



# Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy 2022

# Introduction



This Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy sets out our vision for putting technology at the forefront of our journey to put the residents and local businesses at the centre of the services we provide. It explains how we will develop and inspire confidence in our digital services whilst making them accessible to all. This is how we plan to deliver outstanding customer services.

We want Ashford to be a thriving, productive and inclusive borough by 2030 and beyond; a vital part of Kent and the South East where local businesses, social enterprises, communities and the public sector provide collective leadership to promote shared prosperity, happiness and wellbeing.

We will be supporting our staff to be ambitious, creative and trustworthy in all that they do to fulfil the council's ambition to be an effective and well-resourced organisation that will:

**1 Treat everyone fairly and with respect.**

**2 Understand and respond to the needs of our communities to ensure no one is disadvantaged.**

**3 Put the customer at the heart of everything we do and ensure our services are accessible.**

**4 Make the most of our assets and invest wisely to ensure we live within our means.**

**5 All work towards achieving the objectives of being a Green Pioneer and Caring Ashford.**

These principles are set out in our corporate plan and this strategy builds on that plan.

COVID-19 has been a major disruptor that forced the whole organisation to change its approach to service delivery as well as making people change the way that they transact with us. More people are accessing our services online so we need to make sure that our processes are simple, easy-to-use and have the resident at the heart. To do this we will continue to redesign our services by embracing digital tools that enhance the customer experience. This will allow us to make sure we have the resources to help those who cannot use digital tools and need additional support.



# What we aim to achieve



## The main aims of this strategy are to:

Redesign our processes to put the resident first and to provide a better experience when interacting with the council. We want to improve the choice of ways our residents can contact us. People will be able to get what they need from us in a simple and easy-to-use way.

Work with partners across all sectors to bridge the digital skills gap and provide alternatives to those residents that cannot transact with us online. We will focus on areas where digital poverty acts as a barrier for residents. Work with national and local partners on cross functional projects to reach more residents and strengthen the technology we use and services that we provide.

Develop a better understanding of our residents and businesses, using joined-up data that will allow us to better design services around the needs of them. These new services will drive efficiencies and digital transformation, increasing our transparency and public accountability. This will support us in making better decisions for our residents.

Have a happy and more efficient workforce who are equipped with all the technology they need to do their jobs safely and efficiently. Some of the work that they currently do will be delivered digitally which will mean they are able to focus on higher-value tasks.

Create modern, secure and integrated solutions infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other. This will simplify things for residents and ensure that staff are able to see the relevant information that they need.



# How will we achieve this?

We want to use the most suitable technology to provide easy-to-use digital services that will improve the service to all of our residents no matter how they want to transact with us. We will achieve this through five strands of work:



# Our approach



We will use our digital design principles to guide all of our work to deliver the Customer Service, IT and Digital Strategy strands – these are:

## Do the hard work, test and learn to keep it simple

We need to regularly review our process – just because we have done it for years doesn't mean it's the best way. Working in an agile way where feedback on processes is actioned. Customers should have a single point of contact. It's ok to make mistakes, as long as we learn from them and share our experiences.

## Focus on the customer journey, making it quick and uncomplicated to empower customers to do more for themselves

We need to use data to inform the construction of the customer journey. Aligns with corporate values of Ambitious, Trustworthy and Creative. We must balance our digital persona with also being seen as human beings.

## Focus on the goals and delivery

We need to know the purpose of what we're hoping to achieve. There should be a clear path of how we will do this set out at the start of a project.

## Less is more

We need to work efficiently and smartly. Less is more. If something works we should look to reuse it elsewhere in the organisation.

## Seamless approach

We will put the customer at the heart of what we do. We'll provide easy to use digital services that collect information only once. We need to be consistent across council systems to provide resilience.

## Distinctive

We should be seen by others as trailblazing and distinctive developing new and innovative services using open source so that we can share. Thinking outside of the box and be risk aware, not risk averse. Ask yourself: "How can you make this process more distinctive as an ABC service?" We should dare to innovate, whether that is using new ways of working or existing solutions.

