

**IMPROVING THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE THROUGH DIGITAL SOLUTIONS**

**Report of the Corporate Director (Corporate and Support Services) and Deputy Chief  
Executive**

**1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 This report sets out the information about the current channels that are used by citizens to contact the council, including the current level of demand across each channel and how this has changed over the last three years.
- 1.2 The report includes information about the performance of the AMI chatbot – this has previously been requested by the CRMG Scrutiny Committee
- 1.3 It also sets out opportunities for the future development and application of digital solutions in improving the citizen experience and explains what this would mean for citizens contacting the council.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The Contact Centre remains the first point of contact for many council services that receive a high volume of contact, these are:
  - Council tax
  - Housing benefits
  - Electoral registration
  - Public realm
  - Corporate complaints
  - Library services
  - Elected members line
  - Pest control
  - Registrar services
  - Schools admissions
- 2.2 A contact centre model enables colleagues within the team to be trained to deal with enquiries which relate to multiple services. This in turn creates a better customer experience as peaks and troughs in the time or type of contact can be better managed. Within the council's contact centre colleagues also respond to emails and social media messages where these relate to relevant services - an area in which the council sees increasing citizen contact. The council routinely provides performance data relating to contact centre performance through the Citizen Focus and Engagement portfolio performance reports.
- 2.3 Other services across the council also receive contact by citizens directly. This is the case where specialist professional knowledge is required because of the complexity and nature of the enquiry. Examples include Planning, Licencing, Adult Social Care and Stockport Family.

2.4 The council has already made significant progress in deploying digital solutions to improve the citizen experience. These include developing our website to enable transactions (report it, pay for it, apply for it, find it) through the introduction of a range of online forms, introducing an accessibility tool (Recite Me) to aid use of the website and introducing AMI (our chatbot).

- 2.5 The way in which these tools can improve the citizen experience include:
- greater digital accessibility enabling more people to find the information they need and engage with the council at a time and place that suits them;
  - automation of some manual functions, freeing up staff time to deal with more complex enquiries or more vulnerable residents; and
  - meeting the increasing digital expectations of many residents.

Deploying digital solutions also contributes to the council's MTFP by reducing the cost of delivering services.

2.6 The digital tools available are developing all the time and Section 5 of this report sets out the further potential for digital solutions to maintain and improve the citizen experience over the coming years. Whilst exploration and testing of these solutions will initially focus on the contact centre, there is no doubt that there are likely to be further opportunities across the council to deploy digital solutions that also benefit the experience of residents when engaging with services beyond the contact centre.

