

# Digital Strategy Review – Ceredigion 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, 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 We found that the Council does not have a current digital strategy and is in the process of developing its next digital strategy. To inform its future strategy, the Council is using relevant internal data and is considering external data and intelligence, but the Council is uncertain on involving the public. Despite not having a strategy, the Council is aligning the importance of digital to support delivery of corporate priorities. Despite the absence of a strategy, the Council allocated specific resources to fund its delivery once finalised. However, the Council does not have in place arrangements to monitor, assess and report progress and these arrangements were not in place for the Council's previous strategy which ended in 2022. Without these arrangements, it is difficult for the Council to demonstrate the impact and value for money of its approach.

## Our recommendation for the Council

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- R1 To help ensure that the Council's next digital strategy supports the achievement of its objectives and secures value for money, in developing its next digital strategy the Council should:
- gain an understanding of the needs of citizens by involving them in the design of its next strategy; and
  - review its previous digital strategy including its governance, monitoring, and reporting arrangements to inform arrangements to support delivery of its next strategy to include enabling it to:
    - monitor its impact;
    - monitor the extent to which it provides value for money; and
    - assess if intended benefits are being realised.

# 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 review in June 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 Council does not have a current digital strategy. The Council's previous strategy 'Information Communication Technology and Digital Strategy 2018-2022' concluded in 2022.
- 8 At the time of our fieldwork in June 2023, the Council were actively 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 June 2023, Officers intended to present a new digital strategy to members in Autumn 2023.

## What we found: the Council is taking an integrated approach to developing its digital strategy and is using internal and external data to inform it but does not yet have arrangements in place to assess its value for money or impact

### **In developing its next digital strategy the Council is ensuring it aligns with its strategic objectives, the priorities of its partners and is using internal and external data to inform it**

- 9 Despite the absence of a current digital strategy, there is strong evidence of the Council's commitment to digital and alignment with partners. The Council's Corporate Plan commits to improving digital connectivity and digital infrastructure as well as alignment with the Public's Services Board (PSB) digital commitments in its 2023-2028 Local Wellbeing Plan. There is a clear focus on digital supporting the Council's Well-being Objective of ' Boosting the Economy, supporting business and enabling employment'. The 'Boosting Ceredigion's Economy - A Strategy for Action 2020-35' clearly states the importance of digital as well as identifying digital as a key enabler in the Council's Hybrid Working Strategy approved by Council in July 2022. The Council and the Local Health Board are consulting each other on their emerging digital ambitions with a view to ensuring integration between the two public bodies. At the time of the fieldwork, this work was not complete. The Council is also reviewing the Growing Mid Wales partnership and Welsh Government Digital Strategy for Wales in its consideration of its own digital ambitions and priorities. Consideration of other stakeholders' digital intentions and alignment of internal and external strategies can help the Council in sharing of resources, avoid duplication of efforts and help to identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.

- 10 The Council is gaining a good understanding of its current situation to help inform its future digital strategy. The Council commissioned an external consultant to complete a digital audit of all its services including services' current digital arrangements, assessing the digital maturity of these as well as understanding services' future digital requirements. In addition, the Council commissioned a data maturity review on its current and future workloads resulting in recommendations for the Council to consider for its future approach to data. The Council has also completed a digital self-evaluation with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and piloted a Cyber Assessment Framework self-assessment. This information is key in helping the Council understand its current situation which should inform its future digital strategy.
- 11 The Council is currently drawing on internal data and is exploring external sources of data and intelligence to gain a broader view of the current situation in the County. The Council is reviewing the latest census results to gain a better understanding of the County's demographic profile. It is also reviewing different types of broadband availability across the County and economic factors influencing access to digital technology. Drawing on information from a wide range of sources and through collaborative activity, this increases the Council's ability to plan its strategic approach based on a good understanding of current and likely future trends in the County.
- 12 As the Council develops its future digital strategy, it is important for the Council to understand who will be directly affected by it. The Council is uncertain as to whether to consult with the public on its next digital strategy. Therefore, the Council runs the risk of not involving the full diversity of people potentially affected by its future digital strategy to help ensure the strategy meets their needs. Not involving citizens in developing the Council's strategic digital approach, or the delivery of it, risks designing approaches that do not meet citizens' needs, and therefore may not secure value for money.
- 13 It is currently unclear how far into the future the Council is planning for with regard to digital. With a lack of a current digital strategy, the Council does not have a vision for digital nor does it have measures and milestones reflecting short, medium and long-term outcomes for digital. Once the Council has a clear vision for digital and has identified the outcomes it is seeking to achieve, it will be important for the Council to clearly communicate this across the organisation, including elected members as well as the wider public and partners to ensure there is a wide and common understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve.
- 14 At this stage of its future digital strategy development, the Council has not finalised how it will contribute to the National Well-being goals.



