![Herefordshire Council logo]

Report to Scrutiny Management Board

Herefordshire Council's Digital, Data and Technology Strategy
26 March 2025

1. Introduction

The Herefordshire Council Digital Data and Technology Strategy 2024-2028 aims to transform the council into a digital-first organisation. It will support the delivery of the ambitions in the Council Plan 2024-2028 and is inextricably linked with other key strategies such as Customer Services, Workforce, and Transformation. The strategy focuses on modernising services and ways of working through new digital capabilities, enhancing data use, and improving customer and staff experiences.

2. Importance of the DDaT Strategy

The DDaT strategy is crucial for several reasons:

1. **Modernisation**: It aims to streamline and improve core technology platforms, enabling staff to access ICT systems from any device and location, ensuring solutions are well-integrated, highly available, and protected by layered security.

2. **Adaptability**: The strategy and its associated operational technical roadmap are reviewed and updated annually to incorporate new technologies and digital initiatives, allowing the council to adapt quickly to changes or pressures in the budget and financial plans.

3. **Customer Experience**: By digitalising services and customer journeys, the council will better meet residents' changing expectations for online access and automated services, making it easier for residents and businesses to interact with the council at their convenience.

3. Strategic Aims of the DDaT

- Digital for All: Benefits everyone, including residents, businesses, and communities.
- One Digital: Promotes joined up working for efficiency and improved customer experience.
- Digital by Design: Encourages digital services while not excluding non-digital users.
- Digitally Innovative: Fosters a culture of innovation through digital tools.
- Safe Digital: Prioritises security and resilience in digital developments.
- Transparent Digital: Adheres to ethical principles and makes decision-making accessible.
- Innovative Digital: Embraces new technologies and an agile approach to service delivery.
- Digital Foundations: Ensures the necessary technology, governance, and skills are in place.
- Data is Key: Uses data as a valuable asset for informed decision-making and strategic planning.

As the council enters year two of this four-year strategy, maintaining the focus on these aims is crucial for achieving the desired outcomes and transforming Herefordshire Council into a modern, digital-first organisation that is fit for the future.

4. **Strategy Deliverables – year 1 achievements**

<u>Microsoft</u>

We have successfully migrated most of Herefordshire Council staff's devices to the latest Microsoft software, including Windows 11 and M365 Apps for Enterprise. This upgrade supports our staff in their roles as now they have enhanced collaboration opportunities and devices with strengthened defences against cyber-attacks.

In accordance with our DDaT philosophy of a cloud-first approach, we have begun migrating departmental data from our on-premise storage area network (SAN) to the M365 cloud. This transition allows our workforce to collaborate securely in real-time, both internally and with external stakeholders and partner agencies. Additionally, migrating data to the M365 cloud has improved our data retention management, ensuring better business continuity in the event of a network outage or cyber-attack, as staff can access data without logging onto the network. Upon completion of this migration programme later this year, we anticipate significant cost savings by avoiding the need to spend on the following items as these capabilities are included with our M365 Licence costs:

Description	Cost savings per annum	One off savings
MaaS (Mobile device management system)	£30k	-
SCCM – (Devices and software deployment system)	£64k	-
Replacement costs of SAN Hardware (To accommodate Data being held on the Councils network)	-	£100K
Exchange on Premises (The cost to run Outlook form servers on the Councils network)	-	£313K
Egress Software (This software was required to encrypt emails)	£24k	-

We have maximised our investment in M365 licensing by implementing Teams Voice for both internal and external voice calls, thus avoiding the need to renew our previous contract with another third-party supplier.

The introduction of the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy has resulted in cost savings, as some staff have returned their corporate mobile phones and utilise their personal devices to fully access M365 capabilities.

We have also transitioned to the latest Microsoft endpoint and app management system, Intune. This platform enables us to issue new laptops that can be set up with zero ICT touch, using OEM Autopilot, providing cost avoidance by eliminating the need to outsource the initial setup to a third party.

Artificial intelligence

In line with our proactive approach to digital transformation, Herefordshire Council has already begun considering and exploring the potential role of artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing our service delivery, even before the recent government announcement urging Central and Local Government departments to explore the adoption of AI for service improvements.

To ensure responsible and ethical use of AI, we have introduced an AI guidance policy for our staff and councillors and established an AI ethics and governance board. This board is tasked with assessing potential AI products that could support and enhance our service delivery and ensuring ethical implementation of a range of technologies.

As part of our digital transformation, we have launched pilot programmes for two generative AI products designed to support our staff in their roles.

Firstly, forty staff members from our social care teams will pilot Magic Notes, a secure and innovative tool developed to accurately transcribe meetings and create initial draft write-ups.

