

Digital Strategy Review – Cyngor Gwynedd

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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 does not have a current strategic approach to digital or an approved digital strategy or equivalent. The absence of a strategic approach means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that it is planning over an appropriate timescale, informed by relevant considerations and the involvement of stakeholders. It also means that the Council has not considered the resource implications of its approach to digital over the short and longer term and has not developed measures to monitor progress in implementing it.

Our recommendations for the Council

Strengthening the evidence base

- R1 To help ensure that its next digital strategy is well informed and that its resources are effectively targeted, in developing its strategy the Council should draw on evidence from a wide range of sources, including;
- involving stakeholders with an interest in the digital strategy as well as drawing on the views of stakeholders from existing sources
 - the objectives and strategies of other public bodies, and identifying opportunities to collaborate
 - analysis of current and future trends (see our audit criteria for Q.1.1 and Q1.2 in **Appendix 1** for some examples of what this might include)
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Identifying resource implications

R2 To help ensure that its next digital strategy is deliverable the Council should identify the short- and long- term resources implications of delivering it together with any intended efficiency savings.

Arrangements for monitoring value for money

R3 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 Cyngor Gwynedd's (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 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 Since its previous IT Strategy expired in 2018, the Council has been operating in the absence of a digital strategy. The Corporate Director chairs a Digital Transformation Board to conduct research projects via its sub-groups for four specific fields. These are data, administrative, customer contact and technical.
- 8 At the time of our fieldwork in May 2023, the Council were preparing a new digital strategy. This report reflects the Council's progress at that time while recognising the Council had more work to do before the new strategy would be available for member scrutiny. In May 2023, officers intended to present a new digital strategy to members in the autumn of 2023. In terms of monitoring arrangements, the Council has informed us that the Department of Finance and Information Technology will report on the progress of the Plan and its projects in accordance with arrangements to challenge and support corporate performance. And that the Digital Transformation Board will present an annual report on what is achieved. These arrangements were not in place when we undertook our work.
- 9 The Council has a Digital Schools' Strategy with the aim of *supporting digital learning to ensure the best opportunity for Gwynedd pupils*.
- 10 Some current and planned digital projects are also featured within the Council Plan for 2023-28, as well as its ten-year asset plan and its seven-year Climate and Nature Emergency Plan.

What we found: the Council does not have a strategic approach to digital and has not demonstrated that its next digital strategy will be developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle

The Council has not drawn on a wide range of evidence sources to help inform its digital strategy

- 11 The Council has not drawn on a wide range of evidence to inform its next digital strategy. The Council is aware of issues such as difficulties in recruiting people with digital skills, but the development of its next digital strategy has not been well informed by evidence from sources such as:
 - service sustainability/resilience and resourcing challenges;
 - the needs of citizens and communities;

- the underlying causes of current demand/issues to be addressed; and
 - analysis of future trends and how they might impact, including for example, social, economic, political, environmental, cultural or technological.
- 12 There is limited evidence that the Council is planning over an appropriate timescale. In developing its next digital strategy, the Council is focussed on a relatively short-term timescale and has not developed medium and longer-term milestones which would enable it to assess impact and value for money of the individual digital projects.
- 13 The Council has not fully considered how its next digital strategy will contribute to its Well-being Objectives. The next digital strategy will be aligned to support some of the programmes in the 2023-28 Council Plan but will not necessarily be produced to directly support the Council's well-being objectives. The Council has also not considered how its next digital strategy will align with Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales, the national well-being goals or the well-being objectives of other public sector bodies. Aligning its strategy with other public bodies would reduce the risk of duplication and help to identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.
- 14 The Council did assess how the Digital Schools' Strategy could contribute to the Council's well-being objectives and the national well-being goals prior to approval. The strategy also contributes towards the vision of the North Wales growth bid and the North Wales Regional Skills Partnership. In developing its next corporate digital strategy, there may be some learning for the Council from the process it undertook to develop its 2021 Digital Schools Strategy.

The Council has not identified the stakeholders it needs to involve in the development and delivery of its next digital strategy

- 15 The Council has decided not to consult with the public in developing its next digital strategy even though it is intended to be specifically 'customer-focused.' It is therefore not involving the full diversity of people affected by its digital strategy to help ensure the strategy meets their needs. It will also be important for the council to ensure that specific elements of the plan reflect service user needs, by drawing on existing consultation info and involving them in design. Not involving citizens in developing the Council's strategic approach, or the delivery of it, risks designing approaches that do not meet citizens' needs and therefore do not secure value for money.
- 16 The Council has not considered which potential partners it could work with in developing and delivering its strategic approach to digital. Mapping out who and how it could work with partners would help the Council have assurance that it has identified all appropriate opportunities for partnership working. It could also help identify opportunities to improve value for money in the delivery of its digital strategy. Monitoring the effectiveness of any partnership arrangements the Council

enters into will also be an important part of arrangements for the Council to assure itself that it is securing value for money.

