

Digital Access Strategy 2020 - 2023



Luke Benfield
Southway Housing Trust

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Introduction

Welcome to the new Digital Access Strategy. This document outlines our areas of focus for the next 3 years to 2023 around encouraging Customer Self-Service & Digital Access across our communities.

The strategy directly supports the following 4 key objectives set out in the ICT plan, which was adopted by the Southway Board in November 2019:

- 1. We will work collaboratively with partner organisations and local stakeholders to continue to bridge the 'digital divide' in our area.*
- 2. We will implement and promote the right services in the right way, so that transacting with us online becomes the 'first choice' for Southway tenants.*
- 3. We will continue to assist individuals, within our communities, in obtaining access to computer equipment, the internet and help or training services.*
- 4. We will ensure our workforce is both digitally capable and actively promoting Southway's digital services.*

The Digital Access Strategy sets out the model for service delivery that we are working towards, that will be made possible by the infrastructure set out in the ICT plan. Our previous strategy covered the period 2016 – 2020. As an organisation we have saved money as a result of the work delivered so far and can demonstrate significant changes in the ways that customers now access our services.

As an organisation we are excited to move into the next phase of our Digital Journey. Whilst the digital option is not everyone's preferred method of engagement, usage around these channels (established in our 2016-2020 strategy) is undeniably growing and this trend is set to continue. Compared to 4 years ago, more of our customers now expect a wider choice around the ways in which they can access services.

Seven Principles of the Strategy

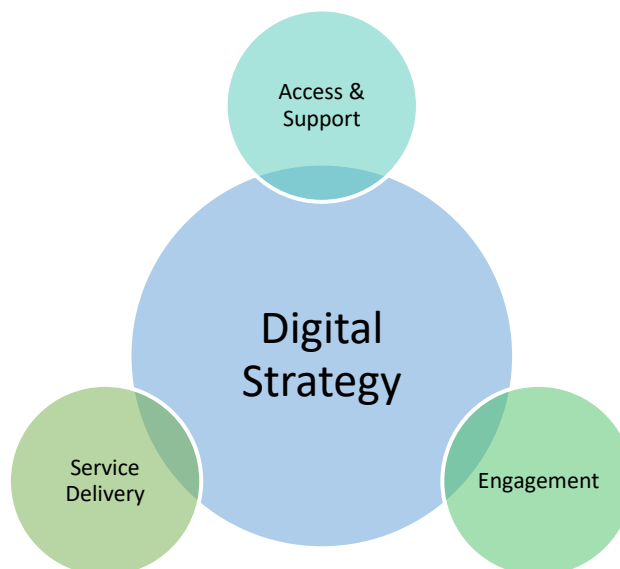
Looking forward, the following principles will inform the approach and direction of this strategy. We will regularly reflect on actions taken to ensure that they remain in line with the following statements:

1. Digital methods of customer contact and communication will continue to form a key part of our service offer to tenants, and these will be promoted as a route that is easy to access and to use. Support, advice, and promotion of these routes will be readily available.
2. Our tenants should be able to choose the most convenient and accessible route to make enquiries, access our landlord services, and actively engage with us.

3. Decisions about which digital channels to promote and further develop will be informed by data, and a sound understanding of our customer needs and preferences.
4. Requests for transactional services will be increasingly carried out online by making sure our digital services and website provide a good customer experience.
5. General information and outbound communications with our tenants will be digital whenever possible.
6. We will make sure that our more vulnerable tenants and tenants in groups that are more likely to be digitally excluded are provided with opportunities and are not disadvantaged.
7. We will continue to maintain more traditional channels of communications (i.e. reception, home visits, telephone) where this represents value for money and there is a strong customer preference to engage in this way.

Digital Strategy Themes

The 3 themes shown on the diagram below will be used to group activities over the duration of the strategy.



Theme 1: Access & Support

In 2016, a report from the Human Rights Council of the United Nations General Assembly declared access to the internet to be a basic human right. We recognise that there are still a significant number of tenants who do not have either the equipment or skills to access

services online. Whilst we know that this applies to a high number of older tenants, this problem is not exclusive to any particular age group and is often linked to financial disadvantage.

Whilst the various schemes and initiatives aimed at providing support and equipment to those in need have provided to be successful, we need to 'widen the net' in terms of where we target this support. Our 'Internet Savvy' courses and 'Laptop Loan' scheme have generally been accessed by older tenants.

We recognise that the most significant gains or impacts will be achieved by working in partnership with other agencies. Over the coming months we will be looking to identify opportunities to do this and shall continue to support city wide initiatives aimed at reducing Digital Exclusion.