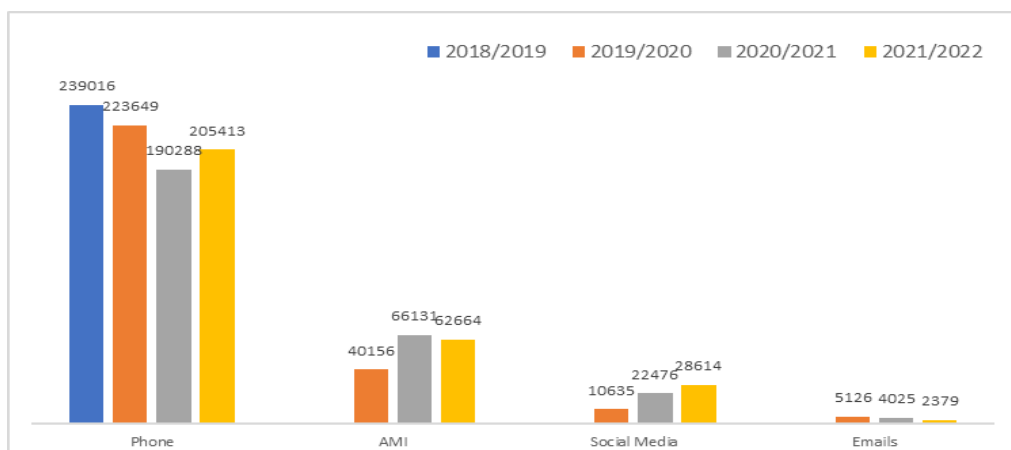
### 3. CURRENT CONTACT CENTRE CHANNELS AND ASSOCIATED DEMAND

3.1 Citizens can engage with the council through a wide variety of methods, namely: -

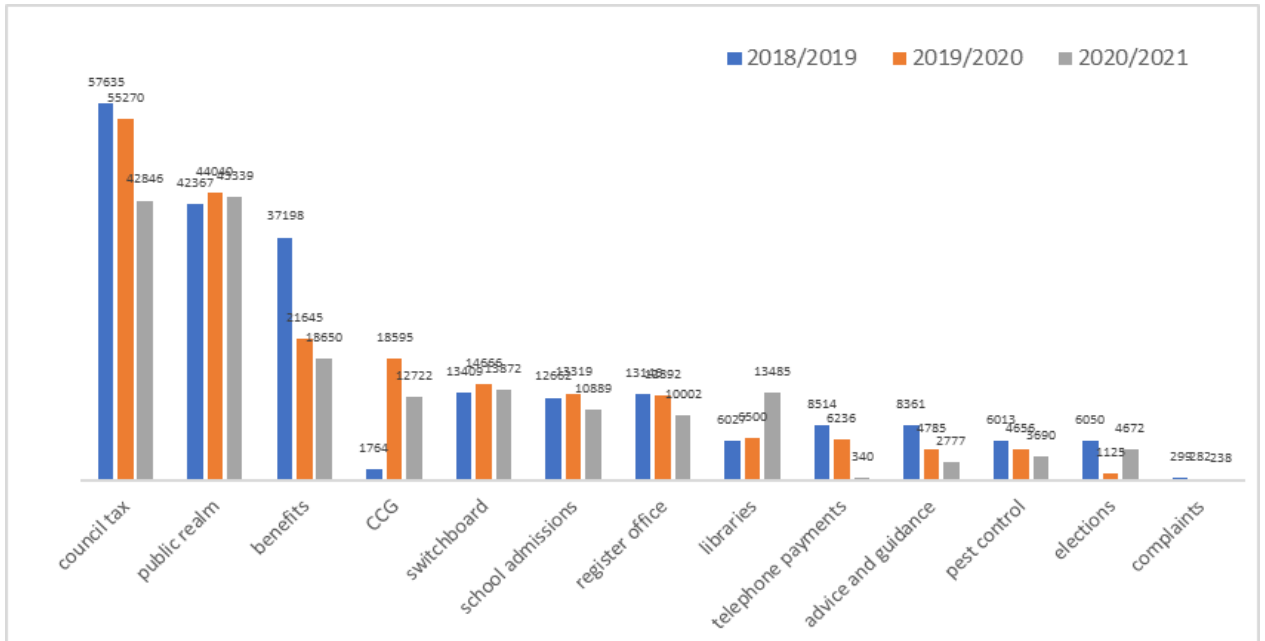
- Information provided on the council website
- AMI chatbot (website)
- Online forms (website)
- Telephone
- Social media
- Email

3.2 The paragraphs below show the amount of contact received by channel from 2019/20 onwards. All 2021/22 figures are a projection based on the level of contact so far this year. Telephony data for 2018/19 is also shown.

3.3 Excluding website visits, the most popular channel for citizen contact is the telephone followed by AMI, social media and then emails.