Secondly, sixty staff members from various departments will pilot Microsoft's flagship AI tool, M365 Copilot. M365 Copilot is an AI-powered productivity tool that integrates with M365 apps such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Teams, providing real-time intelligent assistance to our staff.

Comprehensive training was provided to ensure our staff were well-equipped to use these tools, with continuous support available throughout.

The Magic Notes pilot will continue until early May, while the M365 Copilot pilot will extend until the autumn. We will evaluate these products during their pilot phases, collecting feedback and analytics to measure their effectiveness.

We were successful in obtaining funding from Microsoft to facilitate the implementation of these AI pilots within the Council.

Corporate Network and Wi-Fi

We have upgraded our corporate network at Council sites and replaced equipment that was nearing end of life. These improvements have strengthened our network reliability and increased our resilience against potential cyber-attacks.

We have also upgraded our corporate Wi-Fi at Council sites and public Wi-Fi at libraries. The newly installed equipment provides enhanced coverage and increased levels of security to prevent unauthorised login attempts onto our corporate Wi-Fi network.

Digital Factory

Herefordshire Council have been working closely with the Hoople Digital Team to improve collaborative ways of working across both organisations, and we are in the first iteration of working as part of a newly formed 'Digital Factory'.

To date this has evolved supporting the transformation programme in reviewing our processes and creating an improved digital offer across pathways completed to date. An example of this is the successful build and implementation of an online system to register a birth, death or marriage, and an online ceremony planner to manage payments and ceremony arrangements.

5. **Impact of the Strategy on organisational performance and intelligence**

In the first year of the strategy, we have procured and begun the implementation of a performance management system to record KPI data and delivery plan updates away from spreadsheets and into a centralised and fully audited system. This enables the monitoring of KPIs to be shared among staff at all levels in close to real-time insights into how the council is performing. This intelligence will allow for quicker responses to some key issues, timely course correction, and ongoing performance tracking, leading to sustained improvements.

A GDPR compliance project within the performance team has commenced to ensure that our reporting complies with data protection legislation. A key element of the project is the setting up of security policies to eliminate any vulnerabilities in using data visualisation tools, such as, PowerBI. This project will support a long-term approach to minimise risk of data breaches.

A Data Lead has been recruited to work on our data infrastructure and ensure that it is fit for purpose, particularly for statutory data returns to meet our legal obligations and to respond to data requests for FOIs in a timely manner. Further work is required in this area, and we are currently scoping the recruitment of a second Lead for resilience. This data infrastructure will enable the organisation to have confidence in the data, with particular focus on social care. The concern that we are addressing was mentioned in the Ofsted Monitoring Report in February 2024, and significant progress in this area has been made. Data reliability and accuracy is key for the organisation's evidence-based decision-making, both at strategic and operational level.

The DDaT strategy outlines our commitment to utilising modern digital tools and the latest software to support our staff in their roles. The recent migration from Office 2016 to M365 Office has equipped Herefordshire Council with the most productive and up-to-date versions of M365 Office applications. This transition enhances collaboration opportunities through MS Teams, enabling staff to work on the same documents in real time.

Currently, sixty staff members are piloting M365 Copilot, an AI-powered productivity tool that integrates with M365 apps such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Teams, providing real-time intelligent assistance. This pilot will continue until the autumn, at which point we will evaluate its effectiveness. We anticipate that this technology will deliver operational improvements to Herefordshire Council, similar to the benefits experienced by other councils across the UK. Overall, the transition to M365 Office and the introduction of M365 Copilot have resulted in improved organisational performance.

6. **Strategic Contributions to wider Organisational Ambitions**

Cloud Hosting

The DDaT strategy sets out our commitment to adopting a Cloud-first approach and utilising Cloud applications (not hosted on the Herefordshire Council network) wherever feasible and economically viable. This shift has resulted in numerous benefits, including:

- A reduction in CO2 emissions and a decrease in the Council's electricity consumption.
- Significant savings and efficiencies related to the maintenance and support of physical hardware and its replacement costs.

By adhering to a Cloud-first policy and utilising Software as a Service (SaaS) products, we also leverage the built-in security features these models offer. This also allows us to benefit from the manufacturers' substantial investments in securing our data and their products.

Additionally, our transition to Microsoft 365 (M365) has enabled us to avoid renewing contracts for certain products and services, as these are now included within our M365 licence.

We are increasingly providing digital options for customers, allowing them to access services and information outside of traditional office hours, thereby reducing the need to contact the council directly. For example, digital forms enable residents to make licence requests, seek assistance, or book appointments for Registrar services online.

