

Digital Strategy Review: Bridgend County Borough Council

Audit year: 2022-23

Date issued: March 2024

Document reference: 4084A2024

This document has been prepared as part of work performed in accordance with statutory functions.

In the event of receiving a request for information to which this document may be relevant, attention is drawn to the Code of Practice issued under section 45 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The section 45 code sets out the practice in the handling of requests that is expected of public authorities, including consultation with relevant third parties. In relation to this document, the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office are relevant third parties. Any enquiries regarding disclosure or re-use of this document should be sent to Audit Wales at infoofficer@audit.wales.

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

Contents

Digital Strategy Review

Report summary	4
Detailed report	
What we looked at and why – the scope of this audit	6
What we found – there are weaknesses in the Council’s approach to developing and delivering its digital strategy	8
Appendices	
Appendix 1: key questions and audit criteria	11

Digital Strategy Review

Report summary

Exhibit 1: report summary

The exhibit below summarises the reason why 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 well-being 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 coordinated resourcing of digital over the short, medium and longer term; and
 - providing a framework against which to monitor 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 whether it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council's resources.

Our key findings

- 4 We found weaknesses in the Council's strategic approach to managing and delivering its digital strategy. The Council's digital strategy 2020-24 is not expressed as a set of timebound measurable objectives and milestones. In the absence of clear objectives and measures of success, the Council cannot easily understand whether it is achieving its intended outcomes and value for money.
- 5 The Council has not drawn on a broad range of evidence from both internal and external sources to sufficiently analyse the 'as is' to develop an understanding of the underlying causes of current demand/issues to be addressed.
- 6 The Council has not identified and engaged with all those stakeholders who may have an interest in the development of its digital strategy.
- 7 The Council has not costed the delivery of its digital strategy nor identified its planned savings from delivering its digital strategy. The absence of this information makes it difficult for the Council to be assured that the strategy is deliverable, and that it is delivering value for money over time.

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, the Council should draw on evidence from a wide range of sources, both internally and externally including:
- involving stakeholders with an interest in the digital strategy as well as drawing on the views of stakeholders from existing sources; and
 - aligning its strategic approach to digital both across the Council and with partners to help identify opportunities to share resources, avoid duplication of effort and deliver multiple benefits.

Identifying resource implications

- R2 To help ensure that its next digital strategy is deliverable and achieving value for money the Council should identify the short, medium and long-term resource implications of delivering it together with any intended savings.

Arrangements for monitoring value for money

- R3 To help ensure that the Council can effectively monitor and evaluate value for money from its strategic approach to digital it should strengthen its arrangements for monitoring the progress and impact of its digital strategy over the short, medium and long term.

Detailed report

What we looked at – the scope of this audit

- 8 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.
- 9 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 July and August 2023.
- 10 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?
- 11 **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.

- 12 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.
- 13 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

- 14 The Council's Digital Strategy covers the period 2020-2024. The digital vision is to become a more resilient, innovative and transformational Council by listening and responding to our communities, businesses and staff, and identifying new opportunities in the digital marketplace that enhance our service provision. The Council's Digital Strategy was agreed just prior to the pandemic, which inevitably impacted on the Council's ability to deliver it during that period.
- 15 The Digital Strategy supports Bridgend's Corporate Vision which is 'One Council working together to improve lives' supporting communities to create their own solutions and reduce dependency on the Council.
- 16 The Strategy is seen as a key enabler in supporting delivery of the Corporate Plan. It is divided into three themes:
 - Digital Citizen – (Self-serve when required Choice of communication channels Digital skills and inclusivity)
 - Digital Council – (Transformation of services Innovative digital solutions Joined-up data Citizen centric) and
 - Digital Place – (Widely connected Community focussed Forward thinking, economically attractive)
- 17 Underpinning each theme is a programme of works to deliver the Council's goals by 2024, which is summarised in the strategy as a list of actions. It is unclear if these have been achieved.
- 18 There are nine principles including digital services, which will be integrated to deliver seamless connectivity, be quick and reliable, demonstrate digital leadership, and contribute to the reduction of carbon footprint.
- 19 There are also 12 aims for Bridgend as a digitally mature council, such as setting clear ambitious targets for the delivery of work streams, delivering value for money by making smarter use of resources, and achieving end to end service re-design, with an emphasis on citizen needs, embedding community benefits, and communication.