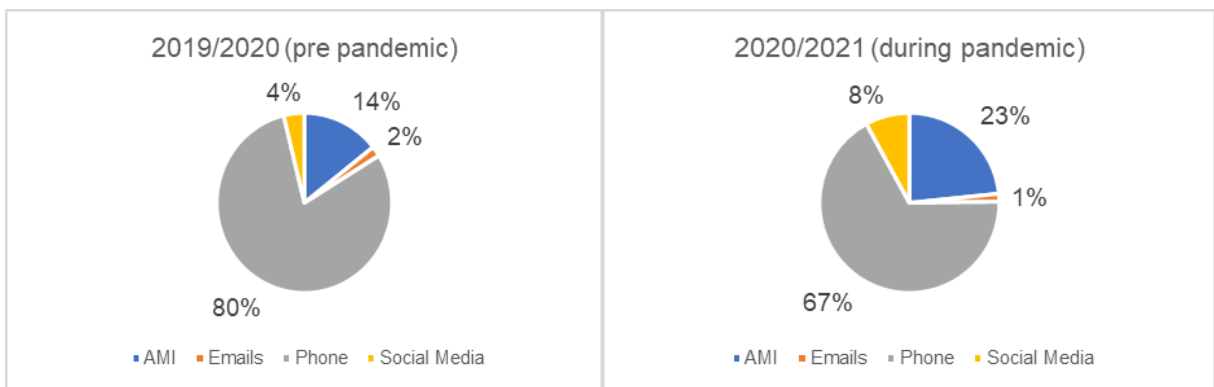


3.4 When looking at telephony topics for calls made across the past two years, the chart below indicates that Council Tax and Public Realm services received have the highest number of citizen calls. This continues to be the case in 2021/22.



3.5 Whilst there was a reduction in telephone calls last year, there was an increase in the use of digital with simple enquiries and transactions increasingly being resolved by digital self-service via AMI, social media and online forms.

3.6 Despite seeing an increase in calls in Q1 and Q2 this year when compared to calls received in 2019/20, there is an overall upward trend in digital contacts, suggesting that citizens are increasingly turning to digital contact with the council. The charts that follow show that since 2019, AMI and social media have increasingly been used by citizens as a preferred channel alongside a reduction in telephone use.



## 4. CURRENT DIGITAL SYSTEMS

### 4.1 Telephony system – Netcall

4.1.1 Stockport Council currently uses Netcall which is a call management system to call handle, provide intelligence about calls and monitor citizen and agent activity. Netcall enables staff to receive calls from any location, making it ideal for hybrid and

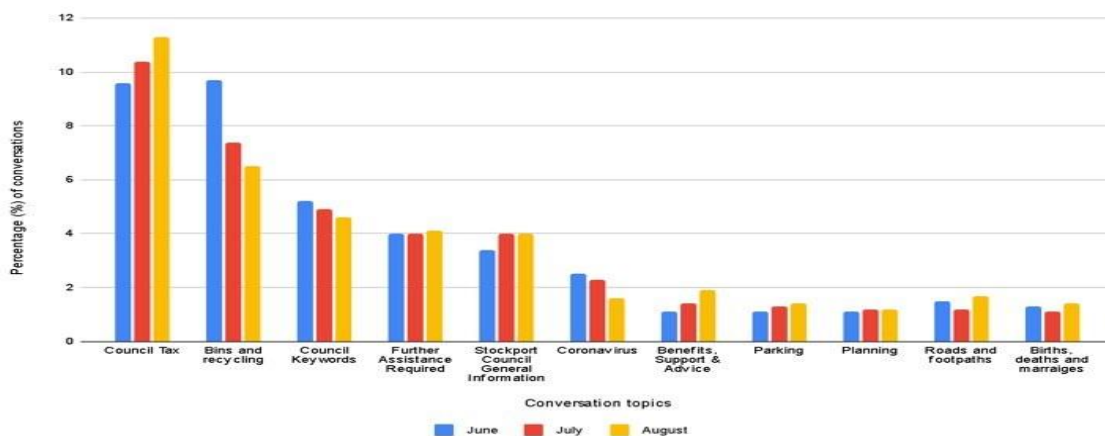
flexible working patterns and the flexibility of this system was a huge benefit during the pandemic. As well as the contact centre team, this system is now used by complaints, support funds, children's and adults' social care teams.

4.1.2 Netcall enables the council to use front end messages for emergency situations (such as flooding information), routing of calls direct to teams, and provides a call back option at busy periods. The call back function in particular has improved the citizen experience, enabling more calls to be answered overall whilst avoiding the need for citizens to wait in long queues for their calls to be answered. During 20/21, 10% of callers used this feature and during 21/22 this rose to 17%, reflecting the higher number of calls the contact centre have been receiving. Netcall has also contributed to MTFP targets by avoiding the recruitment of additional temporary staff to meet known peak demands in the contact centre, for example around the time of council tax billing.