## Who needs this information?

When designing content or a process we should always be asking ourselves this question. We need to have an understanding of the customer's needs and should only collect the information we need. This information should only be collected once, at the first point of contact.

## Tell customers what to expect and keep them up to date along the way

We must manage the expectations of our customers. They should be able to track the progress of their transactions/applications. We need to clearly communicate when they can expect to hear back from us and what else we may need. We should constantly seek feedback from our customers to continually improve services.

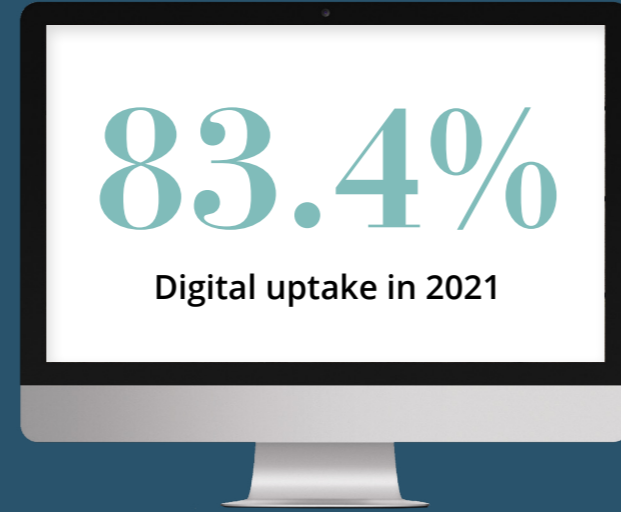
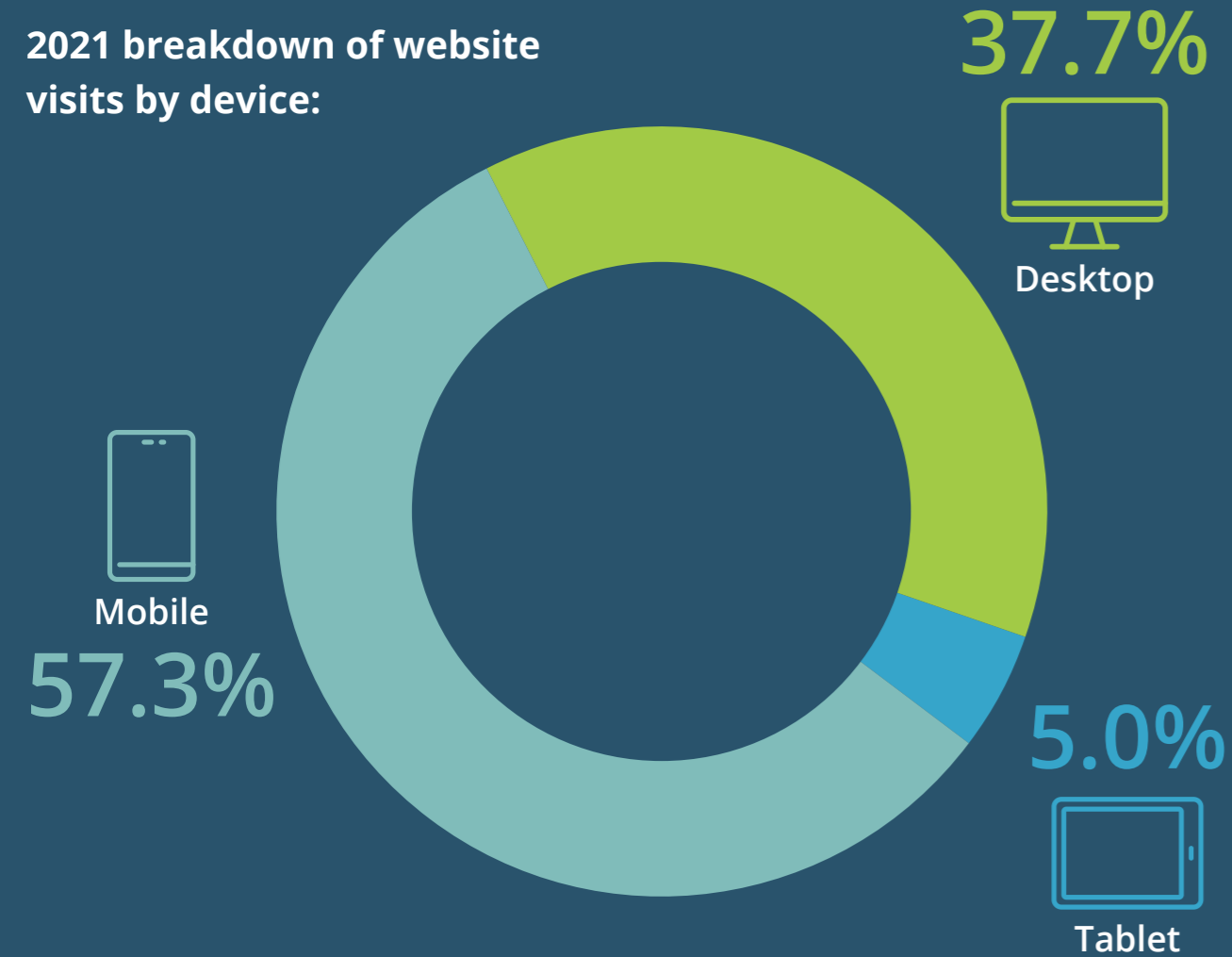
## This is for everyone

