Digital Strategy Review – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Audit year: 2022-23

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Report summary

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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   At the time of our fieldwork the Council was developing its new digital strategy and was gaining a good understanding of its current situation to inform that strategy. Subsequent to fieldwork, the Council published its Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27. The Council has not however carried out a mapping exercise to identify potential stakeholders to involve in the development and delivery of its strategy.

5   The Council is in the process of setting outcomes and measures against its new digital strategy. Costs for resourcing and delivering a new digital strategy are not fully identified as a result and arrangements are not in place to routinely monitor or review the Council's overall strategic approach to digital.

Our recommendations tor the Council

Resourcing

R1   To ensure the strategic approach aligns with available resources the Council should identify the resources its new strategy requires

Arrangements for monitoring value for money

R2   To be able to monitor the value for money of its next digital strategy, the Council should strengthen its arrangements for monitoring both its progress and impact over the short, medium and longer term.

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 July 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   At the time of field work, the Council's approach to digital was incorporated into its Corporate Plan 2022-27 through two priorities: 'Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities', and 'An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place. These priorities have a primary focus of developing infrastructure and data intelligence, to support the Council's delivery of its services.

9   Subsequent to our fieldwork, the Council has published its new digital strategy, which was approved by Cabinet in October 2023.

What we found: The Council has developed a strategic approach to digital but has not fully identified the resources required to deliver it

The Council has developed a good understanding of its current situation to help inform its digital strategy

10   The Council has drawn on a broad range of information, both internal and external, to inform its new digital strategy. This includes external data on levels of poverty, demographics as well as internal information through consultation with service areas. Community hub engagement work also provided a service user perspective on the digital access needs of citizens and communities.

11   The Council has also drawn on information from its community impact assessment of 2021. This led to the identification of a 'digital divide' between those able to access digital technology and those who were digitally excluded. Community hubs were used to provide digital support for vulnerable groups as a result. These hubs were also used to gather feedback from service users to develop an insight into some of the reasons for digital exclusion across the Council. The insight from internal and external information has helped the Council to develop an understanding of long-term factors that are expected to impact upon its digital strategy. This has helped the Council design and deliver a strategic approach that meets the needs of its communities.

The Council has developed a digital strategy which incorporates its current and planned digital and ICT projects, but it is unclear how this strategy aligns to local and national well-being objectives

12   Since carrying out our fieldwork, the Council has approved its Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27 and has communicated it widely to members and senior officers.

13   The strategy states a set of delivery plans with measures for success will be developed for each priority on a yearly basis. Measures reflecting the new digital strategy's aims and priorities are currently in the Council's existing digital and ICT projects, with short, medium and long-term actions.

14   Communicating the Council's strategic approach to digital, to staff and a range of stakeholders increases the likelihood of there being a common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve and therefore increases the likelihood of it being delivered.

15   The Council has not however fully considered how its digital strategy will contribute to its Well-being Objectives, the four priorities noted in its Corporate Plan, although it has stated that the strategy will help deliver them. The Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27 also states it will contribute towards the requirements of the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales, the national well-being goals, Digital Service Standards for Wales, and the Welsh Language Act. However, it is not clear how this digital strategy will align to them, as well as its own well-being objectives, or those of other public sector bodies.

16   Aligning its strategy with other public bodies would reduce the risk of duplication and help to identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.

The Council has identified the stakeholders it needs to involve in the development and delivery of its next digital strategy

17   The Council has considered partnership opportunities, in developing and delivering its new digital strategy. The Council has a good understanding of who is affected by its digital strategy and has identified and engaged with a range of stakeholders, as well as some public engagement. This has helped the Council identify other partners it should involve in developing and delivering its digital strategy.

18   The Council does collaborate on some digital solutions as part of a regional partnership arrangement with Shared Resource Services (SRS). This arrangement enables the sharing of resources, information, and expertise, with the potential to generate efficiencies through collaboration.

19   Mapping out who and how it can work with partners helps give assurance to the Council that it has identified all appropriate opportunities to improving value for money in its strategic approach to digital.

The Council has not fully identified the level of resources needed to fund its new digital strategy

20   The Council has not fully identified the costs involved in delivering its digital strategy. The Council has however costed its ICT roadmap which is an important part of the strategy and has an SLA and management fee in place between the Council and SRS for its provision of ICT services.

21   The Council is currently delivering digital projects across service areas that are intended to deliver benefits over the longer-term. This includes community hubs to support residents to become more digitally included, and in-cab devices designed to improve the efficiency of waste management collection. The Council has also developed its Transactional Cost Shift project which aims to deliver long term benefits across its services. This looks at new ways to deliver better services while reducing costs.

22   Following the pandemic and a subsequent community impact assessment the Council developed its roadmap of investment options to develop the Council's ICT infrastructure. Digital projects undergo their own impact assessments. However, this is undertaken on a project level rather than considering the overall impact of the Council's strategic approach to digital.

23   Work is clearly underway to transform the Council's digital infrastructure and approach to service delivery through its digital projects and development. This work is supported by the Council's new Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27. However, without fully identifying the resourcing needs for the digital strategy, there is an increased risk of the Council not being able to deliver on its digital ambitions.

The Council does not yet have arrangements in place to routinely monitor or review the new digital strategy

24   At the time of the review, the Council had not developed its digital strategy and had therefore not set outcomes or measures for it. The Council monitors and reviews individual digital projects in terms of their delivery. These are monitored by the Service Design & Digital Leadership Board. Aspects of the Council's digital activities are also monitored through arrangements, such as reports on the Council's Commercial Strategy.

25   There has been no reporting of progress against short-medium- and long-term strategic objectives in relation to the Council's overall approach to digital. With the development of the Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27, monitoring the achievement of objectives for both the Council's strategic approach and individual digital projects is important to understand the impact of the Council's investment in digital, and therefore of arrangements to secure value for money.

In developing its new digital strategy, the Council has not reviewed the effectiveness of its previous approach to digital but has drawn on lessons learned during the pandemic

26   At the time of fieldwork, the Council had not undertaken a review of the effectiveness of its previous strategic approach to digital and so had not identified and shared lessons from it. Without reviewing its previous approach to digital, the Council could miss opportunities to improve the effectiveness and value for money of its strategic approach.

27   The Council has gained some insight from the Covid-19 pandemic, including the increased demand for support of vulnerable members of its communities and the community response to the Council's increase in digital service delivery. This has required services to work more effectively together in multi-function teams with a focus on improving the use of data for business intelligence. This has helped the Council to understand the needs of communities in developing its approach to digital.

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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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We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.