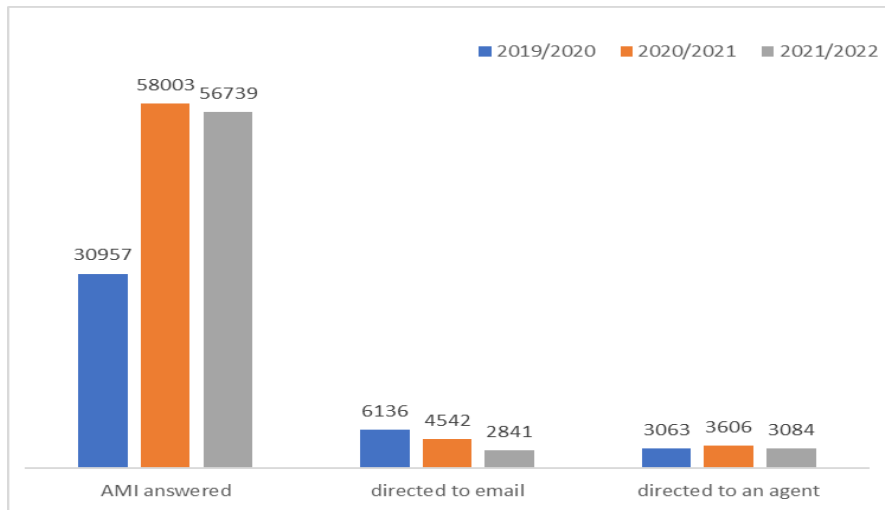
## 4.2 Council website Chatbot - AMI

4.2.1 AMI is an artificial intelligence chatbot. She is available 24/7 and answers queries from information already on the web and provides citizens the help and assistance they need at a time that suits them. AMI can either answer a citizen question first time, or direct citizens to an advisor via live chat for further assistance. If the enquiry is made out of hours when live chat is not available an email will be sent to the contact centre team. The council's web content team meet with the providers of AMI on a regular basis to review the queries she receives and usage information provided to improve the council's web site content.

4.2.2 When looking at the topics AMI discusses with citizens, council tax, bins and recycling are the most popular and this mirrors the most popular telephone topics.

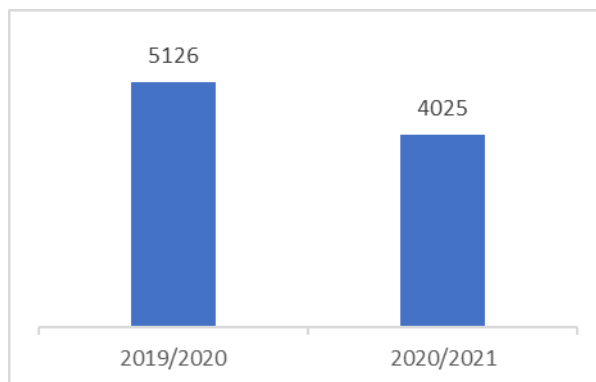


4.2.3 AMI's current success lies in the ability to help citizens find the information they need quickly. Since AMI's introduction, her use has increased as has the number of enquiries via AMI that have not required further assistance. In 2019/20 77% of AMI enquiries were answered independently. This increased to 88% in 2020/21. Based on the current trend, 2021/22 emails generated by AMI are forecast to reduce by nearly half.



### 4.3 Emails

4.3.1 The Contact Centre deals with direct email enquiries from citizens and the enquiries are mostly for Services to Place, and as described above. Emails are generally more time consuming to process than other forms of communication and often do not contain all the information needed to effectively deal with an enquiry. This often results in many emails being sent and received before an enquiry can be properly dealt with, delaying the outcome for the citizen. The graph below shows the number of emails received in the last two years (and excludes emails generated by AMI).



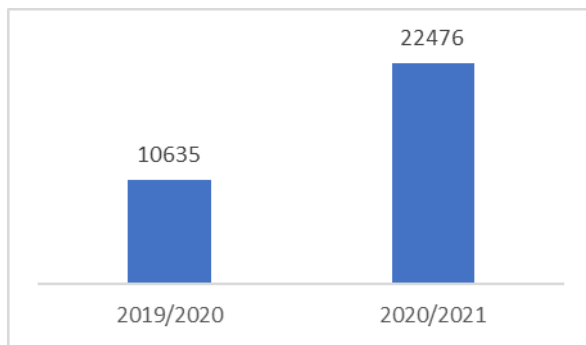
### 4.4 Online Forms and Automation Software

4.4.1 Online forms enable citizens to report issues at a time convenient to them and in some cases, to track progress of a case - for example reporting a blocked grid. Online forms have resulted in fewer emails and calls, enabling citizens to report issues direct to services and without delays taken to process emails. Online forms also ensure that the right information is provided to enable the enquiry to be resolved without the need to request further information.