Consider the ability of those using our services and create content/processes that can be completed by anyone. Ensure services and customer journeys are accessible. Write in plain English, use heading styles, explain acronyms, use alt text and cater for users who have English as a second language.

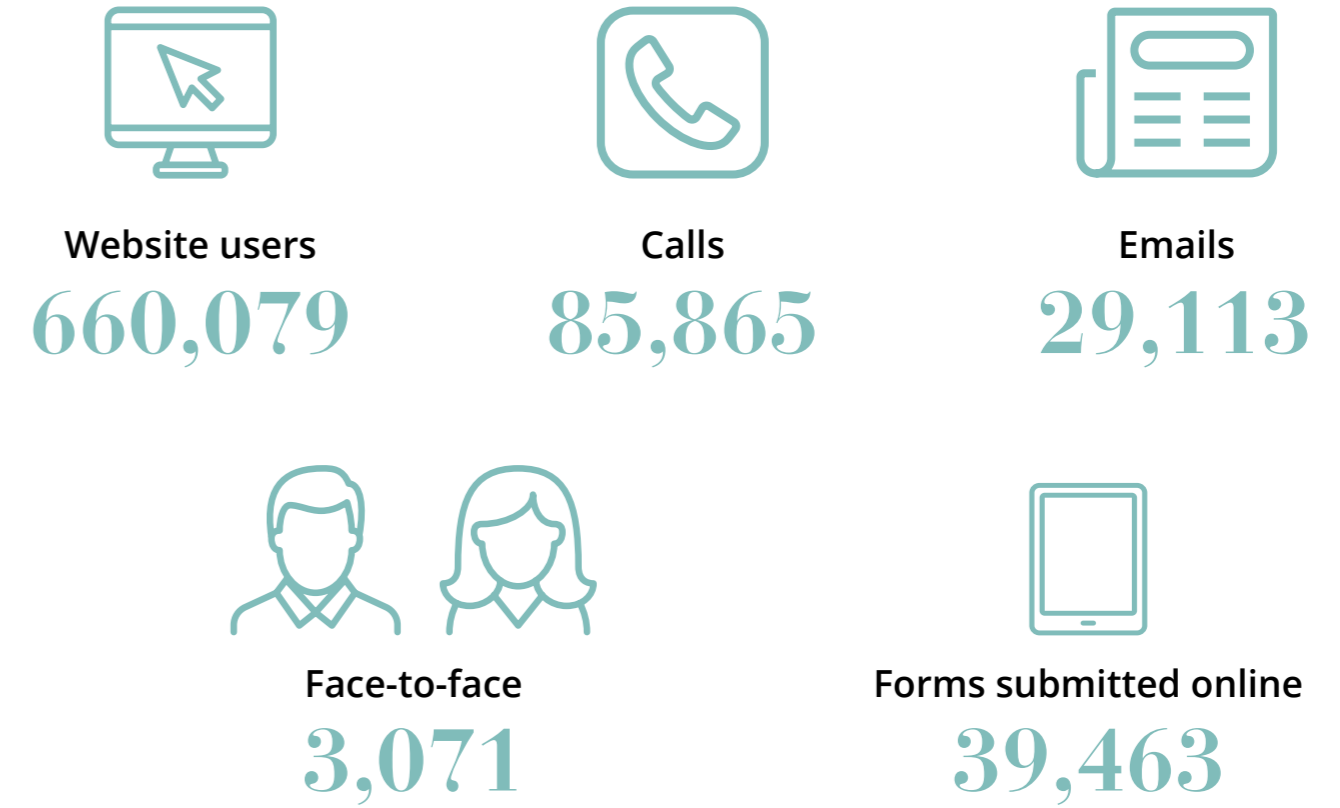
# Key Statistics



2021 breakdown of website visits by device:



Breakdown of 2021 customer service contacts:



# Strand 1 – Residents and local businesses first



More people are going online to access services and the residents of Ashford are no different to the wider population. Our residents and local businesses are our customers and they expect easy and simple-to-use services that are available online and on any device that they use. Our residents visit our website across a range of devices. In 2021 57.3% of users accessed council services via a mobile device, 37.7% via a desktop computer and 5% used a tablet.

We have a variety of online services available for people to self-serve 24/7. These range from quite simple contact forms through to complex end-to-end services like reporting a missed bin that automate as much as possible to provide a seamless and quicker resolution for our residents.

At Ashford Borough Council, we want to ensure that our residents are at the forefront of everything we do. Our residents want to be able to report, apply and pay easily and be able to track what they have reported to the resolution of the process, receiving updates along the way, and we need to be able to facilitate this for them.

[www.ashford.gov.uk](http://www.ashford.gov.uk) is a trusted source of information and we need to ensure our residents trust our online presence, relying on consistent design and content to know they are interacting with us – and only us – whether that be via our website or social media channels. We will also share any known scams via our social media channels. We will work to use trusted systems and sources such as .Gov products such as Notify & Verify to help to build confidence in our online services.

