



**Report of the Leader and Cabinet Member – Economy and Strategy
for Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel
2 March 2020**

**Wales Audit Office (WAO) report on local government
use of data: Report and Action Plan**

Purpose:	To brief the Panel on the Council’s proposed response to the Wales Audit Office study and report: “The maturity of local government in use of data”.
Content:	The report sets out the background to the study, the previous Scrutiny report, and outlines a proposed Action Plan which responds to each of 11 identified recommendations across the four areas of the study.
Councillors are being asked to:	Consider the information provided and forward views to the Cabinet Member via letter from the Panel Convener.
Lead Councillor:	Councillor Rob Stewart, Leader and Cabinet Member – Economy and Strategy
Lead Officer & Report Author:	Sarah Lackenby, Chief Transformation Officer
Legal Officer:	Debbie Smith
Finance Officer:	Paul Roach

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In December 2018, the Wales Audit Office (WAO) published the results of a study on how local authorities in Wales were making use of data in order to inform their decision making. Reports were published for Wales and individual local authorities. On 24 June 2019, the Panel received an initial highlight report detailing the key findings of the WAO study for Swansea, which was based on returns from an earlier questionnaire to Council managers and Councillors, and highlights from the main report.
- 1.2 The initial report to Scrutiny briefed panel members on the key findings of the WAO study, which were divided into four areas as follows:

- Vision, Leadership and Culture;
- Data protection;
- Skills and capacity; and
- Evidence-based decision making.

1.3 Accompanying this report is an Action Plan (see Appendix A) which lists the individual WAO recommendations for Swansea within each of the four above headings and for each: proposed actions; milestones, timescales and targets; what success would look like; nominated lead officer, and; achievements to date.

1.4 Across the four areas, there are eleven separate recommendations proposed by WAO. Since the previous Scrutiny Panel report, a small team of officers from various service areas has been considering the recommendations and developing the Action Plan. This report summarises these and outlines the proposed actions and significant issues around each.

2. WAO study recommendations: Vision, Leadership and Culture

2.1 WAO's opening recommendation is that local authorities should *have a clear vision that treats data as a key resource*. The study found that local authorities across Wales are slow to develop a culture that values and uses data effectively to improve services and outcomes. In Swansea, the Council does not currently have a specific, separate strategy relating to 'data'. Our current approach and aspirations for the use of data and information are set out within existing policy and strategy documents in the Digital Services and Information Management and Security areas. To varying extents, data will also underpin (but not always explicitly) service area strategies within the Council.

2.2 Whilst it is possible to pursue each of the recommendations on a largely individual, ad hoc basis, we agree with WAO's central argument that an overall strategy and vision for the Council's use of data should be developed to provide a framework for considering subsequent actions. Such a strategy would define 'data' in this context (that is, what should be in scope for the strategy and actions), as well as setting out what we want to achieve more broadly in our use of data. Our proposed actions would then be informed by a wider and strategic approach to data.

2.3 The second WAO recommendation is that authorities *establish corporate data standards and coding that all services use for their core data*; to make integration of data across services easier. Application of standards related to data currently tends to be linked to the operational requirements of individual services. It is considered that for further work on this recommendation should follow the development of the data strategy. This could involve further investigation of the key Council systems, their data and coding standards, and any commonalities and good practice. In parallel, we propose to build on the work already undertaken to develop and promote the authority's Local Land and

Property Gazetteer (LLPG) standards to additional service areas working with address data.

- 2.4 The Council is also advised to *undertake an audit to determine what data is held by services and identify any duplicated records and information requests*. This recommendation aims to help identify options to reduce duplication and waste and further enable data sharing across different service areas. We feel that our detailed response to this should again follow the development of the data strategy. It seems logical that there should be an initial focus on the information required for the 'Swansea Account' (see 2.5), and from this to identify further actions to support this.
- 2.5 WAO's fourth recommendation, to *create a central integrated customer account as a gateway to services*, is largely reflected in the Council's existing proposals to provide a single digital identity for citizens to access online services, initially by developing a digital platform and upgrading the Council website. The 'Swansea Account' is the Council's proposed integrated secure online citizen/business account, where all information and services received can be viewed in one place (similar to dealing with any other organisation, e.g. utility companies, banks). It has been piloted in the first instance with the Passport to Leisure scheme, which offers discounts on a wide range of sports and leisure venues to Swansea residents who are on a low income.