Plans for Year 1 (Access & Support)

Some of the projects we are either researching or planning to deliver in the next 12 months are listed below:

1. City Wide Digital Access Scheme
2. Digital Champions Project
3. Digital Mesh
- Community Support Offer

1. City Wide Digital Access Scheme

The current climate created by the COVID 19 lockdown has to some extent 'forced our hand' in terms of providing services digitally. Equally, a lot of customers have also had to adapt to receiving services in a different way. Digitally excluded residents are at risk of becoming even more vulnerable and socially isolated as they find themselves unable to access vital services and employment opportunities, stay informed or keep in contact with friends or family.

Southway has been invited to take part in an ambitious city-wide scheme aimed at providing Wi-Fi enabled devices to around 2000 residents. This scheme will ensure that some of our most vulnerable and excluded residents can access the internet and develop their digital skills. This should enable more residents to not only cope through the pandemic but also to become more independent and self-serving.

2. Digital Champions

We will continue to work with our Digital Champions, to provide one to one support to get online. This work is currently being carried out via video and telephone due to the lockdown.

The aim is to increase the number of champions from the current 10 to between 15 and 20. A double-page article about the service and how to become a champion, will be included in the next edition of 'Southway Stories'. Volunteers are given support and training, and equipment is available for use. A longer-term plan is to grow the group, have regular meet ups, and develop the services offered. Potentially this will include trying to source funding to carry out more work.

On a similar theme, we will be working to ensure that all customer facing staff are trained on how to signpost, support, and encourage our customers to access and use our digital channels.

3. Digital Mesh

Looking at the opportunity to provide access to broadband services in our neighbourhoods. There are examples of where this has worked successfully including in Leeds city centre. Access could be made available on a referral basis from local schools –to directly support tenants who have children who need to access on line learning particularly during any form of lockdown

4. Community Support Offer

During the COVID 19 lockdown, schools across the city had to rethink the way that they delivered lessons to their students. Whilst online platforms were the obvious solution, a high number of students were unable to benefit from them due to lack of access to equipment in their homes.

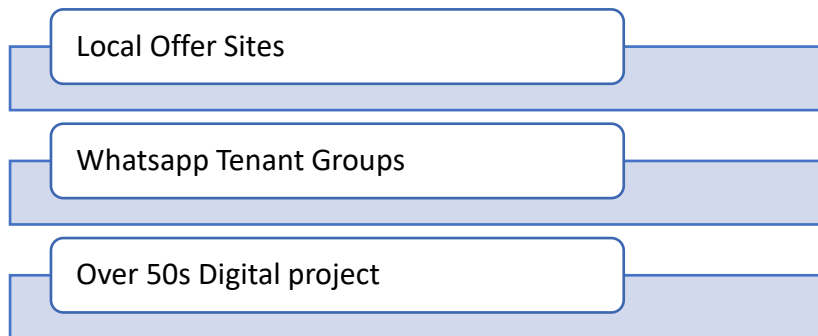
An additional £10K has been included in our Community Support offer to fund the supply of equipment to students living in our communities. We will be working with local schools to identify who may benefit from this support.

Theme 2: Engagement

The way we engage and involve our customers has been one of the areas of the business that has benefitted the most from the work we carried out through our previous Digital Access Strategy.

We will continue to engage with tenants digitally using tools such as the recently created Local Offer sites, the Armchair review panel, and our various social media channels. The ways in which we do this will be informed by analysis of our customer data and supported by the work we carry out to develop our new Customer Voice Strategy for 2021 onwards.

Plans for Year 1 (Engagement)



1. Local Offer Sites

Over the past 12 months we have been developing our local offer pages that can be accessed via our main website. www.southwayhousing.co.uk/local-offer

These community web pages provide tenants with a summary of events, news, and services within their local area. They display live local information about activities and other useful resources for tenants living in our neighbourhoods.

We will also be using these Local Offer sites to explain the work we are doing to improve our neighbourhoods and work with our communities. The sites will include a forum where tenants can leave comments and join in with discussions. Over the next 12 months we will be promoting the local offer sites and developing them for carrying out consultation. Our aim is for tenants to use the sites to engage with us creating a dynamic platform to feedback their comments on services we deliver and to assist us with consultation on various key areas of business.

2. WhatsApp Tenant groups

Our Customer Involvement and Community Investment Team have been trialling the use of WhatsApp groups as an effective way of keeping tenants updated with important information. Prior to lockdown we set up five groups; one for each of the QUIDS IN food clubs and have been using these to communicate important messages about deliveries and payments.

This was then extended to share information about other services that may benefit members, such as online employment support and access to school uniforms. We found that members started to use these platforms as a social network tool to chat, exchange recipes and generally keep in touch.

We were concerned that important messages may be missed so have now set up two groups for each of the five clubs (OFFICIAL and SOCIAL) and these are both very well used.

Over the next 12 months the Customer Involvement and Community Investment Team will be looking to explore the use of WhatsApp groups with our involved tenants, such as the Scrutiny Panel and the Customer Voice Group (previously known as Residents Consultative

Group.) They will also be trialling online conferencing facilities (WebEx & Zoom) as ways of holding consultation events.