- 17 In the absence of a clearly articulated strategic approach to digital there is not a common understanding among members and officers of what the Council is trying to achieve. There might be internal barriers to successful delivery of its next digital strategy unless both members and officers understand what the Council is trying to achieve and the potential implications for service users. A common and shared understanding of the strategic approach the Council intends to take will increase the likelihood of it being successfully delivered.

The Council has not identified the long-term resource implications of its next digital strategy

- 18 The costs involved in delivering the next digital strategy in the short term have not yet been calculated and the longer-term resources required to deliver it have not been identified. The Council has considered and approved whole life cost for the Digital Schools' Strategy, but funding will only be secured for the first two years of the corporate digital strategy at the point of being considered by scrutiny and approved by Cabinet and Council.
- 19 The Council has not calculated any savings that it may make through implementing its digital strategy. The Council will use a 'fail fast' approach to digital initiatives which may appear less beneficial than initially envisaged. Evaluating whether digital projects have delivered intended savings is an important element of monitoring value for money of individual projects and of the digital strategy overall.
- 20 The Council has not considered how it could allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the longer term. For example, investing in digital technology that might incur significant up-front costs but realise efficiencies and improved outcomes over the longer-term. Considering if and how Council resources could best be deployed to deliver benefits over the longer term would help it demonstrate that it is applying the sustainable development principle. It is also an important element of arrangements to secure value for money.

There are weaknesses in the Council's arrangements for monitoring progress

- 21 The Council has identified a potential arrangement to monitor performance against short and medium-term objectives for individual digital projects, but it has not established how it will assess the impact of its next digital strategy as a whole. It has also not undertaken a cost benefit analysis for individual digital projects. The Council has only shared one progress report on the ongoing projects since the 2016-2018 IT strategy expired. In the absence of a digital strategy there has been no reporting of progress against short- medium- and long-term strategic objectives in relation to digital. 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.

The Council does not regularly review the effectiveness of its strategic approach to digital or share lessons learnt

- 22 Informally collated lessons learnt from the previous IT Strategy 2016-2018 and the hybrid working arrangements of the pandemic are known to the Council. Though they do not reflect upon the lack of collaborative or involvement activity, and the Council does not collate these at a strategic level.
- 23 The Council reviews the progress of its Digital Schools' Strategy 2021 with actions-based measures but has not reviewed the effectiveness and impact of the Strategy. By not routinely sharing lessons learned from the implementation of its digital strategies, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve processes, outcomes, and its arrangements to secure value for money. Completing and sharing post implementation reviews could also help the Council assess whether it has achieved its original aims and learnt lessons to improve future projects.

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

1. Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?

Level 3 questions

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?

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)?

Criteria

- 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, 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 (e.g. [National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales](#), Future Generations Commissioner for Wales advice and guidance).
- 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;

Level 2 questions

2. Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve through the use of digital technology?

Level 3 questions

2.1 Is the Council planning over an appropriate timescale?

2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its digital strategy could have, including:

- 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 (i.e. its well-being objectives and wider priorities)?
- how delivery will impact on other what other public bodies are trying to

Criteria

- inform decisions around its use of digital technology that seek to balance the need to meet short and longer-term objectives.
- The Council has considered what long term means in planning its approach to digital – i.e. 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).
- 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:
 - customer experience;
 - management of demand/reductions in demand failure and prevention; and
 - design and implementation of new service delivery models.

Level 2 questions

Level 3 questions

achieve (i.e. their well-being objectives)?

2.3 Is there a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve?

Criteria

- The Council's digital strategy aligns with the plans/strategies of local and national partners including the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy and well-being plans.
- 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

3. Is the Council working effectively with the right people and partners to design and deliver its digital strategy

Level 3 questions

3.1 Has the Council identified who it needs to involve?

3.2 Is the Council effectively involving the full diversity of people affected by its digital strategy?

3.3 Is the Council collaborating effectively with the right partners?

Criteria

- 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.
- 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.
- 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

4. Has the Council resourced delivery of its digital strategy so it can deliver long-term/preventative benefits?

Level 3 questions

4.1 Does the Council understand long-term resource implications?

4.2 Does the Council allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the long-term?

Criteria

- 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.
- 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

5. Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress?

6. Is the Council learning lessons from how it works?

Level 3 questions

5.1 Is the Council monitoring and reviewing progress towards, short, medium and longer-term objectives?

6.1 Does the Council review the effectiveness of its digital strategy?

6.2 Does the Council share lessons learned from its approach to its digital strategy?

Criteria

- 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.
- 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.
- 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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