

Transformation at Powys County Council

Audit year: 2019-20

Date issued: December 2020

Document reference: 2192A2020-21

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Summary

What we looked at?

- We looked at Powys County Council's **transformation** programme 'Vision 2025'
- We asked: **Is the Council well placed to deliver its transformation programme with sufficient pace?**

How we did this work

- We **changed our approach** and timing because of the Covid-19 pandemic
- We did the work through **document reviews, interviews** and **observations**

What we found?

- Overall, **the Council is well placed to deliver its transformation programme however COVID-19 presents new challenges and risks to the programme**

To find out more, please read our full report

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Background

What we looked at?

- 1 During 2018-19, Audit Wales looked at Powys County Council's (the Council) transformation work: 'Vision 2025'. Our 2018-19 work on the Council's transformation concluded that: 'The Council is making transformation a higher priority, but it needs to better define and communicate its vision and programme for transformation and ensure that planned actions are of sufficient scale and pace.' Since 2018, the Council has further developed its transformation work to help drive change at pace.
- 2 Our audit work during 2019-20 at Powys included a follow-up project of the Council's transformation programme. For this work, we asked: **Is the Council well placed to deliver its transformation programme with sufficient pace? As part of this work we considered:**
 - a. Has the Council identified what it is trying to achieve through its transformation programme?
 - b. Has the Council has put in place proper arrangements to deliver its transformation programme? and
 - c. Does the Council review if its transformation programme is delivering the intended benefits?
- 3 Our work on this project looked at all aspects of Vision 2025. We did a 'health-check' across all nine transformation projects. The nine projects are listed in **Exhibit 1** below.

Exhibit 1: Powys County Council's Transformation 'Vision 2025' (as at March 2020) included the following projects:

- Schools Transformation
- Affordable housing
- Brecon Place Based Strategy
- Extra Care
- Growing Mid Wales
- North Powys Well-being
- Integrated Business Planning
- Digital Powys
- Workforce Futures

How we did the work?

- 4 We originally planned to complete the work in Spring 2020, including holding on-site interviews and focus groups. Because of COVID-19, we changed our approach and the timescales for the review and approached the work as follows:
 - a. first stage (February – March 2020): accumulated audit knowledge based on recent audit on workforce planning, previous transformation work and financial sustainability work;
 - b. second stage (March 2020): discussions about a ‘health check’ approach across all nine projects and some pre-lockdown observations of transformation boards;
 - c. third stage (April – May 2020): remote desktop review of open source papers about the nine projects;
 - d. fourth stage (August – September 2020): access and review the Council’s transformation papers on Powys County Council SharePoint;
 - e. fifth stage (September – October 2020): online interviews with Senior Responsible Officers and Cabinet Members covering each of the nine transformation projects; and
 - f. sixth stage (October – December 2020): report writing, clearance and issue report.

What we found?

- 5 We found that, overall, **the Council is well placed to deliver its transformation programme, however COVID-19 presents new challenges and risks to the programme.** We reached this conclusion because:
 - The Council has comprehensive project plans and clearly identifies the aims of its transformation programme
 - The Council has put in place arrangements to deliver its transformation programme, however some arrangements are stronger than others
 - COVID-19 has had an impact on the pace of some transformation projects and this will be an ongoing risk for the delivery of the overall transformation programme

Proposals for improvement

Exhibit 2: The table below sets out the proposals for improvement that we have identified following this review.

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should build on and develop its ongoing engagement with stakeholders. Key stakeholders include Powys residents, partners, schools, businesses, Council staff and County Councillors. This is to help ensure people are aware of developments within the transformation programme, particularly in light of challenges and changes coming from the pandemic.
P2	For the Council to aim to evaluate all projects and consider ways to demonstrate the impact the projects are having on local residents and communities in Powys. This includes for example <ul style="list-style-type: none">• identify who has benefitted from the work;• are projects having the impact that was planned; and/or• is there data which helps to describe the impact of transformation work.
P3	The Council should build on any learning from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is to help ensure the Council takes stock of its transformation progress so far and incorporates learning into future delivery.

