EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14/09/23

5.   **DIGITAL PLAN – 2023-28**

The Cabinet Member for Finance, the Corporate Director, the Head of Finance Department and the Assistant Head of Information Technology were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Finance presenting the Digital Plan in its draft form for the purpose of pre-scrutiny, and to receive observations and feedback on the proposed content of the work programme.

The Cabinet Member set out the context, the Corporate Director explained his role as Chair of the Digital Transformation Board and the Assistant Head of Information Technology further detailed the content of the plan. Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

It was noted that one of the recommendations of a report published by the Bevan Foundation recently, as a result of looking at the poverty situation in the Arfon area in particular, was that Cyngor Gwynedd should ensure that all application forms for grants and allowances for which it had administrative powers were available digitally. It was noted that it was clear from this research, and also from speaking to people facing poverty and to the various organisations that supported them, that this was a problem, and it was asked whether there were plans to address the situation. In response, it was confirmed that offering more digital provision was part of the Plan, but that there was no intention to discontinue the option of using paper forms either.

In response to a further question, it was confirmed that the forms would be digital online ones, rather than documents to be downloaded.

While accepting that the initial costs of establishing the new arrangements would be high, it was asked whether the Department was confident that the new systems would save money over time. It was also asked whether the Department was satisfied that all aspects of the digitisation were essential, and that there were no elements included for cosmetic reasons. In response, it was noted that:

- Nothing cosmetic was included and that the focus was on the things that were essential and which would improve the Council once they were embedded.
- There would be significant work taking place over the next six weeks not only to identify the costs, but also the opportunities to make savings.

Reference was made to a letter sent out by the Council recently which gave people the opportunity to respond by going to the website, phoning or texting, and concern was expressed that those few people who did not have a computer or telephone were being left behind. In response, it was noted that:

- The officers needed to know about those examples, but that the digital technology was not being introduced at the expense of the other channels, and the intention was not to leave anyone behind.
- It was important to recognise that there were still people who needed a face-to-face conversation, and although the Council wanted as many people as possible to use the digital methods, it had not completely discarded the paper element, nor the face-to-face element.

It was suggested that digital technology increased the distance between the two people who communicated with each other. There was a danger of losing sight of flesh and blood aspects as these developments progressed, and it was possible that a lack of empathy and lack of understanding could flourish because of this distance. In response, it was noted that the comment was acknowledged and that this was something to consider.

It was noted that the members were missing face-to-face contact with the Council's staff since the Covid period, and by going further down that road, there was a danger that the Council's accountability to the members, and ultimately to its electorate, would move further away too. In response, it was noted that:

- The intention was to submit a report to Cabinet on 19 September on the establishment of a long-term Hybrid Working Plan for the Council's staff which would mean that all officers who were able to work hybridly would be expected to attend the office with their colleagues for at least two days a week, every working week.
- There was a wish to emphasise that this was a minimum of two days, and that it did not mean that people would only be in the office for two days.
- This would enable us to continue to support and get the best from our staff in order to provide the best possible services for the people of Gwynedd.

It was noted that if the Council intended to use artificial intelligence, it was important that the members received training explaining exactly what it entailed, and how it would be used. In response, it was noted that there was room to educate people about this, but that the Council would not rush into using artificial intelligence, and that any use of the technology would be undertaken in a responsible way.

The teachers unions' representative noted that the Trades Union Congress had recently discussed artificial intelligence in the workplace and that she could share the relevant documents, which included the trade unions' position on this, with the Council. In response, it was noted that the officers would welcome the information and that it would be an important contribution to any future discussion.

The intention to create new systems was welcomed, instead of trying to build on systems that already existed, but, to ensure effective collaboration, the importance of ensuring that the Council's systems could work with the systems used by other organisations such as the Health Board, the Fire and Rescue Authority and the other county councils, was emphasised. In response, it was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd could not do this single-handedly, and as stated in the Plan, the Council would be a willing and ready partner to support measures and initiatives to abolish digital barriers to enable collaboration with

strategic partners, which would include the Health Board, neighbouring councils and the third sector, etc.

It was asked if the Council had a programme to train people in the use of computers and tablets. In response, it was noted that paragraph 9 of the Digital Plan stated that the Council would continue to support the North Wales Regional Skills Partnership to improve digital skills in the county, as well as the improvement programmes that were part of the Digital Gwynedd programme campaign to increase digital inclusion. However, perhaps more emphasis needed to be placed on the fact that the Digital Gwynedd programme went out into the community to deliver training to users.

It was asked whether the Council would be in a position to respond quickly enough if new developments came onto the market during the Digital Plan period. In response, it was noted that:

- There was complete agreement that it was necessary to be alert to new developments in the digital field, even revisiting the priorities within the lifetime of the Plan.
- There was also an intention to carry out work in terms of improving people's digital thinking, which meant that digital developments could be rooted in the Council sooner than was currently possible.
- The Council would be in a position where it would be possible to adapt to whichever social media would be in place in the future.

The Digital Transformation Board was wished well in its work and the aim to '*carve out a bold path on our journey to becoming a digital County*' and '*capitalising on opportunities to innovate and embed digital technology to improve our residents' standard of living, work together better with partners and strengthen and improve our services' responsiveness to our customers' needs and expectations*' was welcomed. Reference was made to the list of key headings in the report when aiming for a digital council, and it was noted that the first and most important of all was '*There is a clear place for the Welsh language in all digital developments*'. It was noted further that the report acknowledged that contacting the Council on the phone remained a popular choice among customers, and the Council was praised overall for responding to phone calls. It was noted that the IT Department itself led in that respect and that their highly effective and efficient mode of operation was a model for the rest of the departments.

The member was thanked for his kind words, and it was noted that the message would be conveyed to the Service's staff.

It was enquired what was the time-scale in terms of establishing a sub-group to act on digital developments among the workforce. In response, it was noted that:

- Although the sub-group had not yet been established, the work of planning for what the sub-group would be required to lead on in due course was already underway.
- The Organisational Learning and Development Manager was a key part of that, and contributions would also be needed from other people who had already been identified.

- Although the group had not yet been established, that would certainly happen within the next couple of months.

In response to a request for more information regarding the intention to create a data warehouse, it was stated that:

- The Council currently had around 300 systems, which collected all kinds of different information.
- The majority of systems addressed certain things that were common across everything, such as names and addresses, and the more systems we had, the greater the reach of the accuracy of the data.
- The data warehouse would be a medium, not only to be able to report from it, but also a medium to clean and be more accurate in terms of the data.
- The resource would also provide more of an overview across the Council's services, so rather than having a one-sided report from one system, it would enable us to look at a range of services and trends in relation to service users across a number of services.
- This would put the Council in a position to make evidence-based decisions and be able to predict how best to shape the services for the future.

The intention to have a system where it would be possible for a customer to raise an enquiry and receive constant updates on where the Council was in dealing with that enquiry was welcomed, and it was noted that it was hoped that the same enquiry tracking system would be available for councillors too. In response, it was noted that the observation was fully accepted and that the officers would note this.

At the end of the discussion, the Cabinet Member emphasised that the Digital Plan would not be a document that stood still, and that it would be continuously reviewed.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.