



Senedd Evidence from the WLGA

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Local Government and Housing Committee, Senedd Cymru Inquiry into Digital in Local Government

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Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is a politically led cross party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level.

We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

Our ultimate goal is to promote, protect, support, and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

We'll achieve our vision by

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils.
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce



Overview

1. This evidence paper addresses the inquiry terms of reference from the Local Government and Housing Committee as communicated by email on 02 December 2024.
2. The information contained within this evidence paper is based on:
 - a. A survey in December 2024 specifically relating to the Senedd inquiry and to which all 22 councils responded.
 - b. A survey about the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) in October 2024 carried out to inform a review of CDPS, and to which 18 of the 22 councils responded.
 - c. Other information gathered by the WLGA Digital Team in the last 12 months (including from surveys / meetings / projects etc.) as relevant to this inquiry.
3. This evidence sits alongside the evidence submitted by the Chief Digital Officer for Local Government and has been produced jointly to minimise duplication. The two submissions should therefore be considered together.
4. Details of how the WLGA (via the CDO and the Digital Team) is supporting councils with some of the challenges outlined in this paper are captured in the CDO evidence document.
5. A very small number of illustrative examples of the work of councils in Wales have been included in this paper. They are a very small snapshot of the breadth of work taking place across Wales. Further good practice examples can be found in the Audit Wales '[Digital by Design?](#)' report.

Committee Terms of Reference

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

6. Digital tools and technologies can significantly enhance public service design and provision by focusing on user needs. In particular:
 - a. **User-Centred Design:** Digital tools enable the creation of services that are tailored to the specific needs and preferences of users. This involves engaging with users throughout the design process to gather feedback and ensure the services meet their expectations.
 - b. **Accessibility and Inclusivity:** Digital platforms can make public services more accessible to a wider audience, including those with disabilities or those living in remote areas. Ensuring that digital services are inclusive helps in bridging the digital divide.



7. All councils have some form of customer feedback loops which feed into the development of their digital strategies or the improvement of their digital services, though these vary in breadth and maturity.
8. There is a broad range of examples across Welsh councils of the use of customer feedback to iteratively improve digital services, examples include:
 - a. Anonymous submission of information via digital channels following feedback that customers do not want to create an account.
 - b. Improving booking processes and forms
 - c. Incorporating Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to import information from other sources automatically
 - d. Reviewing and improving accessibility of web sites and other digital channels
 - e. Development of apps to improve customer options and ease of access
 - f. Automation of processes within services
 - g. Use of data analytics to improve services
9. A substantial percentage of councils carry out structured process mapping of services to enable improved service design (with 15 of 19 councils confirming that they have, or are planning, structured process mapping of council services). However, less than 20% described their process mapping as being 'mature' in terms of being embedded as part of service design and this is certainly an area of development for councils. There is also a broad range of approaches to identifying which services to map, including as part of digital transformation programme, legislative change, strategy priorities, services already under review, high volume services, high impact areas, and service area requests.
10. From a skills perspective, almost 75% of councils have some user centred design capabilities within their teams, including user accessibility, user experience, service design and content design. However, the remaining 25% have identified user-centred design skills as an area they are lacking.
11. There are also innovative examples of user centred design and customer engagement, for example Flintshire Council has a digital squad made up of volunteers, who support digital inclusion and consult with members of the public on service design.

Council Example – User Centred Design

Torfaen County Borough Council

- *Torfaen's Digital First Customer Strategy has three core ambitions – one of which is the provision of excellent and efficient services designed around the needs of their customers. A wide range of engagement with residents was undertaken when developing the strategy – including general and targeted in person events (50+ Forums, Accessibility Forums etc. and online).*



- *To facilitate the ambition of: ‘excellent and efficient services designed around the needs of their customers,’ they have developed a Service Redesign methodology which aligns with Lou Downes’ “Good Service Design” and the Digital Service Standards set out in the Digital Strategy for Wales.*
- *The digital team works with subject matter experts in different service areas to review services and identify opportunities for improvement based on an enhanced understanding of customer needs and frustrations, using tools like Customer Journey Mapping and Business Process Mapping.*
- *To support service areas to better understand their customers, they have developed a set of evidence-based customer personas which are used to demonstrate the different ways a customer may interact with a particular service.*
- *They also capture customer satisfaction in an effort to identify additional opportunities to improve service and process design based on customer feedback.*

Council Example – Digital Channels

Cardiff Council

The council has developed and deployed a range of digital channels to enable citizens to engage effectively with the council.