3. Data protection

- 3.1 The WAO report states "local authorities need to protect personal information from data misuse but without suffocating innovation" and that "many public sector organisations are wrestling with the benefits and risks of data sharing". Specifically the Council are recommended to *provide refresher training to service managers to ensure they know when and what data they can and cannot share*. The guidance currently on the Council's Staffnet pages and on-line training modules (via Learning Pool) will be reviewed and re-promoted in line with the new Code of Practice from the Information Commissioner, and the framework provided by the Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information (WASPI).
- 3.2 Following on from this, WAO also recommend that authorities *review and update data sharing protocols to ensure they support services to deliver their data sharing responsibilities*. In this regard, it is proposed that an audit and review of existing protocols (general and service-specific) be co-ordinated by the Information Governance Unit and developed by the Council's Information Governance Working Group.

4. Skills and capacity

- 4.1 The study noted that "local authorities, in general, do not have the right skills and capacity to manage data effectively", and that "...staff are not being equipped to match the scale and pace of technological change and

the demand for data analytics”. WAO make two recommendations around staff data skills and capacity, firstly that the Council *identify staff who have a role in analysing and managing data to remove duplication and free up resources to build and develop capacity in data usage*; and secondly to *invest and support the development of staff data analytical, mining and segmentation skills*.

- 4.2 The development of a Data Strategy will inform our response to both recommendations; by providing an initial strategic view of what is in scope as ‘data’ and our high-level objectives to improve the Council’s use of data, which will in turn influence our view of the associated skills involved. In the meantime however, we propose to initially liaise with WAO to clarify their view of the key skills required, and undertake some initial research on potential qualifications and opportunities. Later, subject to the emerging strategy, a skills audit will aim to identify staff whose key role and skills relate to data analysis and management, draw out any gaps (and related issues), and identify potential actions to address them.

5. Evidence-based decision making

- 5.1 The fourth area highlighted by the study relates to the use of evidence in decision-making, in order to create a “data-driven decision-making culture”. The Swansea report noted that “Understanding the data and the level of analysis provided to inform business planning and decision making is an area for improvement.” Therefore, WAO recommend that *we set data reporting standards to ensure minimum data standards underpin decision making*. Our proposed response is two-fold: to scope and undertake a review of good practice in data reporting for the performance review process; and to work with services to continue to improve data reporting standards. The WAO report should serve to add impetus to the need for continuous improvement.
- 5.2 The Open Data Institute simply define open data as data that is “available to everyone to access, use and share”. For local government, WAO see open data as “an important characteristic of data maturity” which can “assist a wide range of organisations to develop new businesses and services... (and) ...enable better data sharing across organisations and geographical areas”. To unlock the potential of data held, WAO recommend that authorities *make more open data available*. However the report acknowledges that most Councils are at the early stages of this. Our initial proposed approach is one based on learning, awareness-raising and progress reporting, including working with other authorities and public bodies on the emerging agenda around open data. The results of this research and raised awareness will feed into the draft Data Strategy, and the Council’s approach and aspirations around open data will form part of that Strategy.
- 5.3 The report’s final recommendation is for the Council to *review the range and quality of the information needed by decision makers and the format*

it is presented. In terms of evidence-based decision making, the Swansea report notes that “The Authority has already taken steps in this direction and cites its approach to making efficiencies and reviewing service data as positive approaches...” However, the Swansea survey revealed “a difference of opinion on whether the Authority uses data to inform decisions and whether this is thoroughly embedded within the culture of the Authority”. Specific actions in respect of this recommendation are perhaps less straightforward to identify and bring forward, although clearly all services should be mindful of this principle and keep information and reporting needs (for internal and external users) continually under review.

6. General Issues

- 6.1 The WAO reports encompass a wide range of linked but discrete areas and issues around the use of data within its four broad themes. Clearly, there is more that can be done across all of these areas in different ways, and the lead nominated officers identified for each recommendation will, in conjunction with colleagues, progress and report back on these matters within the standard reporting frameworks.
- 6.2 Following this Scrutiny Panel meeting, and subject to the Panel’s views, it is proposed that the report be circulated to the Council’s Audit Committee for information. Further progress on this Action Plan will be reported to the Panel in due course.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 There are no specific implications related to this report. Any financial implications emerging from the action plan will be assessed on a project by project basis, from within existing budget resources.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Background Papers:

- Wales Audit Office (WAO) report: *The maturity of local government in use of data, December 2018.*
- WAO report: *Local government use of data – City and County of Swansea, December 2018.*
- Report of the Cabinet Member for Business Transformation & Performance to the Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel, 24 June 2019: *WAO report on local government use of data: Swansea findings.*

Appendices:

- Appendix A** WAO Data Study – Action Plan (template).