Digital Strategy Review – Wrexham County Borough 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. It is also an important means of councils delivering their well-being 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, medium and long 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   The Council's digital strategy is informed by a range of evidence sources, and it has been widely shared with officers and Members since its publication.

5   Since publishing the digital strategy, the Council has implemented an engagement strategy to improve how it engages with residents. But the Council did not engage with residents when developing its digital strategy. This means the Council risks developing a strategic approach that does not meet their needs.

6   The strategy is aligned with other internal strategies and the strategies of external partners. The Council works in partnership with some external partners but has not identified or engaged with all external partners who could

contribute to delivering the digital strategy and has not fully explored opportunities for collaboration and joint working.

7   The Council has not fully costed or funded the delivery of its digital strategy and does not have strong arrangements for measuring its digital strategy over the short, medium and long term. The absence of this information makes it difficult for the Council to be assured that the strategy is deliverable and that it will deliver value for money.

8   The Council learnt lessons from its previous digital strategy and the impact of the pandemic. It also has arrangements in place to learn from its approach to digital, but these are not consistently implemented.

Our recommendations for the Council

Engagement with residents

R1   To help ensure that its strategic approach to digital meets the needs of its communities the Council should engage with the full diversity of its population in developing its strategic approach to digital.

Collaboration with external partners

R2   To strengthen its arrangements to secure effectiveness, efficiency and economy through partnership working in delivering its digital strategy, the Council should:

- identify organisations that it needs to work with;
- identify opportunities for collaboration; and
- develop arrangements for assessing and monitoring the value for money of any partnerships it enters into.

Resourcing its digital strategy

R3   To help ensure that its next digital strategy is deliverable, the Council should identify the short, medium and long-term resource implications of delivering the strategy along with any intended savings.

Monitoring value for money and benefits

R4   To improve understanding of the impact of its digital strategy, the Council should strengthen arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the value for money and impact of digital activity 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. We undertook this work between May and July 2023.

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** contains the detailed questions we set out to answer along with the audit criteria we used to arrive at our findings.

Why we undertook this audit

5   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.

6   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

7   The current ICT and Digital Strategy runs from 2020 to 2023 and is due to finish at the end of the 2023-24 financial year. The strategy provides the high-level strategic direction and plans for the full range of digital service delivery during this period.

What we found: There are weaknesses in the Council's approach to developing and delivering its digital strategy

The Council's digital strategy is informed by a range of evidence sources, but it did not engage with residents in developing it

8   The Council's digital strategy is informed by a range of internal evidence sources. It held a series of workshops and interactive sessions with service areas and lead officers and repeated this process with Members to finalise the direction and content of the strategy. The Council also conducted an internal digital audit to understand the digital skills and needs of officers.

9   The Council also analysed how residents accessed services and contacted the Council across all platforms and used this data to inform its plans to change the range and capacity of available online services.

10   The digital strategy outlines some of the external factors influencing its direction, such as the need to improve broadband connectivity. But the Council did not provide evidence of how external partners informed the digital strategy or how it used external data and evidence to inform its strategy.

11   The Council has ensured that the vision of its digital strategy is clearly and widely understood internally. Since its publication, the Council has continued to engage with Members and officers. It runs workshops sessions with service areas that explain how the strategy can help services identify and develop new digital projects and how it links with other corporate strategies.

12   These sessions are also run with Members and the Council has ensured that Members newly elected to the Council in 2022 were included in these sessions.

13   The Council has a good understanding of the long-term factors that will impact on its digital strategy and has already acted to mitigate some of these. The strategy outlines investment plans to improve its digital infrastructure, which follows on from activity carried out under the previous strategy.

14   The Strategy lists planned activity including meeting residents' increased demand for online services, removing accessibility barriers for all digital users, and moving its customer services function to a cloud contact centre as examples of activity that will meet the future needs of residents.

15   Officers in the digital team meet with service areas internally to understand the future needs of services within the Council. They also work with public sector partners externally to understand technology developments and solutions being used in other organisations.

16   The Council did not engage with residents to inform the development of its digital strategy. This was partly due to the impact of COVID lockdowns during the development, which meant some forms of engagement were not allowed and the Council was forced to operate essential services only, as officer time was diverted away from activity such as engagement.