### 4.5 Social Media Platform (ORLO)

4.5.1 Orlo is a platform that manages social media conversations from various social channels via one inbox; it can publish real-time / scheduled messages and helps the council respond to comments made by citizens. The following table illustrates the volume of social media enquiries from June 2019 to July 2021 and shows the

increase in contact that experienced with this channel. With social media use increasing over the past few years, this could be seen as a changing preference with how citizens wish to communicate with the council.



#### 4.6 ReciteMe (Accessibility tool)

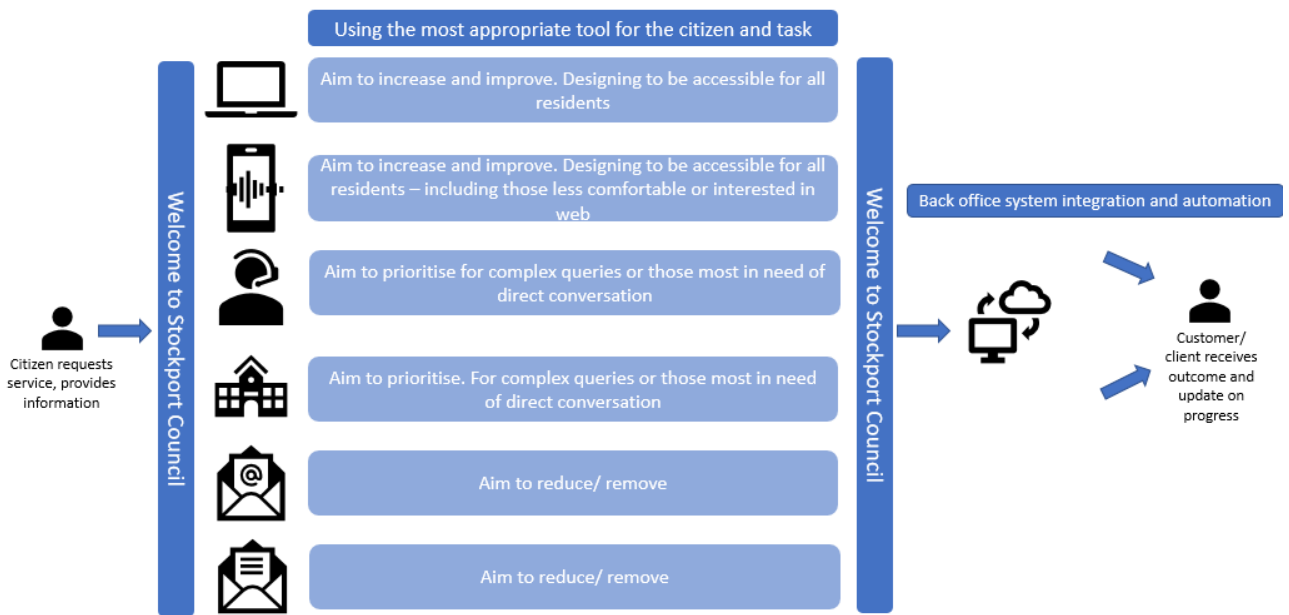
4.6.1 This is a tool that is on the internet that helps citizens personalise their view of the website. The key features include: - a screen reader, changing of font sizes and colours, rulers, a reading window and a wide range of alternative languages. Since its launch in early 2021, ReciteMe has been used by citizens on 18,467 pages and on average 3,693 pages per month.

### 5. FUTURE APPLICATION OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS

5.1 This section sets out opportunities for the future development and application of digital solutions in improving the citizen experience and explains what this would mean for citizens contacting the council.

5.2 We have seen an increase in digital contact and transactions over the last few years, and this has only increased through the pandemic, when digital communication became essential while significant restrictions were in place. Whilst we are seeing some increase in phone contact this year, the overall trend appears to be one of increasing digital contact overall.