## What we will do

- Build a customer portal that gives residents information all in one place.
- Improve online services to enable our services to focus on supporting the digitally excluded and particularly vulnerable residents.
- Carry out user research and receive continuous feedback from residents to understand what they need from us. Create a roadmap and continue to make sure our website is clear and easy-to-use.
- Build any new digital services with the resident at the centre focusing on quick and easy transactions that provide a good customer experience.
- Enhance our channels for customer services, increasing chat and investigating platforms such as WhatsApp and .Gov notify.
- Use data analytics to identify trends/failed search terms and optimise our website content by improving keywords, page titles and descriptions and ensuring that the design and content is consistent.
- Utilise social media and emerging communications channels (such as Nextdoor) to reach out to the community and engage with them on the channels they choose to communicate with us on.



# Strand 2 – Collaborate with partner groups to improve digital skills and inclusion



**Digital platforms are generally the default option for accessing public services, information, entertainment and each other. Those who are offline, and not capable of using the internet, risk missing the benefits that the internet can offer.**

Digital inclusion is about making sure that people have the capability to use the internet to do things that benefit them day-to-day – whether they are individuals or businesses.

Most people will need to interact with a digital system in their lives, such as an online job application, even if they don't have the skills to do so. Digitally excluded people can lack skills, confidence, and motivation, along with having limited or no access to equipment and connectivity.

