2022
Evaluated the impact of provision of Wi-Fi in council properties on well-being and prepare a report with recommendations for the way forward	31/12/2021
Complete corporate connectivity to block 4	30/09/2021
Commissioning of infrastructure for block 4 - e.g. power, data, generators	30/09/2021
Identity/gather data on all customer facing transactions/interactions	30/07/2021
100% rollout of Zscaler completed to all users in Falkirk Council - Block 4	30/09/2021
Physical Kit Deployment for Council Offices Modern workplace development complete at the Foundry.	30/09/2021
Deliver and adopt the 'Zero Trust Network Architecture' to all staff by introducing a cloud-based technology to enhance our network capability	30/09/2021
Provide recommendations regarding rationalisation of all CRM systems utilised within the council	31/03/2022
The move of the data centre from Municipal Buildings to block 4	31/12/2022

## **5. Implications**

### **Financial**

- 5.1 A bid was made for capital funding in 2021 but due to the capital programme being over-subscribed, this funding was not agreed. A further bid will be made in 2022/23 for connectivity for communities. The bid will include further provision of Wi-Fi connectivity in communities and corporate connectivity requirements. A further report detailing the financial requirements for this work will be forthcoming. Any revenue costs associated with capital borrowing may need to be funded from the project savings.
- 5.2 With regard to the revenue budget, Members will note the savings identified at paragraph 4.7. It must be recognised however, that the main benefits of this project are transformational, enabling our communities to be online and to have increased and improved access to online service delivery, where this is possible. It will also improve the ability of our workforce to deliver their jobs in a mobile and flexible way.
- 5.3 Addressing digital exclusion may require further revenue funding to support the ongoing costs of providing connectivity in Council owned properties and to extend the provision of support with developing digital skills, particularly for those who need the most support. Information on the revenue costs and benefits of the above approaches is under development.

### **Resources**

- 5.4 Resources are required from the Housing & Communities, Technology & Infrastructure, Innovation & Digital, PMO and Customer & Business Support teams, to manage and deliver on the objectives of this project. All Services of the Council will require to be involved in the development of improved online service delivery. An additional Digital Communities Co-ordinator is in the process of being appointed following the provision of funding for this post by Council in March 2021.

### **Legal**

- 5.5 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

### **Risks / Dependencies**

- 5.6 A number of risks have been identified for this project.
- Increasing expectations within our communities on how far the Council as an individual organisation can go to address digital exclusion, and a risk that we are unable to meet such expectations (could be for a variety of reasons but most likely to be linked to available funding)
  - Insufficient funding for the project, due to the pressures on the capital programme and potential ongoing impact on revenue budget
  - Insufficient capacity to deliver what we have set out to achieve due to other priority areas of work



- Limited engagement by services on supporting the work to improve online service provision, due to other pressures on them or an unwillingness to change processes
- Increasing revenue costs for cloud-based services
- Availability of IT hardware due to the current global shortage of such equipment

These risks will be kept under review and monitored across the lifetime of the project. Some of these risks may change or be removed as a result of this.

### **Equalities**

- 5.7 Equality of access to connectivity has never been more important for keeping us connected to friends and family, and the ability to learn, work, and access public services. An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment is in progress which highlights the positive impact that this project has, and will increasingly have, on those in poverty and those who currently have difficulty accessing services. This is in line with Elected Member expectations set out in member workshops last year which brought out digital inequality matters within communities.

### **Sustainability/Environmental Impact**

- 5.8 The work being done to improve online service delivery has benefits in carbon reduction, potentially reducing the number of visits some of our citizens will require to make to Council offices, reducing travel related climate implications. There are also similar carbon reduction implications for employees, with the project enabling more working from home (where possible). The move to cloud technology for a number of our systems also has added benefits, reducing the carbon impact of our data centre.

## **6. Conclusions**

- 6.1 This report provides information on the progress made with the Digital Communities Council of the Future project and how it supports our Innovation ambition.

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Date: 14.09.21

**Appendices:**

**Appendix 1: Case Study - Combatting the growing problem of digital exclusion**

**Appendix 2: Case Study - Improving our systems, processes & data management and reducing bureaucracy.**

**List of Background Papers: None**

## Appendix 1: Case Study - Combatting the growing problem of digital exclusion

<b>Case study name</b>
<b>Combatting the growing problem of digital exclusion</b>
<b>Aim</b>
To help reverse a catastrophe of lost education, inability to access to services and unequal opportunity for our poorest by digitally enabling those in need.
<b>What we did</b>
<p>When the UK first went into lockdown, many people were confined to their home without the tools or resources needed to keep in touch with friends and family nor engage in home working or home schooling.</p> <p>Learning from the first lockdown highlighted the need to help combat digital exclusion. The second national lockdown then led to the creation of the Fairer Falkirk's Data and Connectivity top-up plan.</p> <p>Our idea was to reach out to community organisations and work alongside them to provide people who needed it with a £25 payment to help with the costs of staying connected while restrictions were in place.</p> <p>Community and public sector organisations referred digitally excluded individuals to the Fairer Falkirk team via a short and simple online form. The team then checked eligibility, using Council Tax Reduction as the eligibility criteria.</p> <p>This allowed us to verify low-income households, in line with the Council's charges and concessions policy. The team then contacted individuals to take their details and arrange payment.</p> <p>Community organisations responded in droves - without their efforts the project would have been unachievable.</p> <p>Community Organisations including Keeping Larbert and Stenhousemuir Beautiful and Barnardo's and Tamfourhill Community Centre made hundreds of referrals between them, as well as public sector organisations such as NHS Forth-Valley and a variety of primary and secondary schools across Falkirk.</p>
<b>Achievements</b>
<p>From 1 March to 30 April payments were made to 669 digitally excluded individuals/households. This included 117 referrals from schools across the Falkirk Council area.</p> <p>Payments were also made to individuals living in temporary accommodation facilities in Falkirk as well as young care leavers.</p> <p>Some individuals who received a top-up payment in March were re-referred for a second payment in April, highlighting digital exclusion is an ongoing issue.</p>