The Cardiff Council App:

- *Since its launch in 2018, the Cardiff App has been downloaded 104,000 times.*
- *It supports approximately 87,000 interactions per month, highlighting its role as a vital tool for citizen engagement.*

The Council Website:

- *The website attracts an average of 250,000 visits per month, with 77.6% of these visits originating from mobile devices (Apple and Android compatible).*
- *It processes £5 million in online payments monthly and handles over 50,000 waste and recycling enquiries, in addition to facilitating planning applications, school admissions, and providing term date information.*

Bobi the Chatbot:

- *Bobi supports 8,000 interactions per month, providing citizens with the ability to engage outside of standard operating hours, including evenings and weekends.*

Citizen Preferences for Digital Services:

Where comparable reports or requests are available across different channels, Cardiff citizens demonstrate a strong preference for digital options:

- *Website: 69.6%*
- *App: 24.8%*



- *Phone Call: 5.6%*

User-Centric Development:

At the core of Cardiff's digital development strategy is a commitment to understanding and addressing the needs of users. Their experience demonstrates that when the digital experience is intuitive and efficient, citizens naturally prefer these channels.

However, they remain acutely aware of the need to support those who may be digitally disadvantaged or disengaged. To ensure inclusivity, they continue to provide telephone and face-to-face channels alongside their digital offerings.

12. The Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) exists to support Welsh public service providers to design better services. Services that are designed around the needs of the people who use them and are accessible and inclusive.
13. Welsh councils are eager to see CDPS deliver more tangible benefits and outcomes for local government. They are looking for more clarity on the purpose of CDPS and how to access their services and support. Aligning projects more closely with local government needs and understanding their priorities and pressures would enable CDPS to better support the aims of local government
14. Going forward, it is important to ensure that the work of CDPS delivers tangible outcomes for local government, in line with local, regional, and national needs and priorities, and that their priorities are clearly communicated. User centred design is a key area in which CDPS could focus to bring sector wide benefits.

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

15. 95% of councils in Wales have a current digital strategy, and the remaining one is due to be published imminently. Most of these strategies cover a 3-to-5-year period, which reflects the balance needed to respond to rapidly changing technology while focusing on longer-term outcomes.
16. These strategies underpin annual service planning and delivery, but councils note that budget constraints and short-term budgets / cyclical grant funding significantly restricts the ability to carry out long term planning of digital projects, and hampers innovation in digital delivery.
17. Capacity is also a challenge – the pace of change (for example around Artificial Intelligence or AI) and the lack of ability to horizon scan, get in front of and plan, for future opportunities, is challenging. This significantly hampers development of capability at a time when digital can offer a genuine solution to service design challenges and provide cost saving opportunities.



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

Challenges

18. A broad range of challenges to digital transformation and the ability to capitalise on the significant potential digital offers were identified by councils.

19. These include:

- a. Finance and Budgets: Councils face limited funding and short-term funding cycles which restrict the ability to invest in digital transformation.
- b. Culture: Councils often face resistance to change among staff or leadership which can slow progress and necessitate additional resources for change management. Some councils experience a lack of digital leadership at operational and political levels.
- c. Recruitment and Retention: Councils have difficulty competing with higher salaries in other sectors (especially health) and the market for key digital skills is extremely competitive.
- d. Capacity: Councils often have limited resources to manage day-to-day operations and carry out digital transformation which requires dedicated resources and space for innovation.
- e. Capabilities: Many councils have identified digital skills gaps in their workforce and a need for upskilling existing staff. Funding is not always available for investment in training. The rapid pace of technology changes exacerbates capability gaps.
- f. Market and Technology: Supply chain issues, affordability of solutions, and procurement challenges often lead to councils struggling to deploy the best solutions to improve their services. Many councils also have significant challenges with legacy systems that require replacement.
- g. Cyber Security: As systems become more digitised, the risk of cyberattacks increases, necessitating robust cybersecurity measures and compliance frameworks, requiring additional funding, skills, and capacity.
- h. Digital Inclusion: Councils must ensure all residents can access services – investment in inclusive technology solutions or provision of non-digital channels alongside digital channels can be costly.

Opportunities

20. Although there are significant challenges as outlined above, councils also identified a broad range of opportunities for digital transformation in local government.