3: Over 50's Digital Project

The aim is to engage around 100 older people, a mix of Southway tenants and those who volunteer within our neighbourhoods. The programme will include one to one and group sessions who have no basic skills through to more experienced learners, who may be able to offer peer to peer support. The focus is very much about the basics of using digital technology, for example, helping older people use email, set up devices, online safety, online shopping and banking and use of social media.

We recognised during the COVID19 crisis that many older people in our neighbourhoods were not able to maintain their social connections using digital devices. During the lockdown we reframed our offer so that sessions could be conducted over the phone. The aim was to enable older people to have the skills and confidence to use applications like WhatsApp and ZOOM, to enable them to maintain contact with family and friends and participate in group activities. We have engaged around 30 older people so far and are now exploring what the blocks and barriers are to older people using digital devices.

Theme 3: Service Delivery

Approximately 13% of enquiries into the Connect Customer Hub are now received via 'digital' channels (website, email, and social media) and this number is increasing. Activity around the website has increased and this has caused the number of telephone calls we receive to significantly decrease.

New technologies now make it easier for our staff to work from home or other locations. Whilst we still want to maintain an office-based team and maintain our community focus there are advantages to staff being able to work flexibly and remotely.

In terms of what this means for our customers, this allows us to rethink our operating hours and potentially provide an enhanced service around channels such as web chat and email. Over the next 12 months we will be making sure that our online channels are fit to achieve our digital aims. If tenants are having trouble with any element of our online services, this will result in them reverting to contacting us via other means.

Plans for Year 1 (Service Delivery)

Over the next 12 months we will be looking to broaden the 'Digital Choice' for our customers in the following ways:

1. Video Support

2. Webchat

3. Digital Lettings

1. Video Support

On line facilities have been used extensively during the lockdown period. Moving forward, an increased number of our transactions will be carried out digitally using video conferencing facilities, online videos, and technologies such as 'DocuSign'.

This type of media will be used to make our services more efficient for example tenancy sign ups and used as an alternative to physical meetings when this is necessary for property viewings, advice calls, discussions around tenancy related issues and even some simple repair requests and property inspections.

As well as offering a more flexible service to our tenants, this will also reduce the carbon footprint associated with carrying out home visits and office appointments.

2. Webchat

Over the past 12 months we have been trialling a basic web chat plug-in on our website. Demand is currently low as we have yet to promote this option to our tenants. Visitors to our website can choose to start a web chat via our home page. We currently have 1 – 2 agents at any given time managing this channel.

An agent can handle up to 3 simultaneous web chats at any given time. This year we will be rolling out and promoting web chat, and potentially increasing our 'self-service' offer to tenants using 'chat bot' technology for dealing with certain types of enquiries, such as rehousing, repairs diagnostics and advice calls.

3. Digital Lettings

During lockdown it became necessary to implement a new approach to our Voids & Lettings processes. Moving forward, we will be retaining this approach as we recognise that this is a preferred option for many customers. This is particularly the case for applicants bidding for properties from outside the area. Customers will now have a choice in how they are signed up for properties.

Target Setting

The targets that we set over the course of the strategy will be informed by the data and analysis detailed in our Digital Strategy Delivery Manual. This document uses data around the time taken and the staff cost of delivering services to assess savings and set targets. It will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis as we broaden the scope of digital services that we make available to our tenants. Appropriate targets will be agreed each year based on this information. The current position is that:

- Southway has a total of 5750 homes that it manages.
- We know that during 2019/20 32% (1856) of these households were regularly transacting with us 'digitally' in a variety of ways. We class these as 'Digital Households'.
- The Total Cost Saving achieved last year as a result of these transactions was £232,848 as illustrated in the table below.

Yearly Cost Savings 2019-2020			
Transaction Type	# per year	cost	Total Saving Per Year
Email	11,391	£1.91	£21,756.81
Webchat	717	£1.91	£1,369.47
E News	1,200	£1.71	£2,052.00
Text Survey	4,855	£4.45	£21,604.75
Website Visit	7,563	£3.23	£24,428.49
Direct debit	53,532	£2.86	£153,101.52
Online Repair	2,400	£2.58	£6,192.00
Armchair Group	67	£34.98	£2,343.66
TOTAL			£232,848.70

- If we divide the Total Cost Savings by the number of 'Digital Households', each household generated an average of £125.46 worth of operating efficiency savings over the year.
- In Year 1 of the new strategy 2020/21 we aim to increase our overall digital savings by 10% (an additional £23,285 to £256,133).
- We need an additional 186 households (10%) to become 'digital' to achieve this saving which would give us a total of 2042 "digital households".

In future reports we will also report on the effect that our digital work has on other strategic priorities for example carbon reduction and how our new ways of working reduce our footprint.

Links to other projects & strategies

- 1: Community Investment Strategy**
- 2: Customer Voice Involvement Strategy**
- 3: Carbon Reduction Strategy**
- 4: Southway Voyagers lean efficiency project**