In total, the Fairer Falkirk and Communities team processed approximately 25 data referrals per day which amounted to a total of £17,625.

### **Impact**

Overwhelmingly positive feedback throughout the duration of the project, with recipients saying how grateful they were for this funding.

One individual spoke of their increasing inability to pay for broadband. The £25 top-up payment would go towards paying her monthly broadband package which totalled £34.95. Whilst cheaper broadband packages are available, those cheaper packages are from companies that aren't well connected in her area. She said for her it's a choice between slightly more affordable broadband with an unreliable connection or more costly broadband but with a reliable connection that enables her children to participate in home learning.

Another individual was quite emotional about the payment and what it would mean to him. He said that his phone regularly runs out of money which means he is unable to keep in touch with his daughters as often as he'd like. Whilst he said his daughters are quite good at phoning him when he has no credit in his phone, he felt that simply not having the choice to contact them himself whenever he wanted was upsetting.

### **Next steps**

Given the successful impact of this fund, we will continue to explore ways to tackle digital exclusion with targeted interventions through our Digital Communities priority Council of the Future project.

We will also look to re-establish the data top up fund should the Falkirk area experience further level 4 restrictions and/or school closures.

## Appendix 2: Case Study - Improving our systems, processes & data management and reducing bureaucracy.

<b>Case study name</b>
Improving our systems, processes & data management and reducing bureaucracy.
<b>Aim</b>
Implement customer focused digital improvements to not only reduce bureaucracy within schools, but also food insecurity.
<b>What we did</b>
<p>By working in partnership with the Improvement Team and Revenue &amp; Benefits Team, Children's Services have embraced digital transformation, moving a number paper-based process online.</p> <p>This has removed red tape and made it easier for parents and carers to access services and support at a time that suits them best.</p> <p>Processes that have been taken online include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Pupil admissions and placing requests.</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Education benefits applications</a> (free school meals, footwear and clothing grant &amp; education maintenance allowance).</li> <li>• <a href="#">School meals and expenses payments.</a></li> </ul>
<b>Achievements</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the MyFalkirk portal provides a single point of access for our customer to access our digital services.</li> <li>• Approximately 1,800 children per year are now enrolled at school using the online process.</li> <li>• The introduction of the online application process for education benefits has supported the increased uptake of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Footwear and clothing grant – 3,846 awards in 2017/18 to 5,287 at present.</li> <li>○ Free school meals – 3,136 awards in 2017/18 to 4,874 at present.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Where required, documentary evidence supporting applications is now scanned by the applicant removing the requirement for paper copies, handling and transportation.</li> <li>• School meals payments and expense payments can now be made online by parents 24/7, 365 days per year. As well as supporting faster payment, this removes the need for parents/carers to find cash on a daily basis and helps them plan their monthly expenditure.</li> <li>• Work support the Council's digital ambitions as laid down in <a href="#">Digital Falkirk.</a></li> </ul>
<b>Impact</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey data collected from online transactions indicates the majority of people using our digital processes approve of these.</li> <li>• The cashless catering system removes the stigma associated with eligibility of free school meals as pupils are not identified as eligible in class or in the dining room.</li> <li>• Online admissions helps us make quicker decisions regarding resource management such as workforce planning, class configuration and capacity</li> </ul>

assessment. The use of data also helps us reduce the risk of fraudulent applications by validating residency status with other council systems.

- Transforming to digital means we now match data held on school systems against Council Tax and Housing Benefit systems to reduce the requirement for individuals to actually apply for benefits by:
- Passporting the award of education benefits to eligible individuals
- Auto-awarding the annual rollover of education benefits.
- Processing direct payments to provide additional financial support to qualifying pupils throughout the pandemic.

### Next steps

In 2021/22:-

- We will continue to collaborate with colleagues in the Fairer Falkirk and other Council Services to reduce the impact of poverty by maximising the uptake of education benefits.
- We are currently working with colleagues in the Procurement Team and Income Management to implement the use of Smart Payment Cards in schools. This will:
  - Support the reduction of bureaucracy in schools by enabling more online purchasing.
  - Increase the purchasing data available to inform procurement strategy.
  - Reduce the demand for cash handling in schools.
- The school meals payment system will be developed to allow payment to be made for attending breakfast clubs. Not only will this reduce cash handling in schools, it will support our COVID-19 recovery plan for the reopening of breakfast clubs (17 May 2021).
- We are undertaking a review of Devolved School Management which we will use to identify further opportunities to reduce bureaucracy by adopting a digital approach.