Digital Strategy Review – Monmouthshire County Council

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Report summary

Exhibit 1: report summary

The exhibit below summarises the reason we undertook this audit, our key findings and recommendations for the Council.

Why a strategic approach to digital is important

1   Digital technology is key to delivering a wide range of council services in a more economic, efficient and effective way, is also an important means of councils delivering their wellbeing objectives and carrying out sustainable development.

2   Having a clearly articulated strategic approach to digital can bring several benefits such as:

- establishing a common vision for use of digital and the intended outcomes for local communities linked to the council's strategic objectives;

- helping to ensure that councils' use of digital technology is aligned with their key strategic objectives and other plans and strategies and is informed by a good understanding of current and future trends;

- reducing the risk of duplication both within councils and with partners;

- consideration of resourcing digital over the short, medium and longer term together; and

- providing a framework against which to monitoring progress over the short, long and medium term.

The focus of our audit

3   We looked at the extent to which the Council's strategic approach to digital has been developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle and that it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council's resources.

Our key findings

4   We found that the Council does not have a digital strategy. The absence of a costed strategy with clear objectives and measures also makes it difficult for the Council to monitor and assess the value for money of its strategic approach. We also found that the Council has not drawn on a wide range of evidence sources or mapped out the stakeholders it needs to involve, in developing and delivering its strategic approach to digital.

Our recommendations for the Council

Strengthening the Council's strategic approach to digital

R1   To ensure the Council makes the best use of digital technology to secure value for money in the use of its resources the Council should develop and clearly articulate a strategic approach to digital. In developing its approach it should act in accordance with the sustainable development principle.

Arrangements for monitoring and review

R2   To ensure it better understand the impact of its digital strategy and progress in delivering it over the short, medium, and long-term the Council should strengthen its arrangements for monitoring and reviewing the delivery of the strategy

Strengthening engagement opportunities

R3   To help ensure that its resources are effectively targeted the Council should strengthen engagement with the full diversity of those with an interest in the delivery of its strategic approach to digital

Working Collaboratively

R4   To help ensure that the Council identifies all opportunities to improve value for money in its strategic approach to digital strategy the Council should map out all potential collaborative opportunities to deliver its next digital strategy.

Detailed report

What we looked at and why – the scope of this audit

1 We reviewed the Council's strategic approach to digital, and specifically the extent to which this has been developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle; and that it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council's resources.

2 Our findings are based on document reviews and interviews with a sample of Cabinet Members and senior officers. The evidence we have used to inform our findings is limited to these sources.

3 We set out to answer the question '**In developing its digital strategy has the Council acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle and put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources?'** We did this by exploring the following questions:

- Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?

- Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?

- Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy?

- Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/preventative benefits?

- Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?

- Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?

4 **Appendix 1** sets out the detailed questions we set out to answer along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

5 We undertook this review in May/June 2023

Why we undertook this audit

6 This audit was undertaken to help fulfil the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 (the 2004 Act) and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

7 We sought to:

- provide assurance that councils' digital strategies will help to deliver well-being objectives in a way that secures value for money in the use of resources;

- provide assurance that councils are acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in the design of their digital strategies;

- explain how councils are using/planning to use digital technology to meet people's needs and deliver better outcomes; and
- inspire and empower councils and other public sector bodies by identifying and sharing examples of notable practice/approaches where relevant.

The Council's digital strategy

8   The Council's previous digital strategy covered the period 2018-21. The Council currently does not have a digital strategy. Its current digital work is detailed within individual service business plans and some project work.

9   The Council's current approach to digital is facilitated through three separate business plans: Digital Design and Innovation, Information Governance and Security, and Performance and Data Insight. However the Council intends to develop a new digital strategy. to help clarify the role that digital technology will play in the Council.

What we found: The Council does not have a clearly articulated strategic approach to digital

We found that the Council currently does not have a digital strategy

10   The Council has not articulated its overall approach to digital and therefore there is no clear and widely understood vision among members and officers of what the Council is trying to achieve through digital.

11   The Council has not had an active digital strategy for nearly two years and is now in an early stage of considering the development of its new strategy. Digital developments currently run across some service areas, such as the Digital, Design and Innovation team is working to develop its approach to digital through three workstreams that include 'services online by default', 'better use of data' and 'modern and interoperable systems'. An example of this work is the development of the Council's chat facility.

12   However, despite work in addressing digital needs across service areas, without a clear vision and strategic approach to digital the Council risks duplication, and not identifying potential multiple benefits that can be gained from use of digital across service areas. It also makes it difficult for the Council to consider how its approach is aligned with the Council's strategic objectives and those of its partners.

13   Once the Council has a clear vision for digital and has identified the outcomes it is seeking to achieve, it will be important for the Council to clearly communicate this internally and externally to ensure there is a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve.

The Council has not drawn on a wide range of evidence sources to help inform the development of its strategic approach to digital

14   The Council has not drawn on a broad range of evidence from both internal and external sources to understand the current and future trends that could impact on its digital strategy.

15   Some of the data used by the Council has included its Self-Assessment Report 2021-22, Monmouthshire Well-being Assessment 2022 and the Council's Corporate Business Plan 2017-22. Some work was also carried out to review service needs, including assessing call demand levels and reasons behind calls coming into the Council. Customer Relations Management systems (My Monmouthshire) and complaints processes were also considered.

16   However, the evidence the Council has drawn on is limited. For example, the Council has not drawn on evidence relating to service sustainability/resilience and resourcing challenges. The Council has drawn on some evidence to understand the underlying causes of current demands and issues to be addressed. For example, through its well-being assessment and pilot work to assess cause for demand within its Road/Traffic Safety Team. This work aimed to improve systems and processes and streamline operations through a user-centred design approach. The Council has also, through work with SRS Business and Collaboration Board, considered future trends and how they might impact service delivery. Also, the pandemic was noted to have impacted some service areas with long-term plans now being reconsidered.

17   By not considering a wide range of evidence sources, and the factors that could impact and influence future service delivery, the Council risks developing a strategic approach that may not meet the needs of its communities or deliver value for money.

The Council has not mapped out which partners it could work with or set out plans to involve the full diversity of the population in developing its strategic approach to digital

18   The Council is not able to demonstrate that it has identified all relevant people and partners to design and develop its new digital strategy. The Council does work in partnership in relation to digital through its participation in the Shared Resource Centre, a collaborative initiative with other public sector partners. The Council also works with a range of people and partners, on a number of digital initiatives, such as work with the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) in providing digital leadership training, WLGA Digital Transformation Fund Groups, including its Digital Testing Toolkit group, and SOCITM. However, the Council has not mapped out who and how it could work with partners, to help give assurance that it has identified all suitable opportunities for partnership working.

19   By not identifying all potential partners or opportunities for collaboration, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money and outcomes through for example sharing resources and expertise. For example there may be efficiencies that the Council can achieve through collaboration, such as additional joint procurement, building on existing collaborative arrangements. Monitoring the effectiveness of any partnership arrangements the Council enters into will also be an important part of arrangements for the Council to assure itself that it is securing value for money.

20   At the time of our fieldwork the Council had not developed specific plans to involve local communities, including service users in the process of designing and developing a new digital strategy. Not providing an opportunity for the full diversity of the population to influence the design and delivery of its strategic approach to digital risks designing approaches that do not meet needs and therefore does not secure value for money.

The Council has not costed its digital strategy limiting its ability to monitor the value for money of its approach

21   The Council has not costed its strategic approach to digital in the short term, and the longer-term resources required to deliver it have not been identified, including any anticipated savings. Some resources for digital work are identified in service business plans. For example, the Digital Design and Innovation Business Plan includes Staffing costs within its business plan. The Council also sets aside a ringfenced annual Budget for the Shared Resource Centre. However, the Council's strategic approach overall is not costed. This makes it difficult for the council to monitor the value for money of its strategic approach and to consider how resources could best be deployed to deliver benefits over the longer term.

In the absence of a digital strategy with clear objectives and measures, the Council's ability to monitor and assess value for money from its digital strategy is limited

22   The Council currently monitors progress in delivering its digital projects, within its service business plans. However, in the absence of a digital strategy, there is no reporting of progress against short, medium and long-term strategic objectives in relation to the Council's strategic approach to digital. This makes it difficult for the Council to monitor and measure the impact of its strategic approach and therefore gain assurance that it is delivering value for money.

The Council does not systematically review the effectiveness of its strategic approach to digital or share lessons learnt

23   The Council has not reviewed its previous digital strategy to establish what it had achieved and what it had set out to achieve. The extent to which lessons from its previous strategy can be shared and learned will therefore be limited.

24   However, the Council has learnt lessons through its response to Covid-19 which helped reshape its service delivery to meet changes in demand, such as increasing its online access to services for vulnerable adults.

25   The Council has also developed project charters, to record, review and learn lessons by evaluating projects during their lifecycle. For example, a project charter was established to evaluate and improve the Council's customer service approach to develop a more efficient, clear communication method and an improved customer experience. The Council also evaluated this approach. While these learning developments and practices influenced and impacted the Council's current service delivery, including an increase in digital and online provision, it is too early to see how the Council will apply this learning to the future direction of a new digital strategy.

26   By not reviewing its wider strategic approach to digital, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve processes, outcomes, and its arrangements to secure value for money.

Appendix 1

Audit questions and audit criteria

Below are the questions we sought to answer in carrying out this audit, along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Main audit question: **In developing its digital strategy has the Council acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle and put in place proper arrangements to secure value for money in the use of its resources?**

Exhibit 2: audit questions and audit criteria

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
1. Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?	1.1 Is there is a thorough understanding of the 'as is' (ie current demand/issues to be addressed) and the reasons why/underlying causes? 1.2 Is there a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that will impact and the challenges and opportunities that may result (eg risks and opportunities)?	• The Council has drawn on a broad range of information from internal and external sources to develop a thorough understanding of the 'as is' and how it is likely to change. This includes information (including data) relating to: – service sustainability/resilience and resourcing challenges. – the needs of citizens and communities. – the underlying causes of current demand/issues to be addressed. – analysis of future trends and how they might impact, eg social, economic/political, environmental, cultural or technological. They might include known trends eg ageing population, depleting natural resources and particularly technological advances. They might also include those with a higher level of uncertainty eg jobs and skills needed in the future. • The analysis of the 'as is' and how it is likely to change is well informed by involvement activity, as appropriate, that reflects recognised good practice (eg National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales advice and guidance). • The Council uses its evidence base effectively to:

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
		– identify actions in its strategic approach to digital that are likely to be most effective and why, including how they could address the root causes of problems; – inform decisions around its use of digital technology that seek to balance the need to meet short and longer-term objectives.
2. Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?	2.1 Is the Council planning over an appropriate timescale?	• The Council has considered what long term means in planning its approach to digital – ie how far ahead it can/should plan and why (at least ten years with consideration of longer-term trends as appropriate). • The Council has considered how actions can deliver the best impact over that timeframe in terms of outcomes and most effective use of resources. This could include consideration of appropriate intervention points linked to the Commissioner's definition of prevention. (More details can be found in: Taking account of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in the budget process – The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales). • The Council has set out measures for its digital strategy that reflect short and long-term impacts and value for money, with milestones that reflect progress as appropriate. • The Council has set out how its digital strategy will be resourced over the longer term as far as is practical (see also criteria relating to integration).
	2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its digital strategy could have, including:	• The Council has considered how its digital strategy can make a contribution across the well-being goals. • Staff developing the digital strategy understand what colleagues and partners do and how their work relates, and have sought to integrate their

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	• how it could contribute to each of the seven national well-being goals? • how delivery will impact on the other things it is trying to achieve (ie its well-being objectives and wider priorities)? • how delivery will impact on other what other public bodies are trying to achieve (ie their well-being objectives)?	work with that of their colleagues from across the Council and with partner organisations. • Integration is evident in the alignment of the digital strategy with other key corporate strategies and service plans. For example medium-term financial plan, workforce plan, asset management strategies, well-being statement and carbon reduction plans. • The digital strategy is aligned with other strategic intents such as: – customer experience; – management of demand/reductions in demand failure and prevention; and – design and implementation of new service delivery models. • The Council's digital strategy aligns with the plans/strategies of local and national partners including the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales Digital strategy and well-being plans.
	2.3 Is there a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve?	• Councillors and senior officers responsible for implementing the digital strategy have a common and clear understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve and the intended impact on service delivery. • The Council's digital strategy is clearly communicated to staff and partners who may help deliver it.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
3. Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy	3.1 Has the Council identified who it needs to involve?	• The Council has a good understanding of who will be directly and indirectly affected by its digital strategy and who it needs to involve. • The Council has effectively involved the full diversity of views in developing its digital strategy, including from non-traditional sources and from those it may have previously failed to reach.
	3.2 Is the Council effectively involving the full diversity of people affected by its digital strategy?	• The Council has provided genuine opportunities for people to influence the design and delivery of its digital strategy from an early stage, including representatives of groups who share protected characteristics. • The Council has used the results of involvement to shape the design and delivery of its digital strategy.
	3.3 Is the Council collaborating effectively with the right partners?	• The Council is collaborating to ensure it delivers better outcomes and value for money through its digital strategy and has put appropriate arrangements in place to support this, for example for: – sharing or pooling expertise and resources; – sharing information; – ensuring effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability including consideration of value for money.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
4. Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/ preventative benefits?	4.1 Does the Council understand long-term resource implications?	• The Council has assessed the costs and benefits of using digital technology to invest in long-term, preventative approaches and the cost (both financial and in terms of outcomes) of not doing so. • The Council has thought about the resources it will need to deliver its digital strategy over the medium and longer term (whole life costs) and how it could manage risks/meet those costs including, for example, planned 'invest to save' initiatives and managed reductions in technical debt. • The Council has calculated and set out any savings it intends to make through implementing its digital strategy.
	4.2 Does the Council allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the long-term?	• Action (including preventative action) that is likely to contribute to better outcomes and/or use of resources over the longer term is promoted and supported, even: – where this may limit the ability to meet some short-term needs; – where the benefits are likely to be accrued by or attributed to another organisation.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
5. Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?	5.1 Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress towards, short, medium and longer-term objectives?	• The Council monitors the costs and benefits of delivering its digital strategy from a value for money perspective. • The Council is measuring the wider contribution the digital strategy is making across its own/partnership objectives. • Progress is measured against short, medium and long-term objectives.
6. Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?	6.1 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its digital strategy?	• The Council regularly reviews the effectiveness of its digital strategy including: – effectiveness of its collaborative activity; – effectiveness of its involvement activity, including the impact of the strategy on service users including those who are digitally excluded; – the impact of the strategy on those who share protected characteristics; – the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the digital strategy overall in helping the Council to achieve its strategic objectives. • The Council has reviewed lessons learned from its response to the pandemic and is applying this learning to its digital strategy.
	6.2 Does the Council share lessons learned from its approach to its digital strategy?	• The Council shares and applies any lessons learned from the development and delivery of its digital strategy widely across the organisation, and with partners where relevant.

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