17   We also understand that since the digital strategy was published, the Council has reviewed and refreshed its involvement strategy which outlines the Council's proposed future approach to consultation, engagement and co-production, including supporting the development of strategic plans.

18   However, by not engaging with residents to produce the current digital strategy, the Council is at risk of developing a strategic approach that does not meet the needs of its residents.

The Council's digital strategy is aligned with other strategies, but it has not fully explored opportunities for external collaboration

19   The Council has aligned its digital strategy with a range of other internal strategies, including:

- The Council Plan:
- Modern Ways of Working; and
- Workforce Strategy

20   The digital strategy states how it will contribute to the aims and objectives of these strategies and support specific projects such as improving flexible working and auditing the digital skills of officers.

21   The strategy also identifies links and shared priorities with external strategies including those of the North Wales Economic Ambition Forum, the Public Services Board and the Welsh Government.

22   However, the Council could not provide evidence that it had identified the full range of external partners it could work with to deliver its digital strategy.

23   The Council has conducted some collaborative work, as evidenced in its year two progress report on the digital strategy. This included:

- working with business partners and Natural Resources Wales to install LoraWAN sensors in Wrexham town centre to measure footfall, traffic levels and air quality; and

- working with Digital Communities Wales to deliver digital training and support residents' access to online services.

24   However, the Council could not provide evidence that it was routinely identifying and exploring opportunities for collaboration and joined-up working to deliver digital projects. By not exploring all opportunities for partnership working, the Council risks not identifying opportunities to improve the value for money and impact of its strategic approach to digital. It was also unable to provide evidence of any review of its partnership working arrangements. Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of partnership arrangements is an important part of arrangements to secure value for money.

The Council does not routinely monitor the value for money of digital projects and its digital strategy

25   The Council has arrangements in place to monitor its digital activity. Individual digital projects are monitored by the ICT and Digital Transformation Board, which meets every six weeks to review progress. Progress is also reported to the relevant Scrutiny Committee. The digital strategy is monitored by quarterly performance reports to Cabinet and the Council's Annual Performance Review. However, the digital strategy does not contain short, medium or long-term goals, which makes it difficult for the Council to monitor progress and assess the overall impact of its strategic approach.

26   The Council has processes in place to evaluate the impact of digital projects, but this work is not always completed by service areas. As part of the development of a business case for new digital projects, service areas work with the Council's digital team to identify potential savings and value for money opportunities. Once completed, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of digital projects are the responsibility of the relevant service area. But there are no corporate checks to ensure this activity happens, nor is there any analysis of evaluation data to understand the overall impact of digital activity.

27   This means the Council does not always monitor if planned savings are achieved, reducing its ability to understand if its strategic approach to digital is securing value for money.

The Council has not fully costed or resourced its digital strategy

28   The Council has not identified funding for all activity included in its digital strategy. Some projects identified in the strategy are funded, including the development of a customer digital platform and an agile cloud contact centre. However, the Council has not yet costed or identified funding for a number of projects, including:

- installing broadband in all Council-owned housing;
- introducing predictive analytics to understand future demand in online services; and
- developing data sharing platforms with health partners.

29   By not fully costing and resourcing its digital strategy, the Council risks not being able to deliver the full range of the activity included in the strategy. Additionally, by not identifying funding for the medium or long term, it will be difficult for the Council to secure value for money within its digital strategy.

The Council has developed arrangements to learn from its approach to digital but these are not consistently implemented

30   An annual digital strategy update is also presented to the Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee. This includes a review of activity and an assessment of risk and funding issues for the coming year.

31   The Council learned lessons from previous digital activity to inform its current strategy, including from how it adapted to the impact of the pandemic.

32   The Council has processes in place to evaluate the impact of completed digital projects, but this work is not consistently completed and there is not a formal process for collating and sharing this information across the Council.

33   By not fully reviewing the effectiveness of digital projects the Council risks missing opportunities to identify and share ways to improve both the impact and value for money of its strategic approach.

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' (i.e. current demand/issues to be addressed) and the reasons why/underlying causes?	• 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.

	1.2 Is there a thorough understanding of the long-term factors that will impact and the challenges and opportunities that may result (e.g. risks and opportunities)?	• 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).

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria

		• The Council uses its evidence base effectively to:
		  – 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; and
		  – 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 could it 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; and
		  – 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; and – 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; and – 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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