

Digital Local Government Inquiry

The Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) was set up in 2020 by the Welsh Government to support the public sector in Wales to design and deliver better public services.

We support them to:

- Meet the [Digital Service Standard for Wales](#)
- Learn digital skills, through formal training and expert webinars. We develop and support leaders via the [digital leadership academy](#)
- Connect with other digital professionals through our 6 [communities of practice](#) and our programme of events
- Deliver practical digital improvements, with CDPS 'squads' working on cross-sector projects

1. Current use of digital to design and improve public service provision around the needs of users

We have a digital landscape across local government in Wales that is very varied. Although the services delivered may have much in common, each organisation has made their own way to digitisation. There are a myriad of different systems and different delivery approaches.

Partial digitisation has in some areas led to dual spend – investment in digital systems but with parallel manual fulfilment still required.

Globally, best practice for good user experiences, and more economical service delivery, depends on teams taking standard approaches, sharing common technology and ensuring services are viewed as end-to-end processes.

But the organic growth of digitisation across Welsh local government has made this good practice difficult. Many leaders have talked to CDPS about their wish to “stop doing things 22 different ways”. Unpicking the complexity of what is there, and designing routes to more shared approaches requires time and investment, both of which are at a premium.

However, digitisation is not going away, and good services are now essential to citizens' quality of life, and the smooth functioning of businesses in Wales.

There are many challenges in the way of adopting the tried-and-tested best practice approaches. We need local government in Wales to take full advantage of the range of expertise and support available to develop shared approaches to modernisation.

Standards

In Wales we have developed the Digital Service Standard. This draws on global experience over years of how to create good public services. These are a 'gold standard'

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set of guidance that, if followed, will lead to the development of public services that are efficiently delivered, meet user needs, drive effective digital uptake and improve value for money.

The Digital Service Standard for Wales has been agreed by Welsh Government and endorsed by Wales's Chief Digital Officers (CDOs). However, it is not mandated, and there are no penalties or specific incentives available to drive organisations to use it. We are not seeing significant moves towards familiarisation with, or adoption of, the Standard in local government. This is likely to be the subject of a larger-scale push by CDPS in the coming year, with the support of Wales's sector CDOs and we need senior leaders in local government to engage with it.

A growing package of guidance and support is available from CDPS to work towards the Standard, with a Service Manual (how to guides), service reviews of public services, and guidance on the skills required to work towards the Standard.

Here are some practical examples of the work CDPS has done with local government in Wales.

Streamlining Welsh Benefits

The goal is “a person-centred, compassionate, and consistent” approach to the design and delivery of Welsh benefits, underpinned by the [Welsh Benefits Charter](#), so that people need only tell their story once to receive all the financial support to which they are entitled. But overall, progress feels slow. Though the Benefits Charter was signed by all 22 local authorities, with great support for the common vision, achieving pace in the delivery requires commitment and resources to create an agreed programme plan for a period of years. Creating this will require commitment to aligning the goals and priorities between all parties. It is essential to understand who needs to do what, by when, to make the vision real.

Co-designing benefit-related content

Preceding (but linked to) the Streamlining Welsh Benefits project, we worked with local authorities and Welsh Government to co-design better online content for two benefits: [School Essentials Grant](#) and [Free School Meals](#).

The aim was to make it easier for people to apply for this support, reduce duplication of effort in the 22 local authorities, and improve the way that we develop bilingual services. 5 out of 22 local authorities are using this content which has been tested with users. CDPS viewed this as an easily adoptable way to address the “let's not do this 22 different ways” appeal, but this low take-up suggests insufficient priority given to service improvement.

Improving the planning system in Wales

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We've partnered with Cardiff, Gwynedd and Vale of Glamorgan local authorities to [improve the pre-application planning process](#). Our research shows that this work could significantly reduce unnecessary customer contact and unnecessary applications – in an area which is essential to enable policy goals.

We have learned that to collaborate across local government, formal partnerships with a few early adopters and project partners is the best way to ensure clarity, agree ways of working and expected commitment from all parties.

But this work also illustrates the impediments to digital modernisation, as resources in local government are very thin on the ground. CDPS is often told that local government priorities do not align with central government priorities (such as improving planning services).

2. Long-term planning and development of digital across the local government sector;

CDPS has created a leadership group with sector Chief Digital Officers (CDO) for Wales (CDO for Local Government, CDO for Welsh Government and CDIO for Health and Social Care). Together, we agree the key opportunities and challenges in the digital space for Wales. We seek to lead together, with one voice on the common priorities, whether that is around meeting the Digital Service Standard or creating a common approach to the adoption of AI.