Detailed report

Overall, the Council is well placed to deliver its transformation programme, however COVID-19 presents new challenges and risks to the programme

The Council has comprehensive project plans and clearly identifies the aims of its transformation programme

6 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- the Council has developed clear project planning documents setting out key information for how it will undertake its transformation work. The project planning documents set out aims, objectives and targets. They also include timescales and milestones, as well as risks and mitigating actions. It is also clear in project planning documents how projects are intended to contribute to the Council's overall strategic objectives and priorities.
- the Council has engaged with key stakeholders at an early stage as part of the transformation work. Most projects include engagement with service users and/or other stakeholders during the project planning process, including council staff for internal projects, such as Workforce Futures. We found notable practice within the Transforming Education work, including extensive engagement at any early stage with teachers, schools, governors and other key stakeholders.
- financial information including budgets, grants and other funding sources are included for most of the projects, but it is not clear how all aspects of some projects will be funded. Some projects are still awaiting formal agreements for funding, including the Growing Mid Wales project.
- the benefits to the service user, to local communities or to the Council are clearly set out for each project at a project planning stage. For example, the work around the North Powys Wellbeing Hub emphasised the health benefits for residents in the medium and longer term. Project documents also highlighting wider benefits to the economic, social, environmental and the wellbeing benefits to the wider community as part of the wellbeing hub.
- there is strong oversight and project governance through the transformation project boards. Project boards oversee project planning and include input from a range of key officers and relevant cabinet members. Some boards also include relevant external partners. Senior Leadership Team have oversight over the strategic direction of transformation work through the Transformation Delivery Board. This allows the leadership team to gain regular insights and receive updates on progress.

The Council has put in place arrangements to deliver its transformation programme, however some arrangements are stronger than others

7 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- most of the transformation projects have clear governance structures in place to oversee delivery through project boards and workstream delivery teams that focus on specific aspects of project delivery.
- the Council has shown through many of their projects effective and strong collaboration with strong arrangements to support collaboration. For example, work with businesses, Ceredigion County Council and the UK/Welsh Governments as part of the Growing Mid Wales project.
- some projects have strong arrangements to ensure they have the appropriate officer capacity to deliver them. For example, the Transforming Education project has well-developed arrangements for planning resources, skills and input from delivery teams and specialists. For other projects there remains a challenge to ensure that projects and workstreams are properly resourced, including the North Powys Well-being Hub. These challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic with a number of staff being redeployed.
- for internal projects such as Digital, Integrated Business Planning and Workforce Futures there is an emphasis on ensuring internal council staff are skilled and trained to help deliver their respective projects, as well as enabling delivery of the other projects. There is evidence of upskilling and training staff around these three projects. However, there was some variation in take-up amongst staff and services across these three internal projects.
- arrangements for evaluating projects are variable. Evaluations of some projects that are at a more advanced stage have taken place, although these evaluations have not focused on the extent to which the projects are delivering their intended impact in local communities. This is an area the Council could strengthen in the future. .

COVID-19 has had an impact on the pace of some transformation projects and this will be an ongoing risk for the delivery of the overall transformation programme

8 In reaching this conclusion we found that:

- since March 2020 the Council has implemented its Business Continuity Plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, some projects were paused, although some work was restarted either early on in Spring 2020 or October 2020. Despite some delays from the pandemic against milestones and timelines, many aspects of projects and workstreams are seen to be 'on

track'. Key aspects of projects such as Transforming Education and Affordable Housing have shown progress.

- some projects have faced more challenges and delays than others. For example, the Brecon Placed project is currently on hold and there are plans to remove this project from the transformation programme. Others such as the North Powys Well-being Hub was suspended for several months and experienced delays. From the new experiences and insights gained from COVID-19, including new ways of working and stronger partnership working, the Council has an opportunity to take stock of its transformation work and incorporate learning into future delivery.
- for some projects there has been an increase in cost as a result of COVID-19. For example, in Affordable Housing, COVID-19 has increased the cost to operate on sites as well as some costs incurred from delays. Nevertheless, some aspects of the work have been able to progress for example at the site in Brecon. Nevertheless, some delays and increased costs from the pandemic will likely post additional risks and challenges for planned delivery of the work.
- since March, the Council has faced loss of income and increased costs because of the pandemic. This will have an impact on the overall financial position and context for transformation at the Council. Some delays in project delivery will also have an impact on grant funding from the Welsh Government and the timeframes for grant delivery. Therefore, as part of the next budget setting process, the Council will face challenges in setting out its financial position including delivery of its transformation programme.



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