

# Digital Strategy Review – Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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This document is also available in Welsh.

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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's current Digital Strategy runs from 2022 to 2026 with the strategic ambition of being a truly 'Digitally Driven' Council. The Council drew from a wide range of sources and engaged with a range of advocacy groups to inform its digital strategy but has not directly involved residents in shaping its strategic approach. The Council's Digital Strategy aligns with its own Corporate Plan and priorities and also those of partner organisations. The Council has allocated resources to fund its Digital Strategy. The Council has clear arrangements for monitoring progress in delivering its digital strategy, but it is unclear how it will evaluate its impact and therefore value for money.

## **Our recommendations for the Council**

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### **Involvement with stakeholders**

- R1 To better understand the needs of citizens and the potential barriers to them using digital technology, the Council should involve the full diversity of its citizens in developing its digital strategy.
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### **Monitoring benefits**

- R2 To better understand the impact of its digital strategy and the extent to which it is securing value for money the Council should routinely set out the full costs of individual digital projects and how it will assess their impact and the overall impact of its strategic approach.

# 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 between October and November 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’s current Digital Strategy runs from 2022 to 2026 <sup>1</sup>. It includes the Council’s strategic ambition of being a truly ‘Digitally Driven’ Council.
- 8 The Council has divided its strategic ambition into the following four thematic workstream areas:
  - Digital Solutions and Service Design
  - Data Insight and Intelligence
  - Digital Infrastructure
  - Digital Skills, Learning & Inclusion
- 9 The Council’s Digital Strategy sets out a range of outcomes for each of the above workstreams, which it aims to achieve by the end of 2026.
- 10 The Council uses its Digital Work Programme (DWP) to manage delivery of the significant number of digital projects intended to deliver the Council’s digital strategic ambitions.

**What we found: The Council has mostly developed its strategic approach to digital in accordance with the sustainable development principle although has yet to directly engage with its citizens and it is unclear how it will evaluate its impact and value for money**

**The Council drew from a wide range of sources and engaged with a range of advocacy groups to inform its digital strategy but has not directly involved residents in shaping its strategic approach**

- 11 The Council largely informed its digital strategy through:
  - an assessment of the existing ICT infrastructure and contractual arrangements;

<sup>1</sup> [Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, Digital Strategy 2022-26](#)

- nationally and regionally focussed social research to understand the digital skills, knowledge and equipment that its residents need to engage digitally and how to overcome digital exclusion;
  - has annual service evaluation and planning arrangements to identify opportunities within its service areas where digital processes and technology could be deployed to drive improvement and efficiencies and achieve its strategic digital ambitions;
  - engagement with its officers and elected members, and with partner organisations; and
  - the Council is intending to increase its understanding of future social trends through predictive analysis to look at future demand, currently looking at youth service and Flying Start.
- 12 When developing individual digital projects within its DWP, the Council can demonstrate that it engages with and listens to its residents to shape its services. The Council did also engage on its current digital strategy within its own organisation and also sought the views of a limited number of external stakeholders. But the Council did not directly involve citizens in developing its strategic approach. By not involving the full diversity of the population the Council risks developing an approach that does not meet their needs or secure value for money.

### **The Council's Digital Strategy aligns with its own Corporate Plan and priorities and also those of partner organisations**

- 13 The Council has stated a clear ambition for digital within its Digital Strategy for 2022-2026 and has links with its Corporate Plan. The individual projects within the Council's DWP, that deliver the Digital Strategy, have been aligned within the Council's wellbeing objectives.
- The Council's more recent strategies, such as the Human Resources Strategy and Workforce Plan 2023-2028 are aligned with its Digital Strategy. However, understandably, the Council's older strategies that pre-date the Digital Strategy, such as its Corporate Asset Management Plan 2018-2023, do not refer to the Council's Digital Strategy.
- 14 The Council's Digital Strategy makes clear how it will contribute to the seven national wellbeing goals. The Council has also considered the priorities of other public sector organisations when developing its Digital Strategy. However, when developing individual projects for the DWP, the Council does not routinely consider how these proposed individual digital projects will impact upon other public bodies. Considering how its digital projects may impact on the Council's other plans and strategies, and those of other public bodies, reduces the risk of duplicating work and may help identify opportunities to deliver multiple benefits.
- 15 The Council has not completed any formal stakeholder analysis to identify the full extent of who it needs to work with to deliver its strategic approach to digital.



By not mapping all potential opportunities for collaboration, the Council risks missing opportunities to improve value for money and outcomes through, for example, sharing resources and expertise.

- 16 The Council has worked collaboratively with other Welsh councils on a range of shared digital projects, facilitated by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and can demonstrate clear arrangements to evaluate and learn from these projects. Routinely monitoring the effectiveness of partnerships that the Council enters into is an important part of the Council's arrangements to assure itself it is achieving value for money in the use of its resources.

### **The Council has allocated resources to fund its Digital Strategy**

- 17 The Council implements its Digital Strategy through delivery of its digital programme of work. The Council had an earmarked reserve of £3.5m at the beginning on 2023-24 to fund the delivery of its digital programme and on-going requirements are reviewed as part of medium term financial planning arrangements. By identifying the resources needed to deliver its digital strategy, the Council reduces the risk of its digital programme being undeliverable.

### **The Council has clear arrangements for monitoring progress in delivering its digital strategy, but it is unclear how it will evaluate its impact and therefore value for money**

- 18 The Council's Digital Strategy sets out milestones for its delivery and has arrangements to monitor progress against short, medium and long-term objectives. Whilst the Council monitors actual progress against planned milestones, these measures do not evaluate the impact of its Digital Strategy. This makes it difficult for the Council to know if it is achieving value for money.
- 19 When considering proposals for digital project for its DWP the Council does not routinely identify the full financial costs, the intended impact or how the benefits of each proposal for digital projects will be evaluated. The Council understood the direct financial costs and the improved impact on services of only one of the two sample digital projects that we examined. By not routinely assessing upfront the full costs of digital projects and not considering strategically which have the potential to deliver the most impact and cost-effective use of resources, it is difficult for the Council to retrospectively assess value for money.
- 20 Despite the limitations identified above, the Council has formal arrangements to review its digital projects and to learn lessons from them. In addition, these formal arrangements are supplemented with informal learning by officers that helps to improve future projects.
- 21 The Council generally shares post project learning with external partner organisations, for example, through the WLGA facilitated projects referred to above. However we looked at one digital project where there was no evidence

of post project learning. Sharing learning with partners has the potential to support wider improvements across other public sector bodies.

# 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' (i.e., 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, 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.</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</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 (e.g., risks and opportunities)?	

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
		<p>(e.g., <a href="#">National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales</a>, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales advice and guidance).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council uses its evidence base effectively to: <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> </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 – i.e., 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</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> </ul>

Level 2 questions	Level 3 questions	Criteria
	<p>Digital Strategy could have, including:</p> <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 (i.e., its well-being objectives and wider priorities)?</li> <li>• how delivery will impact on other what other public bodies are trying to achieve (i.e., their well-being objectives)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <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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