At times, different priorities, particularly between central and local government, have got in the way of alignment and collaboration. However, this group is the backbone of a shared digital agenda for Wales and has been the driver for the creation of two essential governance forums. The Standards Working Group is a pan-sector panel which oversees the adoption of agreed Standards in the Digital Data and Technology space in Wales, and the AI/Automation Steering Group, a pan-sector panel which has overseen the creation of common guidelines for the effective adoption of AI and Automation. While effective, however, these groups have seen lower levels of engagement from local government than is ideal, suggesting lack of resource and priority being given.

All CDOs and the CDPS CEOs observe the same difficulties in making change at any pace in the public sector; extremely stretched resources, low skills and capacity, a complex technology landscape and the lack of any controls on spending which might lead to better practice and more use of common technology to name a few. We also see leadership, mindset and standard approaches as requiring a big change.

Public Sector leaders in Wales are faced, as we know, by significant challenges. The demands for modernisation sit alongside many competing priorities. However, as previously stated, citizens and businesses increasingly organise their lives and work on digital channels.

As Wales's central and local government seek to deliver policy outcomes, better provision online is a huge factor in success. Badly delivered services impact citizens' lives and prevent them receiving the good outcomes designed in policies.

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We believe leaders in the public sector must commit to giving digital modernisation higher priority. This takes time, resource and, most importantly, commitment - and acknowledgement that without action, the people and businesses of Wales will not benefit from the advancements available.

Leadership starts at the top. CDPS has not seen sufficient prioritisation of modernisation, or of the expertise required to design and deliver it. The Local Government CDO post remains an interim post, with a small team at relatively junior levels. The siting of the digital team within WLGA has been the subject of on-going questions. The WLGA's Digital Board has gone for months without meeting, due to a change in Chair.

We are aware that only 4 local authorities have appointed CDOs, and that of these only 2 sit on their leadership boards. We are aware that one authority is seeking to recruit a CDO at a salary significantly less than any national benchmark.

These factors suggest senior leadership is at best uncertain of the amount of modernisation it wishes to see. They do not signal ambition, support and recognition of digital advancement in local government.

Clarity on Local Government goals for digital modernisation

It has consistently been hard to gain any common view of plans, goals and ambitions for digital modernisation across local government in Wales. This may not be surprising given the pressures on local government. It has often been easier to understand what is not wanted than what is wanted.

There is great commonality across services delivered in local government, but what is expressed by individual local authorities is that their models and approaches are very tailored. It is hard to challenge this without a higher-level, central review and analysis taking place that makes clear where the commonalities lie.

Who should take responsibility for such a review? The WLGA or the Local Government Digital team with the sponsorship of the WLGA, perhaps.

A review could show options for more common approaches, sharing of processes or technology, and shared assets to be developed.

At a simple level, we are aware of commonly required features or components of services being developed and built many times over by each service team. Many are so basic that a 'library' of such components could be shared across local government – in fact more widely across the devolved public sector. An example might be an address look-up feature, a basic element needed by every service, but currently every service will build its own, driving cost, and impeding efforts to streamline services.

Efforts to take more of a common view around delivery and building of common approaches could be valuable in reducing cost, speeding up delivery via use of common assets, and providing consistency of experience and familiarity for service users.

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Issues in alignment and clarity of remit

The Welsh Government has sought to accelerate modernisation in the public sector's use of digital technology and approaches, to deliver better services and build the digital economy. It created the CDO roles in central and local government and Health and Care, drew up a Digital Strategy for Wales and created CDPS.

These are excellent steps. However, particularly in the central-local government work around digital, CDPS has observed issues with differing ideas and priorities.

1. Central government seeking improvement in specific services run by local government which is necessary to meet government goals

This has led to the initiation of joint projects between central and local government and CDPS, but ongoing disagreement over prioritisation and resourcing of these. Local government states that it has insufficient resource to put into projects which have not been agreed as priorities for local authorities, though they are priorities for central government. CDPS has great difficulty trying to bridge this gap.

2. That central government can set goals for local government, but not tell local government how to achieve these

This makes creating joint goals and plans for improvement projects difficult, as Welsh Government is very cautious about defining improvements, and/or local government resents the implications that current delivery is not good enough.

Funding models do not enable effective digital projects

This is a longstanding issue for those of us seeking to deliver digital improvement projects which need a different profile of funding to traditional projects. A traditional project might require a high level of funding to achieve a one-off goal, perhaps the creation of a bricks-and-mortar asset for example.

