

CABINET

Date of Meeting	Tuesday, 23 rd July 2024
Report Subject	Digital Strategy – Audit Wales Review, Recommendations and Proposed Actions
Cabinet Member	Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
Report Author	Chief Officer (Governance)
Type of Report	Strategic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current digital strategy (Digital Flintshire 2021-2026) incorporates our learning, experiences, growth and ambition since it was first published in 2016 and the Council has made good progress in delivering the aims set out.

Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council’s digital strategy throughout Summer 2023, where auditors reviewed all relevant documentation and interviewed key officers and Cabinet Members.

The primary focus of the audit was the extent to which the Digital Strategy was developed in accordance with the sustainable development principle, thereby ensuring that it will help to secure value for money in the use of the Council’s resources.

The Final Report has been returned to the Council with four key recommendations to assist in ensuring it secures value for money. Officers have reviewed these recommendations and have devised proposed actions for approval by Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That Cabinet approves the action plan.
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REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE DIGITAL STRATEGY AND AUDIT WALES REPORT
1.01	<p>Background:</p> <p>The Council's Digital Strategy, Digital Flintshire 2021-2026, comprises of 8 main themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Digital Customer• Digital Workforce• Digital Business and Connectivity• Digital Partnership• Information Management• Digital Delivery• Digital Inclusion• Digital Learning and Culture <p>Each theme is led by a senior manager and is underpinned by a set of core principles and high-level actions which are reflected within the Digital Strategy.</p>
1.02	<p>The Digital Strategy Board (DSB) is chaired by the Chief Officer for Governance and is comprised of theme leads and portfolio representatives from across the Council. It meets bi-monthly to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Receive theme updates to assess progress and remove barriers;• Review and assess business cases for new projects for inclusion in the Digital Strategy Project Plan, ensuring these meet key criteria for appropriate prioritisation;• Record and assess risks and issues. <p>The Digital Strategy Project Plan contains a list of all projects within the Digital Strategy which are assigned to a theme and reported against.</p>
1.03	<p>Audit</p> <p>Audit Wales reviewed the Council's strategic approach to digital in 2023 as part of a national review. The aims were centred around value for money and to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide assurance the Digital Strategy helps to deliver well-being objectives and acts in accordance with the sustainable development principle;• explain how the Council uses digital technology to meet the needs of its customers and deliver better outcomes;• share examples of good practice and differing approaches. <p>Key officers and members were interviewed over a period of approximately four months where a number of key questions were explored, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is the Council's digital strategy informed by a good understanding of current and future trends?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?
1.04	<p>Findings and Recommendations</p> <p>The final report from Audit Wales was issued to the Council in March 2024. It concluded that the Council:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has ensured that the Digital Strategy is aligned with wider corporate priorities and that it has been informed by a range of sources, including public engagement; • recognises the importance of partnership working and collaborates with a range of partners; • has resourced the digital strategy in the shorter term but needs to identify funding for the medium and / or longer term; • has arrangements for the development and monitoring of digital projects, but that these need to be followed consistently and ensure that evaluation takes place to fully identify and realise benefits and efficiencies alongside the development of better ways of working. <p>The report also contains some recommendations which centre on the finding that, “the Council has a clear and integrated strategic approach to digital but there are weaknesses in arrangements to monitor and evaluate value for money”.</p> <p>The areas covered by the recommendations are as follows:</p> <p>R1 - Approach to collaboration R2 – Understanding the resource implications of the Digital Strategy R3 – Identifying and monitoring intended savings R4 – Assessing and monitoring impact</p>
1.05	<p>Response</p> <p>In order to meet the recommendations, the Council intends to undertake the key actions outlined in Appendix 4 which have been summarised below and will ensure that we are able to continue to develop and deliver better value for money as part of the delivery of the Digital Strategy.</p> <p>R1 - Approach to collaboration <i>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.</i></p> <p>The Strategy itself contains a partnership theme and the Council is working with partners to deliver its aims e.g. the Good Things Foundation to provide free data SIM cards and the work with the Economic Ambition</p>

Board to deliver the Local Full Fibre Network. However, there isn't a full list and comprehensive map of partners and where they might be able to help.

Response - The Council will produce a map of current partner organisations as well as detailing other organisations we may be able to partner with to help achieve the aims of the digital strategy. The map will outline key benefits of working with these organisations and will be shared corporately so it can be used across all service areas. We will assess whether working with them may help deliver our objectives and approach them if it might.

R2 – Understanding the resource implications of the Digital Strategy

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.

The Digital Strategy Action Plan identifies which projects are funded and which are not. We reviewed the action plan recently to remove the majority of projects which were unfunded, and 34 out of 43 projects (79%) have confirmed funding. The degree of precision around funding requirements increases as the project gets closer to implementation, conversely medium to long term projects (typically the larger projects) have less detail. Implementing this recommendation will appear to increase the financial pressure on the Council in the short term though in reality this will be merely surfacing pressures that would otherwise have been less visible.

Response - The Council has already made changes to the business case process for DSB to ensure that no new unfunded projects are approved. Those changes will also help it to better identify areas where there are resource implications, whilst ensuring that it reviews all of the information gathered to inform the next iteration of Digital Flintshire.

R3 – Identifying and monitoring intended savings

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.

