

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Municipal Offices
Civic Centre
Ebbw Vale
Gwent
NP23 6XB

24 Cathedral Road / 24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Cardiff / Caerdydd
CF11 9LJ
Tel / Ffôn: 029 2032 0500
Fax / Ffacs: 029 2032 0600
Textphone / Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660
info@audit.wales / post@archwilio.cymru
www.audit.wales / www.archwilio.cymru

Date issued: October 2021

Dear Michelle and Bernadette

Data-driven decision-making feedback

This letter summarises our key thoughts and findings from our review of data-driven decision-making at the Council. It also includes some suggestions you may wish to consider to inform your ongoing work in this area.

A previous review from 2018 found that although the Council had lots of data available to it, it did not consistently use data constructively to proactively challenge, learn and drive improvement. Since then, we have seen several examples of the Council using data more effectively, particularly to inform several Bridging the Gap workstreams. More recently, the Council has also used data to inform its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During early 2021 we met with officers and undertook document reviews to consider how the Council is using data to inform its COVID-19 response and recovery, as well as looking at its wider vision and arrangements for using data to inform decision making. This is what we found:

Use of data

We identified the following strengths:

- The Council was quick to recognise how data insight and analysis could help inform its response to COVID-19. Staff with data analysis skills were redeployed to support pandemic response planning and the Council refocussed the principles of its Bridging the Gap data workstream to focus on using data to inform its immediate response to the pandemic and support locality response teams.
- There are several positive examples of the Council using data to inform its response to the pandemic. These include using data to:

- identify and target support at households most vulnerable to the consequences of lockdown;
 - determine the best sites to locate mobile testing units and vaccination centres;
 - model demand for childcare provision for vulnerable children and the children of key workers to plan staffing requirements;
 - produce weekly COVID-19 intelligence data reports using a range of external data;
 - lead on Coronavirus horizon scanning for the Gwent Strategic Well-Being Action Group.
- The Council is also making good use of data to support its recovery planning, focussing on economy, community, learners, and organisation / workplace. Work currently underway includes using data insight and analysis to support:
 - development of the Council's new operating model and community hubs;
 - income recovery work - by better understanding how and why people get into debt;
 - the Council's digital programme and behavioural insight work;
 - the Council's understanding of how the pandemic has affected the local economy and labour market and to inform economic recovery planning.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- While there are clear examples of improved use of data at a corporate level, use at service level appears inconsistent. Our recent review of Community Services found approaches varied considerably, even within the same directorate. We found that more regulated service areas that are required to collate and report performance data to Welsh Government were also more likely to use data to inform service planning. They also benefited from the support of data officers who provide technical analysis skills, help present data in a meaningful way, and can make suggestions on the potential uses of data. Without this support, not all service areas will understand how to maximise the data they have or what data to collect to support a particular aim. There is also scope to make more sophisticated use of data sets at a service level, for example linking performance and financial data to demonstrate value for money and inform decision making. The Council should therefore consider as part of its ongoing work on data how best to support all service areas to make better use of data and whether additional resources are required.
- Although the Council's weekly COVID-19 intelligence data reports are well set out and the PDF format easily shared, the Council should consider how a data dashboard could help streamline the process and provide live access to data.

Strategic vision for use of data

We identified the following strengths:

- The Council recognises the need for and importance of informed decision making and the value of using data when making decisions. CLT has endorsed the continuing role of data insight and analysis to inform its recovery planning and a Bridging the Gap workstream dedicated to data insight.
- Papers to CLT outline an ambition to become a data driven Council and set out the benefits of using data insight and analysis to drive decision making.
- The Council's Commercial Strategy 2020-2025 includes its ambition to use data, technology and insights wisely.
- Officers involved in the data work are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the potential uses of data, understand how it can benefit the Council, and are committed to taking it forward.
- Officers from the Policy and Performance team and those involved in the intelligence hub have a shared understanding of the Council's ambitions around data. For example, creating a central repository for data and a real-time data dashboard which officers and members can access without having to go through intelligence hub staff. However, it's unclear how widely known this ambition is and whether this is supported by senior management and committed funds.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- The Council's strategic ambitions for data are not currently formalised in a strategy. Although CLT have received papers outlining this vision, the reference to data in the more widely available Commercial Strategy is brief and high level.
- The Council should consider setting out its ambitions for using data in a strategy which can be shared with members and officers. Developing a strategy will provide the council with the opportunity to consider and articulate:
 - the purpose of making more effective use of data;
 - the scale of its ambition;
 - what success will look like;
 - the speed and level of prioritisation required to deliver this ambition;
 - the resources needed to deliver this ambition; and
 - a common understanding of how data should be collected, stored, and used across the Council.
- The Council has already indicated its intention to use the Nesta Data Maturity Framework to develop an organisation action plan. The Council should further consider how it can use the Framework to help develop parts of its data strategy. For example, using the Framework to assess where it currently stands and to identify what level of maturity it aspires to for each