At Ashford Borough Council we want to do what we can to help prevent so many people being digitally excluded. Being able to help our residents is key to everything we do, where they can't access our services online we offer assisted digital help and telephone appointments.

With around a quarter of the UK population having some type of disability, digital accessibility is a key focus on our website development roadmap as we do not want to exclude any of our users. Regular monitoring of our website's accessibility is ensuring that we remain compliant with this important regulation.

COVID-19 highlighted the part that technology plays in the community, particularly engagement. Using hybrid meeting technology to encourage greater engagement with our communities enabled more of our residents to participate in local democracy; and whilst the government has not agreed that hybrid meetings can form part of the formal machinery of local democracy we will continue to develop our approach in order to take advantage of wider engagement and make improvements to our carbon footprint.

Superfast broadband and mobile coverage are part of the essential digital infrastructure needed by residents and businesses especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. We will continue to pro-actively support the rollout of superfast broadband and improvements to mobile coverage across the borough.

## What we will do

- Feasibility study around Community Wi-Fi projects.
- Work with KCC and partners on projects to help develop skills and trust.
- Use our social media to highlight scams, good practice and credible sources of information.
- Proactively monitor and take action to ensure our website continues to have good accessibility standards.
- Continue to work with broadband providers to support improved connections and increase investment.
- Continue the coordination of the Ashford urban area Fibre To The Premises rollout and ensure other planned rollouts are continuing at pace.
- Take a leading role in coordinating and promoting programmes such as the Gigabit voucher schemes and community fibre partnerships.
- Proactively engage with Mobile Network Operators and Mobile UK to progress the Shared Rural Network and improve mobile connectivity in the borough.



# Strand 3 – Make better use of data

Data is a key asset enabling us, as a council, to deliver improving services that are innovative, targeted, and impactful to our residents. These will be designed and delivered around our data assets, transforming our services, improving outcomes and driving efficiencies.

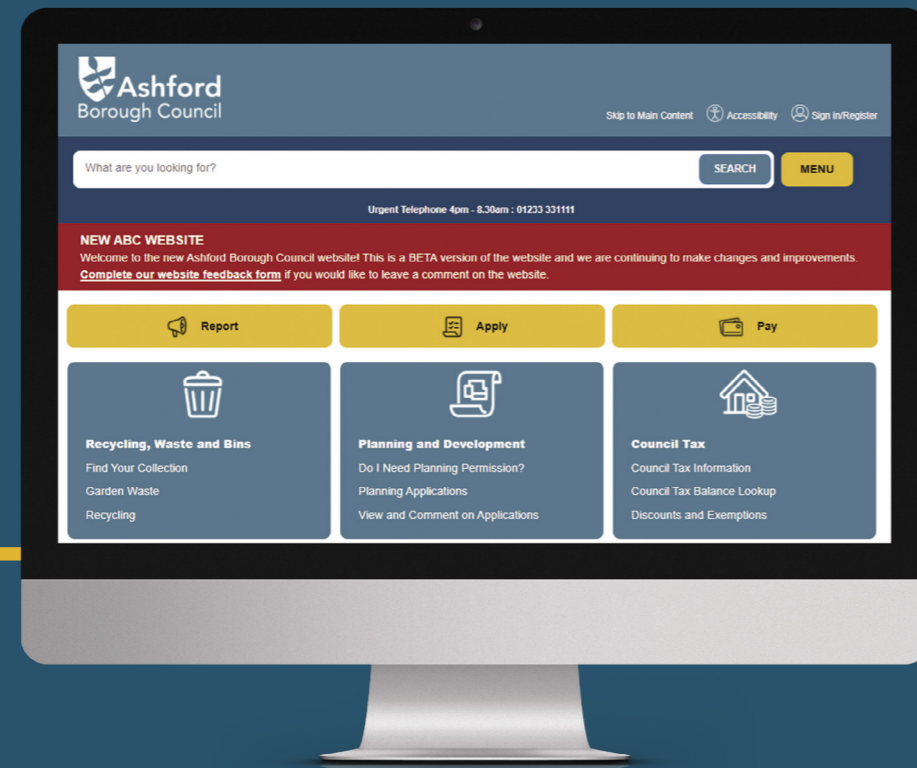
The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the innovative use of data, with a range of data-driven interventions launched or repurposed during the pandemic, providing invaluable assistance to our residents at a time when they needed it most. Whilst the vital public interest, legal basis for processing has now passed, we must not lose sight of the power that deploying our existing datasets in differing ways had in furthering and increasingly tailoring our services to the needs of our customers.

