

## Appendix 2b: Audit Assurances and Themes

### Assurance



### ICT Strategy

#### Objectives

To assess the robustness of the governance arrangements which ensure the technology elements of the Southend on Sea City Council's (Council's) various service strategies properly inform the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) strategy; that the ICT Strategy is delivered and that it supports and enables the achievement of the Council's strategic goals.

#### Summary

The ICT department underwent a full restructure in 2019, resulting in a significant change in personnel. The ICT department inherited legacy infrastructure and service contracts, that had historically resulted in the Council not having a fit for purpose technology environment. Since then there have been gradual improvements to bring about the desired technology environment by standardising the infrastructure to adapt to future digital requirements. Some of the efficiencies have been brought about through procurement and contract negotiation, and through engaging more with the services in the Council.

During these improvement initiatives, ICT continued to operate as a support function responding to the Council's needs. Senior leadership recognise ICT's responsiveness to ensure staff were able to work remotely, by ensuring the right equipment and network connectivity were in place, enabling the Council's services to continue as normal during the Covid-19 pandemic with minimum disruption.

With the combination of managing these challenges and stabilising the IT infrastructure and processes, ICT produced a formalised Digital Strategy in 2022, which aligns to the Corporate Plan. However, the strategy does not outline clearly the Council's IT requirements and understand how ICT will be an enabler to fulfil the Council's corporate priorities.

Alongside this, the ICT team has continued to experience challenges caused by service areas engaging late with ICT on the development of new solutions, which impacts the planning, identifying an appropriate solution and prioritising resources to support projects that require IT input and support. This has resulted in ICT not being able to resource some projects sufficiently, and equally not being able to bed in the right underlying IT architecture and solutions, that may be applied holistically to the Council's IT needs, which could be scalable and efficiently supported.

To manage this challenge, ICT has introduced the 'Entrance Hall' process to capture the current and proposed project requirements, and enable prioritisation and management of resource requirements accordingly. This has been a key initiative, to curb the reactive approach to IT projects. However this is not a long-term sustainable solution as it will not allow ICT to plan and drive solutions holistically and be the architect of the infrastructure to benefit the Council's overall future digital requirements.

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Changing the approach to be more proactive and focused on collaboration with service areas will encourage a greater level of challenge around the thinking on and architecting solution sets, which will enable IT solutions to be better future proofed (for scalability and compatibility), more cost effective and support the management of vendors where applicable.

A clear governance structure needs to be created, with senior management setting the tone and direction on the prioritisation of the Council's IT projects, to fulfil the long-term strategic requirements of the Council and services. Forming a governance forum will be key to understand the Council's digital priorities, which will in turn set the tone for prioritising and sequencing of projects. With such a forum in place it will help ICT to get the support at a corporate level to determine which projects, should go ahead and provide a better overview of risks that may impact ICT priorities and other corporate risks. Officers are working to address this through the introduction of a Digital Group, providing oversight and linkages with the Smart Council technology development programme, as part of the Council's current wider review of governance arrangements. Draft Terms of Reference for this group were prepared in November.

Clear, early and ongoing collaboration is also required between the service areas and the ICT team. Removing this barrier will help to ensure that the services consider IT in their forward planning / decision making, and are also aware of possible solutions that IT can provide. Improvements have been suggested to the Performance Management Framework (PMF) to aid this collaboration.

Number of actions agreed: 3