category. The Council can then use this information to develop an action plan to help achieve its ambitions. The framework also provides examples of what success looks like at the chosen level of maturity.

Turning strategic ambition into reality

We identified the following strengths:

- There is commitment and enthusiasm from senior officers to use data more effectively and we were told this is shared by the Leader of the Council.
- The Council can provide examples of where it has used data in decision-making, particularly during the pandemic in making informed operational decisions.
- Officers we spoke to commented that the Council is now more proactive in its use of data, with data starting to be recognised as a key resource. The Council's use of data to support its pandemic response has helped demonstrate to a wider audience the potential of data beyond assessing service performance. But the Council acknowledges that it is early on its journey to change mindsets around the role of data to shape service changes, plan future service delivery and inform decision making.
- The Council has established an intelligence hub to improve the way data is shared and used to inform service planning. The hub aims to create a central repository of data and help embed the effective use of data across the Council, rather than being focussed within the Policy and Performance Team. The intelligence hub includes officers from across the council and those we met with shared positive experiences of being involved in the hub projects. The hub is agile in its arrangements, task focussed, and makes the most of council officers' knowledge and experience when it needs them.
- The Council benefits from corporate policy and performance officers with strong data analysis skills and an understanding of how data can be used. However, the Council recognises that these skills need to be more widespread and that in future service managers should have the skills to understand and analyse data effectively.
- There is currently no specific funding to develop in-house skills and capacity to take forward the Council's vision for data. Instead, the Council, through its intelligence hub, is working with a small group of officers to develop their data analysis skills. The Council was proactive in securing an MSc student placement to help it develop its use of algorithms to improve data to support services and respond to emergency situations. The Council also plans to introduce 'Data Champions' to improve skills and knowledge across service areas and help with succession planning.

Areas for consideration going forward:

- Whilst there are benefits to the informal nature of the intelligence hub, the lack of formal arrangements means its success is reliant upon individual officers that share commitment, enthusiasm, and capacity to take it forward. It's unclear to what extent officers involved in the intelligence hub have the capacity to take on this additional role and whether this approach will create sufficient officers with the right level of skills to implement the Council's vision and reduce reliance on the Policy and Performance Team. The Council should consider if there's a need to increase the capacity and capability of a wider network of officers.
- It's not clear from our work how well known the intelligence hub is. To promote the hub and raise awareness, the Council could consider including information on the hub into service managers' induction process.
- The Council does not have a delivery plan for its strategic vision to use data effectively in decision-making. Without a clear pathway officers may find it challenging to achieve the vision. It also makes it more difficult to measure success. As noted in the previous section, the Council should consider using the Nesta Data Maturity Framework to help identify the scale of its ambition and develop a plan to achieve it.
- The Council should identify the key skill sets and key roles required to support delivery of its strategic vision. This will help to identify any resource gaps and assist with succession planning.
- The Council may therefore wish to develop a delivery plan that:
 - demonstrates co-ordination of effort and resources;
 - includes a prioritised work plan of projects;
 - set out forward-looking targets and measurable actions to assess success against.

I hope that this summary of our findings and suggestions for improvements is useful. We have previously spoken with the Council about how Audit Wales might work alongside the Council as it undertakes a self-assessment against the Nesta Data Maturity Framework. Following internal discussions, we felt it would be more appropriate for the Council to undertake the self-assessment itself so that we do not unduly influence the process. But if it would be useful and add value we'd be happy to facilitate a workshop to help the council move forward from the initial self-assessment, for example to facilitate discussions on developing priorities / actions. Please get in touch if you'd like to discuss this letter and any future work on data.

Yours sincerely

Charlotte Owen
Audit Lead

cc Colin Davies
Audit Manager