

Digital Strategy Review – Conwy County Borough Council

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Report summary

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 The Council has a clearly articulated approach to digital which is communicated widely with officers and Members. While the Council does engage with residents, it did not engage directly with the full diversity of those affected by its digital strategy, in developing it.
- 5 The Council is making use of digital technology to deliver services, but the Council has not identified the resources needed to fully deliver its digital strategy. It has also not developed arrangements for identifying and evaluating the value for money of its strategic approach to digital, including the potential savings that could be accrued.

Our recommendations for the Council

Engagement with residents

- R1 To help ensure that its strategic approach to digital takes into account the needs of all its communities, the Council should assure itself that its engagement activity involves the full diversity of those affected in helping to shape its strategic approach to digital.
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Review funding arrangements

- R2 To help ensure its strategic approach to digital is aligned to available resources and to help enable the Council to take a long-term view of its costs and benefits, the Council should identify the full resources required to deliver its digital strategy.
-

Monitoring and evaluation

- R3 To help the Council monitor the value for money of its digital strategy, it should:
- identify any savings it is aiming to make from the strategy; and
 - strengthen arrangements to monitor both the delivery and impact of digital activity and the overall strategy.
-

Working collaboratively

- R4 To help ensure that the Council identifies all opportunities to improve value for money through collaborative working in delivering its digital strategy, the Council should:
- map out all potential collaborative opportunities to deliver its digital strategy; and
 - put in place systematic arrangements to monitor the value for money of collaborative arrangements it enters into.

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 during May to September 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** sets out 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 Conwy Digital Strategy runs from 2022-2027. The strategy has four key priorities:
- workforce;
 - services;
 - connectivity; and
 - economy.
- 8 The strategy has the same timeline as the current Corporate Plan and aims to provide digital technologies and solutions that will support implementation of the Corporate Plan. Each priority in the digital strategy is supported by a range of activity, aims and objectives that are planned for completion over the lifetime of the strategy. The strategy contains a Delivery Statement that outlines how the Council plans to implement its digital strategy. It also provides the basis for the IT Digital Transformation Service planning for 2022-2027.

What we found: the Council has set out its ambition for the use of digital technology, but it is not fully costed and there are weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation arrangements

The Council has set out a clear and well-aligned strategic vision for digital

- 9 The Council's digital strategy clearly describes the Council's ambition and the proposed impact of the strategy on the organisation. The strategy has also been communicated to officers and Members and is clearly understood. The digital strategy was shared in draft format with the Council's Senior Management Team, Manager's Forum and Cabinet. The strategy was also communicated to service areas, and officers continue to promote the digital strategy and digital opportunities with service areas. Having a common and shared understanding of the strategic approach the Council intends to take increases the likelihood of it being successfully delivered.
- 10 The Council has considered the wider impacts of its digital strategy, both internally and externally. The Council's digital strategy aligns with other corporate strategic documents, including the Corporate Plan 2022-2027, 21st Century Schools

programme, Customer Engagement Strategy, and Cyber Resilience Strategy. The strategy outlines how it can support the Council's Corporate Plan, including a move towards more hybrid working, and support activity to meet Welsh Government objectives, such as the migration of documents onto a Welsh Government digitised social care system.

- 11 The digital strategy also aligns with the digital workstream of the North Wales Economic Ambition Forum, and the Public Services Board Well-being Plan's Community Empowerment priority, including, for example, in relation to improving access to broadband. It also identifies how it will impact on the national well-being goals for Wales.
- 12 Aligning its strategic approach with its other strategies and objectives and those of other public bodies reduces the risk of duplication and can help to identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.
- 13 The Council is planning its digital strategy over a five-year period. The Council considers that this approach allows it to be both strategic and operational, and to reflect the pace at which technology changes. Some objectives and activity included within the strategy are planned to extend beyond the lifetime of the current strategy. These factors indicate that the Council's ambition and strategic approach to digital is long term, which could help to reduce the reliance on short-term interventions that may provide less value for money.

