

Digital Strategy Review – Flintshire County 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. It 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, 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 has a clear digital strategy that links well with partners and is informed by a range of internal and external evidence.
- 5 The Council has funded delivering of its strategy over the short term but has not yet identified funding for the medium or longer term.
- 6 The Council's arrangements for monitoring and evaluating digital projects are not consistently implemented. This also makes it difficult for the Council to monitor the value for money of its strategic approach.

Our recommendations for the Council

Approach to collaboration

- R1 To ensure that it identifies opportunities to improve the value for money of its strategic approach to digital, the Council should map out the organisations it could collaborate with in delivering its digital strategy and assess the potential benefits of opportunities it identifies.
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Understanding the resource implications of its digital strategy

- R2 To help ensure its next digital strategy is deliverable and to be able to monitor the value for money of its strategic approach, the Council should identify the medium and long-term resource implications of delivering its strategy.
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Identifying and monitoring intended savings

- R3 To help monitor the extent to which digital projects and its overall strategic approach to digital are providing value for money, the Council should identify potential savings associated with digital projects and monitor the extent to which these are achieved.
-

Assessing and monitoring impact

- R4 To better understand the overall impact of its digital strategy and monitor value for money, the Council should strengthen arrangements for measuring the effectiveness and impact of digital projects and its overall strategic approach.

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 March 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 digital strategy, 'Digital Flintshire', runs from 2021 to 2026. The strategy outlines progress made during the previous strategy and the changes included in the updated strategy.
- 8 The Council's vision for digital is based around a number of principles and identifies five main areas of focus: Digital Customer, Digital Workforce, Digital Business and Connectivity, Digital Partnership, and Digital Learning and Culture.

What we found: The Council has a clear and integrated strategic approach to digital but there are weaknesses in arrangements to monitor and evaluate value for money

The Council's digital strategy is aligned with wider corporate priorities and was informed by a range of evidence sources including public engagement

- 9 The Council's current digital strategy, 'Digital Flintshire', explains how it will support its wider corporate aims and how it links with other internal strategies such as the Asset Strategy and Workforce Development.
- 10 The Council drew on a range of evidence sources to inform its digital strategy. Internal evidence sources included a review of service area work plans and their digital requirements, and workshops for officers and Members. Externally, the Council reviewed the Welsh Government Digital Standards and Futures Trends report, the Scottish Government's Digital First Service Standard and the PSB Well-being assessment.
- 11 The Council also conducted a public consultation exercise, which provided residents with the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy. This received 179 responses, which were used to inform the strategy.

- 12 The consultation was made available to the public via contact centres and libraries, and the Council targeted external partners such as Town and Community Councils and the third sector, as well as established networks representing harder to reach groups such as older people, the North Wales Regional Equality Network, Traveller groups and disabled residents.

The Council is working with a range of partners but has not assured itself that it has identified all opportunities to work collaboratively

- 13 The Council recognises the importance of partnership working but has not identified and engaged with all partners who may have an interest in the development of its digital strategy.
- 14 'Digital Partnerships' is one of the five themes within its digital strategy, and this outlines how the Council intends to establish 'digital commitments' with partners. The Council is working with a range of external partners, including the University Health Board to develop health-related digital projects and neighbouring councils, Customer Focus Wales, Digital Communities Wales, and the North Wales Economic Ambition Forum.
- 15 The Digital Strategy Board, which has responsibility for the delivery of the digital strategy, includes in its Terms of Reference the importance of digital projects engaging with all relevant internal and external partners during the development phase.
- 16 However, the Council has not completed any formal analysis of which partners it needs to work with, or what its current partnership arrangements are achieving. Mapping out who and how the Council needs to work with would provide assurance that it identified all opportunities for partnership working. Not doing so could lead to the Council missing opportunities to pool resources or expertise with partners to deliver improved value for money.

The Council has resourced its digital strategy over the short term but has not identified funding for the medium or longer term

- 17 The Council has processes in place to understand the funding situation for its digital activity. The Council's digital strategy is supported by its Digital Strategy Board Plan, which lists all planned digital activity for the 2023-24 financial year. Projects are listed by the most appropriate theme and include a priority rating, timeline, and funding status. This document also provides an overview of planned activity for the financial years beyond 2023-24.

- 18 The funding status assigns one of the following categories to each project:
- funded;
 - MTFS bid placed;
 - ambition item or no business case; and
 - unclear where funding is coming from (implementation and/or ongoing).
- 19 The Board Plan shows that 42 of the 68 planned activities had funding to support them. Of the remaining 26 projects, four were yet to include a business case, six had Medium Term Financial Strategy bids submitted to support them, and for the remaining 16 projects it was unclear where funding would come from. Updates on the funding status of all projects are provided to each Digital Strategy Board meeting.
- 20 By not identifying the resources required to fund all of the activity set out in its digital strategy, the Council risks designing an approach that it will be unable to deliver.

The Council does not routinely apply its monitoring and evaluation arrangements and does not have an adopted methodology for identifying potential savings from digital projects

- 21 The Council has arrangements for the development and monitoring of digital projects but these are not always followed. There is also no agreed methodology to identify potential savings when developing new digital activity.
- 22 IT Business Partners work with service areas to support the implementation of the digital strategy, and to support the development of digital projects. The Digital Strategy Board oversees the development of digital projects and the order in which they are approved. The governance arrangements of the Digital Strategy Board are included in the digital strategy.
- 23 Part of the process of developing digital projects is the writing of a business case. This includes a requirement for service areas to identify potential savings that could be achieved through the implementation of the digital project. However, this activity is not always completed for every project and the Council does not have a recognised process to support the calculation of potential savings. Additionally, where the Council does identify potential efficiencies from digital projects, it does not routinely evaluate if these have been subsequently realised.
- 24 This means, for some projects, the Council does not identify potential efficiency savings, which makes it difficult for it to subsequently monitor the value for money of projects and therefore its strategy overall. As a consequence, the Council cannot quantify the potential or accrued savings from its digital activity, and so does not understand the full impact of its digital activity or the overall digital strategy.

The Council has arrangements to share lessons learned but there are weaknesses in arrangements for reviewing the effectiveness of its strategic approach

- 25 The Council identifies lessons learned from its digital activity and shares these with partners. The Council conducted a review of the previous digital strategy and how digital technology influenced its response to COVID. Many of the lessons learned from COVID have been incorporated in current strategies around developing flexible working practices and increasing the range of services available to residents online.
- 26 The Digital Strategy Board also has a standing agenda item to identify successes in digital activity, which are published on the Council's external digital hub and the gov.delivery website.
- 27 However, as noted above, evaluation arrangements for digital projects are not implemented consistently. This makes it difficult for the Council to understand and review the effectiveness of its overall digital strategy. This means the Council may miss opportunities to improve the impact and value for money 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' (i.e. 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.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	<p>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)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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, e.g., social, economic/political, environmental, cultural or technological. They might include known trends e.g., ageing population, depleting natural resources and particularly technological advances. They might also include those with a higher level of uncertainty e.g., 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: <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.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<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: <u>Taking account of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in the budget process – The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales</u>). • 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).

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	<p>2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its digital strategy could have, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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)? 	<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 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: <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.
<p>5. Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?</p>	<p>5.1 Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress towards, short, medium and longer-term objectives?</p>	<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.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
<p>6. Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?</p>	<p>6.1 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its digital strategy?</p>	<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.
	<p>6.2 Does the Council share lessons learned from its approach to its digital strategy?</p>	<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.



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