21. These include:

- a. Collaboration: There are significant future opportunities for collaboration across Welsh local government in terms of digital. By working together, we can continue to share resources, expertise, and best practices, leading to more efficient and innovative service delivery. There are also opportunities for more shared systems and services in future and increased collaborative procurement to ensure best value.
- b. User Centred Design: The increasing awareness of the importance of genuine UCD in service design will enable service delivery to be radically reconsidered rather than bolting on a digital façade to what are sometimes poor service models.
- c. New and emerging technologies: AI, RPA, privacy enhancing technologies for data access, cloud services etc. offer significant opportunities to streamline processes, improve service delivery for citizens and realise cost savings.
- d. Community Engagement: Digital platforms offer councils genuine opportunities for better communication and engagement with their communities, and opportunities for communities to be involved in decision-making and policy shaping. Improved digital infrastructure and access to genuinely accessible services can reduce the digital divide and ensure everyone can take advantage of the opportunities that digital presents.
- e. Strategic National Approach: National digital investment to deliver strategic programmes outcomes could accelerate delivery of digital transformation across councils especially where it is aligned to agreed priorities. The Connecting Care Social Care programme is a good example of this (see CDO evidence for more details).
- f. Private Sector: Collaborating and developing partnerships with tech companies can bring significant benefits to councils' transformation efforts.
- g. Data: There are significant opportunities to use data to inform service design and decision-making. Leveraging data analytics can support more informed decisions, identify trends, optimise resource allocation, and improve public services.
- h. Cybersecurity: Collective action to strengthen cyber resilience measures will bring significant benefits to councils, this includes work already going on in terms of WARP, CymruSOC and the Cyber Assessment Framework.
- i. Sustainable Practices: Digital offers a breadth of opportunities to support councils' sustainability efforts, such as reducing carbon footprints through smart energy management systems and promoting eco-friendly practices.



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

Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

22. All councils recognise that collaboration and knowledge sharing among local authorities are essential for driving digital transformation effectively. Collaboration and scaling good practice reduce duplication and allow for economies of scale.
23. Collaboration and sharing good practice can also enable accelerated innovation and by building on proven solutions, local authorities can implement modern technologies faster and with less risk.
24. These collaborative efforts can help build a resilient digital ecosystem in local government, ensuring that councils can collectively address challenges such as cyber threats, funding gaps, and skill shortages.
25. Councils in Wales actively participate in a broad range of forums that support collaboration and knowledge sharing on digital, and identified a substantial number of groups, forums and partnerships which facilitate the sharing of knowledge, good practice and experience locally, regionally, nationally and beyond, including for example:
 - a. Welsh Local Government Association Digital Advisory Group and its sub-groups and communities of practice (RPA and AI / Sustainable Futures / Content Design)
 - b. Public Services Boards
 - c. Corporate Joint Committees
 - d. Economic Wellbeing and Regional Economic Sub – Committees
 - e. City Deal Digital Boards
 - f. Regional Learning & Skills Partnership
 - g. Centre for Digital Public Services Communities of Practice
 - h. SOCITM UK – Society for Innovation, Technology & Modernisation
 - i. Local Government Association Groups
 - j. UK Government Central Digital and Data Office
 - k. UK Authority
 - l. Public Sector Digital Transformation Forum
 - m. CymruSOC Security Operations Centre
 - n. WLGA Cyber Assessment Framework
 - o. Welsh Government HWB Technical Advisory Group
 - p. TEC Cymru
 - q. Supplier networks, e.g. Microsoft Local Government Digital Innovation Forum, Goss ICM Community
 - r. WLGA Connecting Care SRO Advisory Group
 - s. WLGA Streamlining Welsh Benefits SRO Advisory Group
 - t. Data Cymru Strategic Data Leads Network



- u. A broad range of local / regional groups (e.g. Get RCT online; SRS collaboration board).
26. Many councils recognise the value of the WLGA Digital Advisory Group (DAG) in bringing together the sector in Wales to collaborate, identify shared priorities and agree actions. The group is taking forward a breadth of activities (see CDO evidence for further details), but it is recognised that more can be done to improve knowledge sharing and scaling up of good practice (see below). During 2024, the DAG agreed that the SOCITM Wales group would be merged into the DAG to avoid duplication. There is therefore now one key group (DAG) of all 22 digital leads who meet regularly, supported by the WLGA Digital Team, to identify priorities and collaboration opportunities.

