REPORT TO: Corporate Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 21 January 2025

REPORTING OFFICER: Director - ICT & Support Services

PORTFOLIO: Corporate Services

SUBJECT: ICT Programme Update

WARD(S)   Borough Wide

1.0   **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1   To outline the Department's Key programmes of work.

2.0   **RECOMMENDATION: That the Board supports the ongoing programme of work.**

3.0   **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1   The delivery of M365 has been a colossal undertaking, delivering a step change in the way the authority delivers technology to the end user. This undertaking has also crossed over the Customer Journey Transformation project, delivering positive change to the end user experience linked to this change over to the Microsoft cloud. This programme's Phase 1 objective is the full transformation, from legacy telephony and contact centre systems to modern, integrated communication and data infrastructure.

3.2   This includes decommissioning outdated hardware, implementing new cloud-based contact centre solutions, building a secure on-premise open-source hybrid data Lakehouse, and delivering a business intelligence platform that supports the Halton operational and strategic and business continuity goals.

3.3   Successful completion of these works will enhance both internal and external communications, improve data-driven decision-making, and provide a scalable foundation for future growth with a clear foundation for further transformational project deliveries, as the technologies become embedded within the environment.

        The Business Analysis programme is underway (Q2) and delivering a considerable benefit in outcomes/savings opportunities to the Transformation team through the work undertaken to date.

The Contact Centre solution procurement and delivery programme, with the Data Lakehouse project deployment starting also in Q3, is well underway.

3.4 The procurement and delivery of the MDR cyber security management systems are now in place with the security team refining and deploying systems and services in line with the supplier's recommendations. This will be an ongoing set of requirements as the cyber security space evolves and changes to deal with the ever-changing threat landscape.

3.5 The IT security team have linked up with Emergency Planning and an event took place in November to cover the cyber essentials in the case of an all-out attack, rendering the technology we expect to be available – 'all off'. DR and BCM was the focus of the event with attendees from all directorates now realising the impact of an 'all off' IT loss.

3.6 The Customer Journey transformation programme linked to the IT Digital Halton strategy outlines a comprehensive approach to enhancing the full customer journey using personalised web portals, chatbots, mobile technologies, social media integration, and the latest AI and chat technologies.

The goal is to seamlessly link the authority's contact centre and shops with these technologies, improving both face-to-face and digital customer experiences, while ensuring accessibility for all, including those with limited access to technology.

This strategy will also integrate with existing CRM, new service platform technologies and Office 365 technologies to improve internal and external client interactions from contact to resolution.

Digital poverty remains an issue within Halton as it does in many areas across the Northwest. New ways of interacting with this client base, possibly through social media in part, will be part of the customer journey programme, but the shops remain an essential aspect of the front door into the Council for many, with footfall increasing along with violent incidents and abuse towards the staff.

3.7 This programme of work will also be linked to a newly agreed partnership with NHS led Halton Health Hubs – discussions have taken place to evaluate the options for a presence within the new Runcorn Old Town hub and also to offer an NHS presence within the HBC locations. The management within this area are discussing options to increase the number of Council services within the locations, bringing services into the community on a face-to-face basis. Digital poverty and low digital skills mean that not all interactions can be digital.

3.8   We can never escape a conversation over IT at the moment without the mention of AI.

With the development of the centralised Data Lakehouse technologies managed and organised data will become more amenable to the application of generative AI (Artificial Intelligence). Generative AI models are trained on substantial amounts of data, and the quality of the data can have a significant impact on a model's performance.

Properly organised data is easier for the model to process and learn from, thus leading to better results. A well-organised dataset will make it easier for each LLM (Large Language)/ML (Machine Learning) model to learn the patterns that distinguish diverse types of data, which will lead to accurate output.

As we move to the delivery of on-premise containerised AI models these will maintain a clear security stance and allow the development of these models to become secure and effective partners within the thousands of internal business processes the authority manages.

Together with the delivery of front of house services, such as a fully interactive Web, Mobile and Social Media interfaces linked to processes driven by enhanced resident engagement, expanded AI capacity within our CRM Halton will start to deliver pro-active problem solving (self-help), improved customer experience and response times.

4.0   POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1   No policy implication as this programme's objectives are primarily focused upon supporting the key objectives set out within the corporate plan, supporting key delivery requirement throughout departments and directorates.

5.0   FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1   This mobility revolution is driving our personal and business lives. We expect to be no longer tethered to a desk or a sofa; we expect our mobile devices to interact and transact anywhere.

5.2   How these operational and client interactions are supported and elevated to an acceptable and affordable level is a considerable change in the way Halton transacts, linked to a considerable on-going investment in:

- Cloud, Data Centre, Service Platforms, M365, 3rd Party Software Applications.

- Zero Trust – internet managed corporate devices (The new Dell Laptops).

- Data and Analysis, - Centralised Data Management and Reporting Resource

- Live reporting for senior management, officers and members.

- AI and Cognitive technologies.

- Personalisation – Front of house as well as internal.

5.3 We are a Government body like so many others edging closer to an ever-changing environment of financial pressures. As a local authority the external pressures placed upon our services are immense across all sectors of our delivery capability.

So how do we focus limited resources, in terms of delivering digital capability, that isn't just about money but more about employed/deployed people and skills?

Improving and enhancing internal/external process and customer experience is one of the critical business outcomes from digitalisation, this will release the savings long term.

Reducing cost structures and automating work, particularly given our financial pressures, there needs to be a firm reliance on automation, particularly intelligent automation, to digitise and automate tasks.

We must be responsive to legislative changes and deliver improved service offers more quickly. Many of the digital enablers can launch new initiatives and new processes almost on a daily basis when aligned within the whole environment.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families**

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

6.5 **Working Towards a Greener Future**

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

6.6 **Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**

All systems support the development and sustainability of the Council's priorities and will be developed supporting services in compliance with regulation and policy.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 Digital transformation is more than technology transformation. Technology is an enabler – a platform to enable organisational innovation. Ignoring this would be the biggest risk to our organisation.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 All systems will be developed in compliance with regulation and policy.

9.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 As part of the potential relocation of the data centre and networking centre from the Municipal Building, surveys and recommendations have taken place to review the us of Solar and Battery systems to allow for an off-grid deployment. Details will follow.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.