We have digitised several processes and back-office services to facilitate faster service delivery. This has led to a reduction in the time required to request and receive a blue badge or to apply for and be issued various council licences.

Through digital enhancements such as the integration of Zoom software in our Contact Centre, we aim to reduce the volume of face-to-face interactions and telephone enquiries. By leveraging technology to provide answers and direct users appropriately, we can achieve efficiency savings. This development will also allow us to focus our in-person support on customers who require face-to-face or telephone assistance, and reallocate resources to other council services, ultimately ensuring a speedier response in those areas.

Through piloting AI products such as Magic Notes and Microsoft 365 Copilot, we expect to realise time-saving efficiencies in tasks performed by our staff.

The DDaT Strategy outlines a clear framework for the allocation of resources, ensuring that the Council's digital initiatives are well-funded and supported. The strategy also includes an operational technical roadmap that sets out the mechanisms and components for delivering the Council's vision. This roadmap is reviewed and updated annually to adapt to new technologies and digital initiatives, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently

The strategy also supports the development of digital skills among staff, enabling them to leverage modern digital tools and software to enhance their productivity. By engaging with users, it has highlighted the varying levels of digital skills within the Council. Consequently, we are actively designing a skills programme to standardise ICT competencies among our staff. We will be developing a comprehensive training plan to ensure everyone reaches the same level of proficiency. The upskilling of our staff is a priority for the council and was exercised to support the pilot programme for M365 Copilot, which involved thorough training for staff to ensure they are well-equipped to use the new AI tool to assist them with their daily tasks.

7. **Next steps in implementation**

Customer Transformation

Digital is a key enabler in terms of delivering an improved customer offer across council services. As we embark on the next phase of our transformation journey, we are building a digital foundation with a new content management system, telephony platform and AI technology which will present exciting new opportunities and enable us implement a digital-first 24/7 customer service, whilst also adhering to our commitment to provide excellent customer service to our customers who need to or who choose to contact us via telephone or face to face.

Digital Factory

The Digital Factory will support our transformation by providing a prioritisation mechanism managed by Herefordshire Council, and the digital skills and resource needed to implement customer and digital transformation.

Website

We are currently implementing a new content management system (CMS), which serves as the foundation for our website. This new CMS will lay the groundwork for significant improvements, aimed to be completed by September 2025.

We will then be able to commence a process of reviewing the overall design, functionality, and content of our current website to replace it with one that provides enhanced user journeys and provides a superior customer experience, offering our communities 24/7 access to various services. The new website will facilitate self-help and self-signposting for residents, making services available to them 24/7 through the use of AI, including chatbots, to assist with queries.

Furthermore, the updated website will adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 regulations, improving both accessibility and usability.

We will continue to digitalise our processes, enabling enquiries to be submitted via forms on the new website, thereby streamlining interactions and improving efficiency.

Telephony – Contact Centre

We will enhance the customer experience for our residents by implementing Zoom software into our Contact Centre to assess if they could be signposted to a digital solution for their enquiry or to navigate their call to our contact centre team. This software will also support our call centre staff by utilising AI to transcribe calls, suggest potential solutions, and allow staff to focus on the conversation without the need for extensive notetaking. The Zoom product assists with call wrap-up notes, as they are already transcribed, and provides feedback on customer interactions through sentiment analysis.

To improve our service delivery, the Zoom product offers enhanced reporting capabilities, allowing us to analyse key data such as the top 10 reasons residents contact the council's call centre. This insight will enable us to identify recurring issues within particular services or opportunities to direct residents to digital solutions, thereby reducing the necessity for them to call the council.

AI

If the piloting of AI in the Magic Notes and MS Copilot solutions prove to be successful, we will continue to assess alternative AI products to assist our staff in their roles and consider how we can further use this technology to improve service delivery and alleviate any bottlenecks and delays. Our staff are our experts and as such will know and have ideas about the best technological solutions to support them in service delivery. We are in the process of developing an organisational engagement programme so that we can capture these ideas and explore the solutions we have available. Any future products and AI use cases would require approval from the Council's AI Ethics and Governance board, and full staff training and support will be provided on how to use the AI product.

Social Care Digitalisation

We will be upgrading our social care case management system, Mosaic, to the latest version 24.1. This new version offers a more user-friendly interface, making it easier for our social care staff to navigate and use the system effectively. Additionally, it includes advanced reporting and analytics tools, which provide valuable insights into service delivery and performance. Another key advantage is that it will enable the council to introduce an Access Community Gateway portal, which can house digital forms for our residents and partners to complete. These forms can then be directly integrated into the Mosaic system if necessary.