Funding can then cease as business-as-usual processes take over. In the digital space, products need long-term continuous iteration to keep up with changing technologies and expectations. For example, we all see our banking apps continually updated. Therefore, digital projects require a different profile of funding: lower figures, possibly quite low in the stages where initial Minimum Viable Products are developed and go live. But over the lifetime of the product, which may be 10-15 years or even more, at a lower, but sustained level. This is at odds with the traditional annual or short-term funding cycles.

CDPS shares with the CDO for Local Government a view that the current Digital Transformation Fund model is not fit for purpose. This annual funding model leads to annual sets of proposals, which are agreed, but must be delivered largely by contractors as the funding model does not allow permanent recruitment. The large cost of expert contractors limits the scale of the project. These contractor teams take time to assemble; research periods take further time; practical work commences but there is little time left to

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build a product; the financial year ends, the contractors are let go, knowledge is not transferred, and the project is difficult if not impossible to sustain.

A fit-for-purpose model would look much more like a lower level of guaranteed funding which would allow the recruitment of a permanent digital “squad” which could develop, build and iterate meaningful and useful live products over a much longer period. Between 3 to 4 permanent members of expert staff can be employed for the price of an expert contractor.

3. The opportunities and challenges to moving the digital agenda forward within the sector;

Digital services, done well, make it easier for people to carry out tasks, reducing costs elsewhere. The [‘State of Digital Government’](#) review highlights some great examples of how poor digital design is costing organisations. For example, 60% of the calls to Defra’s call centres are from people who couldn’t carry out their task online, due to unclear content or broken links. If this analysis was carried out across local government services in Wales, how would they fare? How much valuable time and money is being wasted?

Culture and mindset

The intention to do things differently depends on leadership, mindset and attitudinal changes. Without changes in mindset, current and further investment will not deliver value for money in the digital space.

Given the budget pressures and expectations of local government, mindset change is hard. But it’s essential to learn from what has been demonstrated across the world as better ways to deliver digital services. This aligns with Audit Wales ‘Digital by Design’ report, which recommends that councils take a more systemic approach to learning, so they can adapt and improve their work on digital.

Some parts of local government are adopting more forward-thinking mindset and attitudinal approaches, leading to very positive practices such as end-to-end service mapping and design and user-centred development and product testing on users during development.

However, not everyone is giving these mindset changes the attention they need. It’s important to stress that the technological aspects of modernising services are often the ‘easy’ part. Business change, a learning mindset and an understanding that digital provision requires different delivery approaches are harder, but just as essential.

Leaders in local government in Wales need to take this challenge seriously. The mountain of evidence for investing in digital is growing – we need the WLGA and local government to take it seriously: recruit people with the right skills and empower and champion them to do their job.

Procurement

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Local authorities have huge, combined buying power, but this power is not used, due to a lack of a cohesive digital sourcing strategy, organisational silos, the challenges of sharing services, and the lack of collective buying drive fragmented purchasing.

Some of the most significant savings in government are possible through adopting shared procurement approaches. We have a few examples in Wales of where this has worked well including the Hwb Learning Platform and associated infrastructure and device catalogues used by local authorities for school technology.

4. To better understand how local authorities collaborate and share knowledge and experiences on developing digital, and to look at mechanisms to scale up and share good practice and innovation.

The Digital Advisory Group (DAG), made up of a group of passionate digital leaders in Local Government is a great vehicle to ensure digital is thought of as an enabler. CDPS has a seat at the DAG table to share learning, experience and advice. It is unclear to CDPS, however, how consistently the DAG members have the ear of their CEOs and their leadership team.

Some examples of good joint digital leadership: the transformation plan for Caerphilly Council is a totally joined-up collaboration between the digital team and the Council executive, with the intention of addressing both the need to deliver better services and the need to make cost savings.

We're aware that at Neath Port Talbot Council, the executive and the digital team have strong common goals around digital delivery and the resources this takes. It is clearly understood that the CDO and the Director of Services must work hand-in-glove to deliver for residents and the business.

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice are voluntary groups of practitioners or other staff with an interest in specific areas. CDPS have developed 6 in the digital space including user research, AI, content design and service design.

CDPS would like to see the number of local government staff grow through senior endorsement, as these communities are powerful drivers of potential collaborations, scaling good practice and innovation, sharing knowledge and, critically, growing confidence as staff realise, they are part of a larger national intent.

We look forward to discussing this further with you on February 12.

Harriet Green and Myra Hunt,
Joint CEOs, Centre for Digital Public Services.