5.3 Continuing to develop the way in which digital solutions enable residents to interact with the council will form one part of the council's digital strategy which is currently in development. The overall aim is to improve the citizen experience by ensuring that citizens can access information, advice and guidance and carry out transactions such as reporting something or paying for something at a time and place that suits them and that the overall experience is consistent regardless of the channel used. This in turn allows the council's resources to be focused where they are most needed – supporting more vulnerable residents and dealing with complex enquiries and needs, as demonstrated in the diagram below:

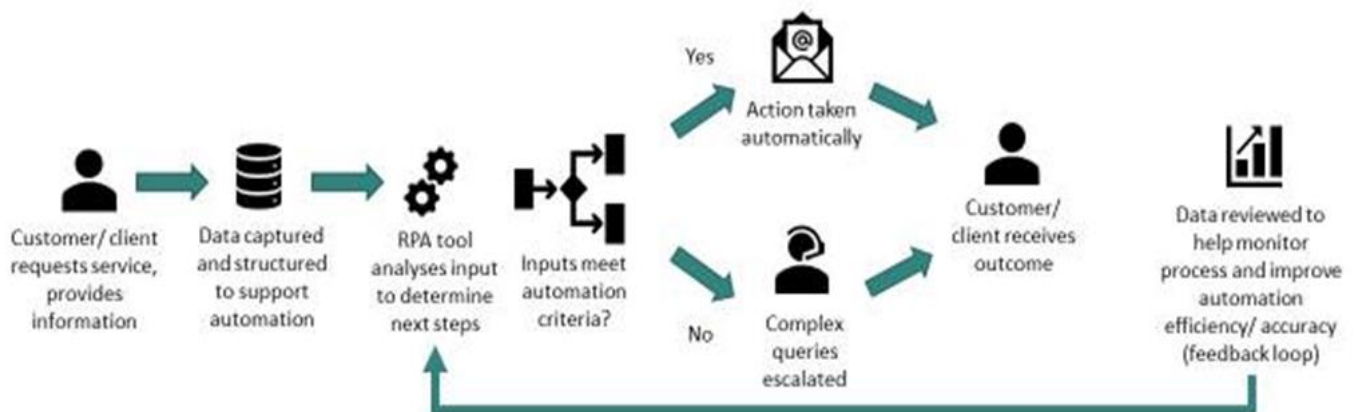


5.4 This approach seeks to provide the best citizen experiences where possible whilst making the most of ever-evolving digital solutions, where these represent value for money, and responding to the increasing digital preferences and expectations of citizens.

5.5 It is important to note that this approach does not advocate “switching off” channels. Rather it recognises that there will inevitably be differences in how people need to interact with the council and seeks to ensure that the citizen experience is consistent regardless of the channel used.

5.6 In particular the council is yet to explore the opportunities presented by increasingly established digital automation technologies, including: voice automation (such as used by products such as Alexa or Siri); robotic process automation (RPA), a form of business process automation technology that is based on robots (bots) and/or artificial intelligence that guides residents through a digital system for a service request; and low-code, a form of process automation which enables new processes to be build and designed rapidly.

5.7 The diagram below illustrates a possible RPA citizen journey.



- 5.8 In the case of the use of voice automation this is already successfully used by many businesses and some councils and can be a useful tool for handling simple enquiries or requests where telephone is the preferred choice of communication channel for the resident. Typical examples might be requesting the date of your bin collection or reporting a missed bin. This could be coupled with other automation software to provide a fully digital process whilst still enabling the resident to use their preferred method of contacting the council.
- 5.9 Another area of automation to be explored is the further development of our chatbot, AMI, including the potential integration with other functionality such as online forms or even robotic process automation in order to enable resident to use AMI to carry out transactions such as applying for, paying for or reporting something.
- 5.10 Recognising that social media is increasingly being used to interact with the council, a study is to take place to look at whether AMI or other automated solutions could be developed to respond directly to social media enquiries.
- 5.11 Finally, accessibility will be a consideration when considering the development of any existing digital solutions or the implementation of a new solution.
- 5.12 Integral to the development of further digital solutions to improve the citizen experience is the council's ongoing commitment to increasing digital inclusion and enabling those who can, to interact with the council digitally. This goes hand in hand with the understanding that for some residents – for example, those who remain digitally excluded, are more vulnerable or have complex needs - that interaction directly with colleagues within the council will continue to be required.
- 5.13 Stockport's libraries continue to develop the range of support that can be provided in districts to support those residents that either need to access IT, be provided with support to get online or to be supported in a face to face environment.
- 5.14 In 2021/22 we have seen an increased number of organisations joining the Digiknow network and a growing numbers of digital champions once more after a small reduction during the pandemic. The council has also supported the establishment of the digital lending library, which has been able to provide devices on loan and data packages to those needing to get online.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