Public Realm

ICT are supporting the programmes and ICT workstreams required to facilitate the council's vision to design and deliver new public realm services that are fit for the future, embracing technology and digital innovation. This includes transferring and procuring new ICT systems to support the new public realm services, as well as designing the ICT infrastructure to support and host them.

IoT – Internet of Things

We will be undertaking an evaluation to assess the feasibility of leveraging technology opportunities provided by the Internet of Things (IoT). IoT refers to a network of interconnected devices that communicate and exchange data with each other over the internet, utilising 4G or 5G SIM cards that operate on mobile phone technology.

The IoT technologies under consideration at Herefordshire Council include:
- Fly-tipping prevention cameras that utilise AI.
- Smart road gritting solutions.
- Smart bins to enhance the efficiency of waste collection routes.
- IoT-enabled streetlights, allowing remote management of brightness and lighting schedules, thereby delivering energy efficiency and maintenance cost savings.

Microsoft

We will make further use and drive additional value out of our investment in M365 by:
- Providing our workforce with additional M365 apps not typically included with MS Office Suites, such as MS Lists, Shifts, and Whiteboard.
- Introducing MS Power platform opportunities by using Power Apps which can be used by council staff to develop a variety of applications that streamline processes, improve efficiency, and enhance service delivery.
- Replacing our intranet with one built using the latest Microsoft technology Modern SharePoint and Viva Engage, to support our workforce and facilitate their roles. Transitioning to this contemporary platform will enable the introduction of chatbots to assist staff and make the intranet an accessible source of information for our AI products to refer to for information and solutions.

Cyber Security systems and CCTV

We will be upgrading our CCTV solution to allow improved measures and new technology to be implemented to continue to safeguard council data, systems, and services from the increasing likelihood of cyber threats.

Data and reporting

Like many other councils and organisations, Herefordshire faces the challenging task of aligning data from various ICT systems to present it in a unified view. By leveraging data technology tools, we aim to collect and synthesise evidence to understand customer needs comprehensively and transform data into valuable information. We will be reviewing products that would allow us to view our data via a single pane of glass, which will enable us to harness our data effectively. By extracting data from our systems and transforming it into valuable information, we can use this evidence to gain insights, make informed decisions, and adjust policies accordingly. This ensures that our data is reliable, accurate, and provides a single source of truth.

We will be improving our reporting using new products such as InPhase and utilising PowerBI to create reports and dashboards. This will allow us to visualise and analyse our data more effectively, leading to enhanced decision-making and service delivery.

Cloud Hosting

We will be introducing a new corporate mapping system as currently we have various GIS systems hosted on our network. By transitioning to a new cloud-hosted GIS system, we will have a modern solution that can integrate with any future systems we adopt. This change will also provide financial savings by consolidating multiple GIS products into a single, cohesive solution.

Our Enterprise Resource Planning [ERP] system supports many of the critical administrative processes within Herefordshire Council including Finance, Payroll and HR management. The system was procured by Herefordshire Council in the financial year 2010/11 and the underlying technology hosting the system is now approaching the end of its supported life, with supplier support ceasing completely in 2026. We will be moving this ERP system on to a cloud hosted solution to continue using this product and receiving the necessary support on its functionality from its supplier Unit 4.

The replacement of our Planning and Regulatory system is continuing with a go live date of 31st March 2026. The replacement system will be cloud hosted and will deliver multi-Directorate benefits, whilst replacing a business-critical system that is about to reach the end-of-life stage.

New WAN solution

We have entered into a new agreement for the provision of a Wide Area Network (WAN) solution for the Council. This agreement will provide faster and more resilient network connections between our sites by utilising modern WAN technology as well as provide cost savings. Additionally, the new WAN equipment will increase our resilience against potential cyber-attacks.

Appendix

Term	Definition
Cloud	Cloud hosting is a service that allows organizations to store and manage their data, applications, and resources on remote servers

	accessed via the internet, providing scalability, flexibility, and cost-efficiency
SaaS	Software as a Service is a cloud-based software delivery model where applications are hosted by a provider and accessed by users over the internet, as opposed to a server residing on the Council's network
BYOD	Bring Your Own Devices
M365	Microsoft 365
DDaT	Digital Data and Technology
SAN	Storage Area Network
WAN	Wide Area Network
AI	Artificial intelligence
CMS	Content management system
MS	Microsoft
IoT	Internet of Things
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning [ERP]
WCAG	The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 are a set of recommendations aimed at making web content more accessible to people with disabilities. These guidelines cover a wide range of disabilities, including blindness, low vision, deafness, hearing loss, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity, and cognitive limitations