Information and data are crucial to every part of the council's business. Managing and using it correctly, making sure it's secure and making it available helps us to identify areas to focus on to deliver improved services.

We also monitor search terms so we can ensure our visitors can find what they are looking for no matter how they search for it as well as enabling us to communicate with our residents using the same terms that they are accustomed to using. Also, by reviewing our website visits and call centre data we can predict times of the year when we expect to be even busier, allowing us to put measures in place to deal with increased demand.

## What we will do

- Continue to develop our approach to cyber security.
- Build on our digital dashboards to inform service delivery.
- Continually review and cleanse the data we collect and process for our core functions making sure it is used securely and ethically.
- Develop a borough profile so we understand our residents better and inform the best way to deliver services.
- Use analytics on our social media channels to develop digital profiles of our customers.





# Strand 4 – Give staff the tools and skills needed to carry out their jobs safely, effectively and efficiently

**Council staff are equipped with work devices that are modern and reliable to help them to do their jobs with ease and efficiency. We need to continue to do this and work with employees to identify the best suited device for respective areas of work. Where possible, we will standardise these devices.**

Council staff to have the ability to work from anywhere (excluding jobs which have to be completed at specific locations/sites, such as parks and open spaces), with reliable system access, sufficient bandwidth and telephony service where supplied to give a similar work experience as if in the office.

Staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily on the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms.

The safety of our staff is paramount to us and we will invest in technology for them to be able to work safely whether that is via trackable devices or health and safety technology that monitors the impact of specific high-risk tools and equipment.

Voice calls in the future will be made over the internet. With this in mind we will identify how this might affect our services, and invest in new technologies to ensure a continuation of service.

## What we will do

- Ensure council staff are equipped with modern and reliable work devices.
- Ensure that council staff have the ability to work from anywhere.
- Continue to develop the corporate intranet and other collaborative platforms so that staff can find the information they require to carry out their roles quickly and easily.
- Continue our migration to cloud platforms, where appropriate, for productivity and collaboration tools.
- Invest in health and safety technology to enable staff to work safely.



# Strand 5 – Create an integrated digital infrastructure with systems that all talk to each other

**As we move our services online to enable residents and staff to better access our systems and their data in a 24/7 digital world, we must give them the best tools, reliable platforms and systems that talk to each other.**

We will need to ensure our internal and external network communications infrastructure is kept up to date and able to deliver robust and fast services for all of our residents and partners. This will also mean working with other public and private sector organisations to help influence the decisions and the infrastructure that is installed across the borough. This will help ensure the residents and businesses of Ashford can obtain the fastest broadband services possible to help them access our services.

Develop a clear vision and design for all of the council's IT systems, to consolidate them to a set of specialist systems built on shared components and platforms, integrated through APIs, and using cloud services (Software as a Service & Platform as a Service) where possible.

## What we will do

- Make our systems accessible to staff wherever they need to access them.
- Develop a clear vision and design for all of the council's IT systems.
- Continue cloud migration of services to either private or public cloud services.
- Centralise ordering processing and management of new software to Corporate IT Service.
- Develop a process for identifying and implementing integration and interoperability opportunities for new and existing systems.
- Develop a full picture of the carbon footprint of our technology estate.
- Review all major back-office and legacy systems to highlight suitability.