- 6.1 A project group is exploring the market for possible solutions from potential and existing providers of systems used by the council. This discovery will help the visioning and options appraisal of suitable solutions for an improved citizen contact experience and journey and the costs and benefits of each. Along which the outcomes of the short-term objectives outlined below, this work will demonstrate the scale of potential improvements and efficiencies to be gained from the development of existing capabilities coupled with the introduction of new products.
- 6.2 We propose to start by testing the potential of the solutions described above in order to understand the opportunities and limitations of these and the areas in which the biggest benefit can be derived both in terms of customer experience and in terms of the council's MTFP.



- 6.3 Short-term objectives are proposed for the next 6-9 months. These relate to immediate improvements of the systems and methods used by citizens to contact the council – all with a view to improving their experience and to understanding the potential to deliver further efficiencies through the use of digital channels. These are:
- 6.3.1 Expand the development of on-line forms where there are high volumes of contact centre interactions where a self-service digital solution does not yet exist e.g. online forms for bulky collections.
  - 6.3.2 Continue to develop AMI to provide up to date, accurate information, advice and guidance for residents and businesses, enabling “self-service” by answering an increasing number of questions and queries without a need to contact the council in another way
  - 6.3.3 Explore the additional potential within existing products such as Netcall and AMI, or of third party solutions through the use of APIs, to enable greater automation of processes.
  - 6.3.4 Carry out a voice automation trial on a suitable high volume area of phone contact
- 6.4 Alongside these activities, a “citizen promise” is proposed. This will set out clear expectations for citizens about the standards they can expect when interacting with the council. This work is underway and once complete will be accompanied by learning packages and development opportunities for colleagues across the council to refresh and further develop skills such as the use of easily understood language when communicating, to effective complaints handling, to user experience and service design.

## **7. RISKS**

- 7.1 Financial risk of investing in products that do not deliver the desired benefits – to mitigate this risk the approach outlined in this report includes the development of a business case to identify the costs and benefits expected from the development of any existing digital products and solutions or the implementation of any new solutions.

## **8. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 There are no legal considerations arising from this report. Any procurement of new products or solutions from third party suppliers as a result of the discovery and business case to be developed would need to comply with procurement legislation and regulations.

## **9. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT**

- 9.1 There is no human resources impact arising directly from this report. However, the further implementation of digital solutions to improve the citizen experience of interacting with the council would be done with the expectation of also contributing to the council’s MTFP. In particular the “radically digital” theme within the council’s draft MTFP for 2022-2025 outlines significant savings under the theme “radically digital” and it is acknowledged that this may entail staffing reductions. Wherever

possible, savings would be sought through vacancy management but the potential for redundancies must also be acknowledged. Where this is the case, appropriate business cases would be produced and consultation carried out with unions and affected colleagues as per the council's reorganisation policy.

## **10. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

10.1 The approach outlined above takes into consideration that different citizens have different needs and expectations when interacting with the council. The council's existing approach to digital inclusion has to date helped over 15,000 people get online or develop their digital skills, and this commitment will continue. The council will also continue to improve the accessibility of the website using tools such as ReciteMe as well as accessibility best practice when developing any online tools. An equality impact assessment will be developed as part of the business case for the further development of the digital approach outlined above.

## **11. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

11.1 Whilst it is not anticipated that there would be any significant environmental impact directly arising from the proposed approach (positive or negative), an environmental impact assessment will be developed as part of the business case for the further development of the digital approach outlined above.

## **12. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

12.1 The Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee is requested to note the report and provide comments in relation to the proposed approach to the development and application of digital solutions in improving the citizen experience.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

There are none

Anyone requiring further information should contact Kirsteen Roe: email - [kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk)