

Review of the Council's Arrangements to Become a 'Digital Council' – Bridgend County Borough Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why-

- 1 When we undertook a digital risk diagnostic in 2018, we found that the Council had not maintained the pace expected to develop and deliver its digital strategy. The Council has recently adopted a new Digital Strategy 2020-24. The key aims of the strategy are to harness digital technologies to help deliver services that are streamlined and integrated, keeping the citizen at the heart of what they do.
- 2 As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council, like many public bodies, has undergone significant change, often responding urgently to changing circumstances, guidance and regulation. New services have been created, some services stopped, staff re-deployed and new working practices put in place, including enabling those that can work from home to do so. This has required change on a scale and at a pace that is unprecedented and has increased demand for digital solutions.
- 3 Overall, we wanted to understand if the Council has effective arrangements to support its ambitions of becoming a digital council. This included exploring how the Council has learned from its shift to more digital working as a result of the pandemic.
- 4 The fieldwork included a review of documentation, Digital Transformation Board observations and interviews. Board meeting observations commenced in November 2020 and interviews in January 2021. As such our findings are at a point in time and we recognise that the Council has further progressed its arrangements since we drafted this report.

What we found

- 5 Overall, we found that: The Council has begun to put arrangements in place to support its digital ambitions but needs to strengthen its plans for delivering them.
- 6 We reached this conclusion because:
 - the Council has a new digital strategy which would benefit from reflecting the impact of the pandemic and emerging national policy direction;
 - the Council set up a Board to oversee delivery of its digital strategy, which has provided fresh impetus, but there is scope to strengthen some governance arrangements; and
 - the Council has not yet determined the resource requirements needed to deliver the strategy and there is scope to further instil a corporate culture for change.

Proposals for Improvement

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

The table below sets out the proposals for improvement that we have identified following this review.

Proposals for improvement

Digital Strategy

P1 The Council could improve its digital strategy so that it reflects upon:

- the impact of the pandemic on advancing dependency on digital services.
- the Council's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council should strengthen links between its digital strategy and other key strategic considerations such as accommodation and workforce.
- the recently published Digital Strategy for Wales, and how it can impact and strengthen the council's strategic approach to digital.
- opportunities to seek advice and collaborate with, where appropriate, the chief digital officer for local government and the Centre for Digital Public Services.
- the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) 2015 Act. There are opportunities for the Council to further embed the sustainable development principle and five ways of working into its delivery arrangements.

Delivering the strategy

P2 The Council should strengthen some governance arrangements to deliver the strategy by:

- quantifying the resources and timescales required to meet its digital ambitions;
- making programme risk management a standing item on the Board's agenda in a format which provides an overview of the programme risk;
- explore member representation on the Board to improve communication of what the Board has achieved and its intentions going forward among members of the Council and in turn to the communities they represent; and
- the Board providing oversight of the delivery of the strategy to members giving them the chance to hold officers to account for their performance in delivering the strategy at agreed intervals.

Proposals for improvement

Corporate Culture

P3 - The Council should consider improving how it communicates and engages with staff and members to evoke the culture necessary to embrace change. It should:

- develop a consistent message around the purpose of its Digital Strategy and Transformation Programme;
- strike a balance between references to digital transformation giving rise to savings and efficiencies in the Digital Strategy and latest MTFS and increasing staff capacity to focus on other things; and
- consider carefully staff concerns and attitudes to change.

Detailed report

The Council has begun to put arrangements in place to support its digital ambitions but needs to strengthen its plans for delivering them

The Council has a new digital strategy which would benefit from reflecting the impact of the pandemic and emerging national policy direction

7 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Corporate Management Board adopted its Digital Strategy 2020-24 (the Strategy) in November 2020. The Strategy sets out a high-level vision of becoming 'a more resilient, innovative and transformational Council', and is divided into three main principles: Digital Citizen, Digital Council and Digital Place.
- the Strategy supports the Council's Corporate plan 2018-2022 priority 'smarter use of resources'. One of the key programmes to deliver this priority is the digital transformation programme 'aiming to change the way we operate to enable customers to access information, advice and services online.'
- the digital strategy makes no reference to the pandemic. Like many organisations, the majority of the Council's workforce quickly transitioned to working from home and increased its demand for digital solutions as face-to-face communication became unavailable. This is a missed opportunity to reflect in the strategy the lessons learned during this time, build on the developments it has presented and embed change where it has already occurred.
- it is positive that the Strategy references the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) 2015 Act and sets out some examples of how the strategy will address the five ways of working¹. However, there are opportunities for the Council to further embed the sustainable development principle and five ways of working into its delivery arrangements.
- the Council has not yet set out its digital priorities post transition to the new platform in March 2021. We recognise that the Council has been focusing its activity on transitioning to a new digital platform with a different provider, due

¹ Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) 2015 Act sets out five ways of working, (Involvement, Collaboration, Prevention, Longer-term and Integration) needed for Public Bodies to achieve the seven well-being goals (A Prosperous, Resilient, Healthier, More Equal and Globally Responsible Wales with a Vibrant Culture and thriving Welsh language).

to the current provider's decision to leave the market at relatively short notice. When setting these priorities, the Council needs to ensure that in addition to expanding the range of digital services available, it can deliver equality of access to all its residents, to encourage use and limit digital deprivation.

- the Strategy does not state how it intends to prevent digital exclusion, other than stating that it will not abandon conventional ways of contact such as telephone. The people we spoke to were mindful of the need to ensure that the strategy did not lead to people becoming digitally excluded. We think that the Council should reflect on the lessons learned during the pandemic to articulate more clearly its plans to attempt to address this.
- since we completed our fieldwork, the Welsh Government published the Digital Strategy for Wales, setting out the national direction and Welsh Government's expectations for using digital, data and technology to improve the lives of people in Wales. This includes an aim to help ensure people in Wales experience modern, efficient and streamlined public services. The Council will need to reflect on its own strategy and how it fits in with the national direction.
- in developing the strategy, the Council said that it involved a number of stakeholders to inform its vision and approach. The strategy would benefit from close alignment with the emerging Welsh digital agenda. For example, the extent to which the Council works with the Centre for Digital Public Services, which launched in June 2020, and the recently appointed Chief Digital Officer for local government who are likely to play significant roles in developing the digital agenda across Wales. The Council should aim to make the best use of these services by working with stakeholders to share learning and retain a parity of pace of change with the rest of Wales.

The Council set up a Board to oversee delivery of its digital strategy, which has provided fresh impetus, but there is scope to strengthen some governance arrangements

8 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- it is positive that the Council set up a Digital Transformation Board to oversee delivery of the strategy. The Board, established in October 2020, is chaired by the Interim Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change and it reports to the Corporate Management Board (CMB). The Board is made up of representatives from across the organisation, typically at Group Manager level.
- there is currently no member representation on the Board. This is something worth exploring since this will improve communication of what the Board has achieved and its future intentions among members of the Council and in turn to the communities they represent. There is also an opportunity for the

Board to provide oversight of the delivery of the strategy to members giving them the chance to hold officers to account for their performance at intervals to be agreed.

- the Board is providing fresh impetus to delivering the strategy focussing initially on the new digital platform going live on 1 April 2021. The Strategy contains an action table setting out 48 actions the Council intends to take. The table does not prioritise the actions and it is not clear how the actions were selected for inclusion in the Strategy. It does not set timescales or allocate resources or responsibility for delivering the actions. So far, the Board has not developed the table into an action plan that would allow them to keep track of progress.
- it is positive that the Board intends to adopt a programme of specific projects to be delivered by subgroups, whose membership will include end users. No groups have been set up as the work of the Board has not yet progressed to this point.
- for a project to be taken forward a business case will need to be produced and agreed by the Board. They will have to include the anticipated benefits, as well as the resources required. The Council told us that timescales will also be considered on a project-by-project basis. As yet, no business cases have been produced.
- programme risk management is not a standing item on the Board's agenda in a format which provides an overview of the programme risk. Board papers include risk as a separate agenda item called 'Risks and Issues' and sometimes as part of a highlight report on the transition to a new digital platform. In both circumstances, the risks described are specific to the digital platform project and do not consider risks or issues that could affect the programme as a whole.
- there are opportunities to align the digital strategy and the Council's future longer-term plans for its workforce and its estates. Although the Head of Human Resources sits on the Board, the Head of Corporate Landlord does not. The Head of ICT sits on both the Digital Transformation Board and the Accommodation Board, ensuring some overlap, but there is scope to strengthen these links to inform any future policy decisions in this area.

The Council has not yet determined the resource requirements needed to deliver the strategy and there is scope to further instil a corporate culture for change

9 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has recognised a shortfall in capacity to deliver the strategy, but it has yet to quantify what resources will be required and where they will come from. The Council also recognises the potential resource implications at a service level to support digital transformation.

- it is positive that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2021-22 to 2024-25 (MTFS) states that the Council will continue to invest in the automation and digitisation of services in line with the Digital Strategy, but it does not say how much its investment is likely to be. It identifies earmarked reserves for ICT, as well as earmarked reserves for each Directorate. It is not clear from the report how much, if any, of the earmarked reserves will be used specifically to support the delivery of the digital strategy.
- there is a transformation team made up of three people. At the time of our fieldwork, the team was committed to some 47 projects, some of which are legacy projects and not directly transformational. The Board should consider how it will supplement its existing resources to deliver the digital transformational work programme.
- information Communication and Technology (ICT) resources available to act as an enabler for digital transformation are limited. The ICT team has experienced levels of vacancies in recent years due to their unique external market. For example, in-house capacity for developing software is very limited and the Council has no specific plans to increase capacity in this particular area. The team has also been preoccupied with managing and overseeing wholesale change in service operating models due to the pandemic placing other constraints on their capacity, such as supporting staff to work at home.
- officers told us about the pressures of dealing with the pandemic, which has meant limited capacity in several areas, particularly in education and social services. It will be a challenge for officers to find additional capacity to support transformational work whilst also responding to the pandemic and its aftermath.
- many people we spoke to identified the organisational culture as a potential barrier to delivering the strategy. We understand that previous attempts to move towards more digital services emphasised the potential savings, which caused a lot of concern amongst staff about potential job losses. The Corporate Plan, Digital Strategy and MTFS all state that savings and efficiencies could be delivered due to digital transformation. Senior officers understand that staff concerns and attitudes to change will need to be considered carefully if the Council is to be successful in delivering the digital strategy.



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