## **The Council does not have arrangements to assess or monitor the impact and value for money of its strategic approach to digital**

- 15 The Council has set aside £1 million for an unspecified period to help fund delivery of its future digital strategy. While this demonstrates the Council's commitment and recognition of the importance of digital, the Council allocated this amount without having a digital strategy. Therefore, the Council cannot be assured it has allocated a suitable amount of funding to deliver its digital ambitions. The Council has also not finalised the arrangements for how services can access this funding, nor has the Council finalised the monitoring and reporting arrangements that will determine progress and value for money of projects resourced from this fund.
- 16 At the time of our fieldwork, the Council had not allocated any funding from this pot. The establishment of proper monitoring arrangements would help the Council to assure itself that value for money is being secured from the fund.
- 17 There is no formal corporate oversight for the monitoring and reviewing of the collective progress, impact and value for money of all current digital projects. The Council does have a Corporate Project Management Panel (CPMP), but it does not have a role in monitoring any projects, including digital projects. The Corporate Performance Board and individual scrutiny committees can request to review and challenge the progress of individual digital projects. However, without monitoring the combined progress and impact, it will be difficult for the Council to gain assurance its digital strategic approach is securing value for money.
- 18 At the time of our fieldwork, the Council were considering the CPMP as the right forum to assess, monitor and oversee the future digital strategy, or whether it needs to set up a specific Digital Board with responsibility for the corporate oversight. The lack of current monitoring arrangements means the Council cannot provide assurance that the benefits of individual digital projects, or their collective benefit are being delivered.
- 19 A key element in understanding the future success and impact of a digital project and wider strategy is understanding the perceived financial and/or non-financial benefits at the outset. The Council recognises that the intended benefits were not clearly articulated for its previous Information Communication Technology and Digital Strategy. Without clearly articulating the intended benefits of its digital strategy and individual digital projects it is difficult for the Council to monitor progress in delivering them, and the extent to which the strategy is helping the Council to secure value for money.
- 20 At the time of our fieldwork, the Council was reviewing its previous digital strategy to help inform its future digital strategy by assessing what the Council delivered. However, this review centres on whether the Council delivered its previous digital actions and projects. The Council should take this opportunity to strengthen its review and consider the effectiveness of the previous strategy's governance arrangements. This could include consideration of the monitoring and reporting of progress and whether the Council had sufficient information at the outset of the strategy, to be able to understand and monitor its intended impact. This learning

can help the Council to shape the appropriate arrangements to support delivery of its future digital strategy.

# 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"> <li>• 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"> <li>– service sustainability/resilience and resourcing challenges.</li> <li>– the needs of citizens and communities.</li> <li>– the underlying causes of current demand/issues to be addressed.</li> <li>– 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.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• 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 <a href="#">National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales</a>, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales advice and guidance).</li> <li>• The Council uses its evidence base effectively to:</li> </ul> |
|   | 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"> <li>– 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;</li> <li>– inform decisions around its use of digital technology that seek to balance the need to meet short and longer-term objectives.</li> </ul>   |
| <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"> <li>• 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).</li> <li>• 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: <a href="#">Taking account of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in the budget process – The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales</a>).</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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).</li> </ul> |
|   | <p>2.2 Has the Council thought about the wider impacts its digital strategy could have, including:</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council has considered how its digital strategy can make a contribution across the well-being goals.</li> <li>• Staff developing the digital strategy understand what colleagues and partners do and how their work relates, and have sought to integrate their</li> </ul>  |

| Level 2 questions | Level 3 questions  | Criteria   |
|-------------------|--|--|
|                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how it could contribute to each of the seven national well-being goals?</li> <li>• how delivery will impact on the other things it is trying to achieve (ie its well-being objectives and wider priorities)?</li> <li>• how delivery will impact on other what other public bodies are trying to achieve (ie their well-being objectives)?</li> </ul> | <p>work with that of their colleagues from across the Council and with partner organisations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• The digital strategy is aligned with other strategic intents such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– customer experience;</li> <li>– management of demand/reductions in demand failure and prevention; and</li> <li>– design and implementation of new service delivery models.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul> |
|                   | <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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• The Council's digital strategy is clearly communicated to staff and partners who may help deliver it.</li> </ul>   |

| 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"> <li>• The Council has a good understanding of who will be directly and indirectly affected by its digital strategy and who it needs to involve.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• The Council has used the results of involvement to shape the design and delivery of its digital strategy.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <p>3.3 Is the Council collaborating effectively with the right partners?</p>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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"> <li>– sharing or pooling expertise and resources;</li> <li>– sharing information;</li> <li>– ensuring effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability including consideration of value for money.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

| 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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• The Council has calculated and set out any savings it intends to make through implementing its digital strategy.</li> </ul> |
|   | <p>4.2 Does the Council allocate resources to deliver better outcomes over the long-term?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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"> <li>– where this may limit the ability to meet some short-term needs;</li> <li>– where the benefits are likely to be accrued by or attributed to another organisation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |

| 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"> <li>• The Council monitors the costs and benefits of delivering its digital strategy from a value for money perspective.</li> <li>• The Council is measuring the wider contribution the digital strategy is making across its own/partnership objectives.</li> <li>• Progress is measured against short, medium and long-term objectives.</li> </ul>  |
| 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"> <li>• The Council regularly reviews the effectiveness of its digital strategy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– effectiveness of its collaborative activity;</li> <li>– effectiveness of its involvement activity, including the impact of the strategy on service users including those who are digitally excluded;</li> <li>– the impact of the strategy on those who share protected characteristics;</li> <li>– the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the digital strategy overall in helping the Council to achieve its strategic objectives.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The Council has reviewed lessons learned from its response to the pandemic and is applying this learning to its digital strategy.</li> </ul> |
|   | 6.2 Does the Council share lessons learned from its approach to its digital strategy?                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>   |







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