Council Example – Partnership Working and Evaluation

Powys County Council

- *To strengthen their arrangements for securing effectiveness, efficiency and economy through partnership working in delivering their Digital Strategy and plans, Powys continues to undertake regular stakeholder consideration, evaluation, and mapping exercises to identify and prioritise the organisations they need to work with and identify opportunities for greater collaboration.*
- *They review and assess the effectiveness of those partnerships on an annual basis, as part of wider benefits monitoring and annual reporting.*
- *They continue to utilise a broad range of local, regional, and national forums to engage, consider and deliver on opportunities for wider collaboration with public sector partners and avoid duplication (many of which are outlined in the list above).*

Opportunities for Scaling Up, Sharing Good Practice, and Innovation

27. Councils can work in silos, leading to fragmented progress and missed opportunities to leverage shared insights. Addressing this challenge requires a systematic approach to connect councils, share experiences, and develop collaborative solutions.
28. There are many identified barriers to genuine collaboration, but some of the challenges that need to be overcome include:
- a. Ensuring the interoperability of systems so that digital tools can seamlessly integrate across councils and enable scaling of solutions.



- b. Developing clear guidelines on data privacy, security, and usage are essential for collaboration.
 - c. Overcoming resistance to change and aligning diverse organisational priorities requires targeted change management efforts.
 - d. Recognising the cost of collaboration, and funding this accordingly, both in terms of collaboration support resource and releasing appropriate resources within the organisations.
29. Suggestions from councils on how to improve the scaling up of digital solutions, share good practice and innovation, and encourage collaboration include:
- a. Consistency and standards
 - i. Greater standardisation and consistency of digital approach across councils to ensure everyone moves forward together, and that a baseline measurement of 'as is' and 'to be' is possible.
 - b. Joint Digital Projects:
 - i. Partnering on large-scale initiatives such as shared platforms for service delivery, cybersecurity, or data integration to reduce costs and accelerate innovation.
 - ii. More national business cases such as that developed for the Connecting Care social care programme would be beneficial.
 - c. Establishing Central Repositories of Best Practices / Other Resources:
 - i. Develop a centralised, easily accessible online platform where councils can share case studies, tools, templates, and successful digital strategies.
 - ii. Include metrics or success indicators to guide authorities on the potential ROI or impact of adopting specific practices.
 - iii. Wales Councils Application Store – centrally held repository of built applications e.g. PowerApps developed and shared.
 - iv. Wales Councils Process Map store – centrally held repository of efficient business process maps available to be shared.
 - d. Scaling Up Through Shared Frameworks:
 - i. Standardised frameworks for digital development to simplify collaboration by aligning objectives, processes, and technological choices.
 - ii. Adopting modular solutions that can be scaled or customised based on individual council needs while retaining interoperability.
 - e. Building Communities of Practice (CoPs):
 - i. Organise thematic groups focused on areas like AI adoption, Robotic Process Automation (RPA), data governance, and citizen engagement – the WLGA Digital Advisory Group already has several groups, as does CDPS, and these need to be strengthened and developed.



- ii. Encourage participation across roles, from IT specialists to service managers, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of challenges and solutions.
- f. Funding and Incentives for Collaboration:
 - i. Leverage Welsh Government grants or funding programs to support inter-council collaborations, with conditions that require the sharing of outcomes and learnings.
 - ii. Introduce incentive schemes that reward councils for creating and disseminating replicable digital innovations.
 - iii. Better allocation of funding, including across social care and health, to facilitate national strategic projects.
- g. Engaging Private Sector Partners:
 - i. Collaborate with technology providers to pilot scalable solutions such as Beam / Magic Notes, offering a pathway to tailor innovations for wider public sector use.
 - ii. Establish public-private partnerships to co-develop tools that address shared challenges, such as accessibility or resource optimisation.
- h. National Digital Leadership Initiatives:
 - i. Develop a national leadership program that equips decision-makers with skills and strategies for scaling up digital practices and encouraging innovation.
 - ii. Encourage the formation of cross-authority mentorship schemes where councils with advanced digital capabilities support those in earlier stages.

Council Example – Joint Working

Shared Resource Service (SRS)

Torfaen, Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire, and Newport councils (along with Gwent Police) have worked with the SRS over the last 12-18 months to agree a set of shared priorities and form multi-partner project teams to take these priorities forward. This has undoubtedly led to quicker realisation of benefits through a collaborative approach which draws on good practice and knowledge sharing – for example all partners now on the same contact centre solution, targeted work and sharing of findings in relation to AI and Automation to reduce duplication and to support implementation further and wider than could have been achieved individually.

The partners in SRS are now considering expanding the services of SRS beyond ICT to establish a collaborative arrangement across the whole Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) agenda.