Hitherto, digital projects have primarily been focussed on improving customer experience or access rather than cashable savings e.g the integrated process for applying for school places which also deals with transport and school uniforms which replaced the need for parents to deal with 3 separate services in the Council. The business case for new projects now requires all projects to identify the savings to be delivered and they will not be approved (except in exceptional circumstances) unless the project does deliver savings. An accountant is allocated to the DSB who will feed data on savings proffered into the pre-existing processes for predicting savings and monitoring their delivery.

Response – the Council has amended processes at its DSB to ensure there is greater level of challenge around identifying and monitoring savings. The Council has made amendments to key operational

documents to ensure that this can be facilitated. The Council will review completed projects, including reports on costs and savings and the sharing of reflections / lessons learned.

Note it was a request from the Governance and Audit Committee (when it considered this report from Audit Wales) that Corporate Resources OSC should play a role in monitoring the savings from the Digital Strategy. Savings from the Digital Strategy is included in the transformation programme, and, as such, is something that the committee will monitor (if the recommendations in that report are accepted).

R4 – Assessing and monitoring impact

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.

We currently have largely anecdotal feedback on the outcomes of projects and reports back to DSB when a project has completed as part of the relevant theme update. For example, the digital blog shows the results of completed projects. That approach needs to be formalised and standardised. It also needs to encompass the savings tracking identified above.

Response – The Council will further develop and implement standardised operational project documentation which will allow it to review and assess impact and effectiveness at a strategic level.

2.00 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

2.01	<p>Work is continually ongoing to ensure that the projects and ambitions within the strategy have accurate costings assigned; this will create a funding plan and ensure that any potential funding gaps are identified as early as possible.</p> <p>It is already clear that the level of ambition within the Council and expectation from residents outstrips the available funding and capacity of the IT Service to support new projects alongside day-to-day delivery and necessary renewals of software/hardware (so called “keeping the lights on”). Only those projects which are a clear priority can be taken forward and portfolios will assist in prioritising and managing conflicting priorities.</p>
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3.00 IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

3.01	Digital Strategy - Ways of Working (Sustainable Development) Principles Impact	
	Long-term	Positive
	Prevention	Recognising that our population is aging and becoming more diverse, digital services mean more focus can be given

	to supporting those more in need of support. Recognising the threat of climate change, more flexible working practices mean less journeys impacting on Co2 emissions and air quality.
Integration	Easy access to information and ability to easily manage day-to-day tasks digitally can help people to be self-reliant and prevent loss of independence.
Collaboration	Consultation results have underpinned the strategy and ongoing programmes of learning from feedback from citizens and users will inform future development.
Involvement	Benefits across the wellbeing goals from improved digital services e.g. an equal Wales. Working with our partners to deliver digital services that enable Health and Social Care Integration e.g. Single Point of Access (SPOA).

Well-being Goals Impact

Prosperous Wales	Improving local infrastructure to support developing businesses. Helping local people gaining relevant skills.
Resilient Wales	Changing working practices and developing skills for more resilient services and communities as the population and climate changes in the long-term.
Healthier Wales	Timely access to information to ensure support can be provided promptly preventing further deterioration, supported by real time information.
More equal Wales	Flexible services, responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable.
Cohesive Wales	Supporting improved internet connectivity so that information is easily and reliably available to enable all communities to be well-connected, informed and involved in their local area.
Vibrant Wales	Ensuring all services and information are provided bilingually.

<p>Globally responsible Wales</p>	<p>More digital services reduces the need for journeys and resources such as fuel and paper, reducing Co2 emissions and use of resources.</p>							
<p>Risks are logged, recorded and monitored by the Digital Strategy Board and included in the Corporate Risk Register where required.</p>								
<p>Audit Wales - Ways of Working (Sustainable Development) Principles Impact</p>								
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4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
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4.01	<p>Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee have received this report as part of their scrutiny role. It has commented on whether the proposed actions are the right ones to meet the recommendations, whether any more could be done etc.</p>
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5.00	APPENDICES
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5.01	<p>Appendix 1 – Digital Flintshire 2021-2026 Appendix 2 – Digital Flintshire Interactive Document PDF Appendix 3 – Audit Wales Report Appendix 4 – Audit Wales Response</p>
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6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
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6.01	<p>Digital Strategy for Wales – publication date 23 March 2021 https://gov.wales/digital-strategy-wales-html</p>
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	<p>Digital Flintshire Interactive - https://indd.adobe.com/view/f6f2bbb8-27e8-41a1-a566-32f5a0cddd08</p> <p>Digital Flintshire Hub - https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/Resident/Digital-Flintshire/Home.aspx</p> <p>Flintshire Digital Strategy - https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/en/Resident/Council-and-Democracy/Digital-Strategy.aspx</p> <p>Audit Wales Publications - https://www.audit.wales/publications</p>
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7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	<p>Contact Officer: Gareth Owens Telephone: 01352 702344 E-mail: Gareth.legal@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	<p>Audit Wales: works to support the Auditor General as the public sector watchdog for Wales. They aim to ensure that the people of Wales know whether public money is being managed wisely and that public bodies in Wales understand how to improve outcomes.</p> <p>DSB: Digital Strategy Board - chaired by the Chief Officer for Governance and comprised of theme leads and portfolio representatives from across the Council.</p> <p>Theme Lead: a senior manager responsible for overseeing and reporting against any projects which are assigned to their strategic theme.</p>