The Council drew on a range of evidence sources to inform its digital strategy but did not involve the full diversity of those affected by it

- 14 The strategy is informed by a range of evidence sources that helps the Council understand the current and future trends that might impact on its strategy. However, there is scope for the Council to draw in additional evidence sources, including, for example, analysis of relevant demographic data. The evidence sources the Council drew on included:
 - internal staff survey;
 - internal strategic documents;
 - PSB Well-being Plan;
 - engagement activity with partner organisations;
 - the results of existing service area consultations and customer feedback from website users and other Council digital platforms;
 - relevant results from other engagement activity carried out by the Council; and
 - the condition of the Council's IT infrastructure.

- 15 Whilst the Council drew on its wider engagement activity in developing its strategic approach, the Council did not directly involve residents in its development. It follows, therefore, that the Council did not involve the full diversity of those affected by its strategic approach to digital. Not involving the full diversity of those affected in developing the Council's strategic approach, and the delivery of it, risks designing approaches that do not meet citizens' needs and therefore do not secure value for money.

The Council is collaborating with a range of partners to deliver its digital strategy but has not systematically considered all opportunities for partnership working

- 16 The Council works in partnership in delivering its digital strategy. It works with external partners on a number of digital initiatives including:
- North Wales Economic Ambition Forum
 - UK Community Renewal Fund, other councils and private sector partners, to improve broadband connectivity in north Wales
 - Sharing a digital solution for blue badge applications with Anglesey Council
 - Health partners and GP surgeries to develop a digital solution to phase out the use of fax machines for sharing documents and information between partners
- 17 The Council has not mapped out all the potential the partners it could work with to deliver its strategy and opportunities for collaboration. The Council has informally identified some opportunities for partnership working and collaboration, but this has not been part of a formal process that would assure the Council that it has identified all partners and opportunities. By not mapping 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. Monitoring the effectiveness of the partnership arrangements the Council has entered into is also an important part of arrangements for the Council to assure itself that it is securing value for money.

The Council has not fully costed or resourced its digital strategy and there are weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation arrangements

- 18 The Council has not fully costed or resourced its digital strategy or identified the savings it intends to make. In the absence of this information, it is difficult for the Council to be assured that its strategy is deliverable, or for it to be able to monitor its value for money over the longer term.

- 19 The Council has implemented several digital projects that have led to efficiencies. These include an electronic document management system for social care as well as introducing Robotic Process Automation across a number of service areas, such as human resources and schools. The Council has also invested in digital sensors across a range of services resulting in efficiency savings.
- 20 However, the Council does not have systematic arrangements in place to consistently evaluate the progress, impact and value for money of its digital strategy. The Council has not set out short, medium and long-term milestones to monitor progress of the digital strategy, and it does not consistently monitor the impact of individual digital projects or the overall impact of its digital strategy. This weakens the Council's ability to assess the value for money achieved by individual projects and the overall impact of its digital strategy.
- 21 The Council provides feedback on some digital projects after their implementation and also informally to external partners. However, lessons learned are not consistently collected across all digital activity, or for the strategy as a whole. This means the Council cannot assure itself of the effectiveness of its strategic approach to digital.

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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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:
	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)?	

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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.
<p>2. Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?</p>	<p>2.1 Is the Council planning over an appropriate timescale?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).
	<p>2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its digital strategy could have, including:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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)? 	<p>work with that of their colleagues from across the Council and with partner organisations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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.
	<p>2.3 Is there a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
<p>3. Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy</p>	<p>3.1 Has the Council identified who it needs to involve?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
	<p>3.2 Is the Council effectively involving the full diversity of people affected by its digital strategy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
	<p>3.3 Is the Council collaborating effectively with the right partners?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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
<p>4. Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/preventative benefits?</p>	<p>4.1 Does the Council understand long-term resource implications?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
	<p>4.2 Does the Council allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the long-term?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council regularly reviews the effectiveness of its digital strategy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.



Audit Wales

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

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