What we found – there are weaknesses in the Council’s approach to developing and delivering its digital strategy

In the absence of clear objectives and measures of success the Council’s ability to monitor and assess value for money from its digital strategy is limited

- 20 The Council’s digital strategy 2020-2024 is not expressed as a set of timebound measurable objectives and milestones. In the absence of clear objectives and measures of success, the Council cannot easily understand whether it is achieving its intended outcomes and value for money.
- 21 There are examples where the Council has implemented individual digital projects to improve the value for money of services. Such as the Housing Jigsaw project, which achieved a reduction in face-to-face contact and potential cost avoidance of just under £9 million per annum. Yet these project savings and benefits were not reported to assist the Council in assessing the overall value for money of its strategic approach to digital.
- 22 The Council monitors progress in delivering its strategy at its Digital Transformation Board. It uses a highlight report which summarises its programme of digital activity. This is helpful in identifying slippage of delivery on a project-by-project basis. However, the Council has not developed a mechanism to enable it to assess the actual realisation of benefits from these projects in its digital programme, nor how these projects contribute to achieving its strategic vision and aims for digital. Therefore, the Council does not know whether the projects are collectively achieving the Council’s intended medium and longer-term outcomes over the life of its strategy.

The Council has not identified and engaged with all stakeholders who may have an interest in developing its digital strategy

- 23 The Council has not identified and engaged with all stakeholders who may have an interest in the development and delivery of its digital strategy, including groups who share protected characteristics. Not involving stakeholders 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.
- 24 The Council has not identified potential digital partners and explored how it could work with them in developing and delivering its strategic approach to digital. Mapping out who and how it could work with partners would help assure the Council 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 from benefits of economies of scale removing duplication and sharing scarce resources.

- 25 It is not evident how the digital strategy is aligned with the Council's other key corporate strategies such as the Bridgend 2030 net zero carbon strategy. Aligning its strategic approach to digital both across the Council and with partners should help the Council identify opportunities to share resources, avoid duplication of effort and deliver multiple benefits.

The Council has not drawn on a broad range of evidence to inform the development of its digital strategy

- 26 The Council has not drawn on a broad range of evidence from both internal and external sources to understand the current and future trends that could impact on its digital strategy. The Council has drawn on internal data to understand the extent to which service users use digital channels to contact the Council and has also sought views in the future digitisation of services through its budget consultation. However, the Council has not drawn on a wider range of evidence and also has not regularly reviewed the effectiveness of its strategic approach to identify lessons learned. By not considering a wide range of evidence sources the Council risks developing a strategic approach that does may not meet the needs of its communities or deliver value for money.

The Council has not costed and identified planned savings from the delivery of its digital strategy

- 27 The Council has not costed the delivery of its digital strategy, although it has identified reserves to support delivery of the strategy. In 2021-22, it set aside just under £1.3 million in both capital and revenue. By the end of 2024-25, it is anticipated that just under £900,000 of this reserve will remain. We previously recommended¹ that the Council should quantify the resources and timescales required to meet its digital ambitions.
- 28 The Council has also not identified its planned savings from delivering its digital strategy. Even though the Council's medium term financial strategy (MTFS) 2023-24 to 2026-27 is anticipating an acceleration of the Council's digital programme to enable efficiency savings. The absence of this information makes it difficult for the Council to be assured that the strategy is deliverable, and that it is delivering value for money over time.
- 29 There are examples of digital projects that the Council is planning to implement that aim to deliver benefits over the longer-term. For example, the Robotic Process

¹ Audit Wales, [Bridgend County Borough Council – Review of the Council's Arrangements to Become a 'Digital Council'](#), September 2021

Automation project. This project will require investment in digital technology that will incur significant up-front costs but aims to realise efficiencies and improved outcomes over the longer term. However, at present this has not progressed due to the upfront costs involved. Consideration of how resources can best be deployed over the short and longer term is an important element of arrangements to secure value for money.

- 30 The Council does not have a prioritised plan for a managed reduction of out of date, ageing and de-supported devices and systems. We recognise there are ongoing challenges in the IT industry as costs of hardware, software and staff are rising, making it increasingly difficult to make significant inroads into managed reductions. However, the absence of a strategic plan for updating its IT infrastructure risks the Council incurring additional costs and inefficiencies over the longer term.

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).
	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"> • 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; and – 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 the 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</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has considered how its digital strategy can make a contribution across the well-being goals.

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	<p>digital strategy could have, including:</p> <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)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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; and – 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; and – 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; and – 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

1 Capital Quarter

Tyndall Street

Cardiff

CF10 4BZ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English.
Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.