

24th May 2024

DIGITAL AND IMPROVEMENT DELIVERY PLAN 2024-25

Purpose

1. To provide members with an overview of the current position with grant funding to support the work of Improvement and Digital.
2. To seek views from members on the priority area's for improvement support and approve the delivery plan 2024-25.

Background and Context

3. The Improvement Programme is a Welsh Government grant funded programme established in 2021-22 as a shared commitment of Welsh Government and the WLGA to promoting, supporting, and resourcing self and sector-led improvement across local government in Wales.
4. Welsh Government committed to funding the programme up to £800k per annum, focused on corporate improvement support, for three years, subject to achievement of objectives and annually agreed delivery plans.
5. The three-year programme, agreed by Welsh Ministers, was based on proposals by the WLGA submitted in 2019, which included a range of activities set within the following core themes:
 - Leadership, financial resilience, and transformation
 - Self and peer assessment, challenge, and support
 - Improvement capacity and support.
6. A report was presented to the [Executive Board in November 2023](#) outlining delivery over the three-years of the programme, achievement of outcomes and challenges.
7. Despite the challenges highlighted within the previous report, there has been increased demand, take-up and recognition of the value of the improvement programme, with the final year of the programme utilising £787.3k of the potential £800k, the shortfall due to two commissioned pieces of work having to be postponed for delivery in 2024-25. Despite staff remaining on fixed-term contracts or secondments, there has been stability within the team over the last twelve months which has supported capacity and continuity.
8. In preparation for a new phase of the improvement programme, the Head of Improvement engaged with Chief Executives during the Autumn to inform considerations for the next iteration of the offer. Feedback across the sector around the challenges and priorities highlighted, financial resilience and sustainability, due to increased demand across social care and housing/homelessness, concerns around continuing to raise education standards within the context of the funding pressures, and the need to address

inequality and climate change/adaptation, whilst experiencing recruitment and retention challenges. These discussions formed the basis for the Improvement Objectives within the WLGA Corporate Plan.

9. In January 2024, Welsh Government officials advised the WLGA of the intention to recommend to the Minister for Finance and Local Government a total budget of £2.15m for both improvement and digital agendas with the recommendation conditional on planning taking place to create new arrangements to better align improvement, digital and data agendas for 2025-26. The £2.15m allocation equated to the same total funding that was provided for the Improvement Programme (£800k), and the Digital Transformation Fund and Digital Skills Fund ¹(£1.35m) for 2023-24. However, there was an expectation that the WLGA would absorb the funding cuts to Academi Wales² by taking over the contract and cost of delivering the Senior Councillor Leadership Programme (total cost for 2023-24 £115k), so effectively a cut in the funding available for improvement support. Welsh Government have advised that there is flexibility on the division of the grant between digital and improvement, however, we are working to the funding split from 2023-24 and will liaise later in the year if either team is forecasting an underspend that can be utilised by the other. There was a requirement to submit objectives and a high-level delivery plan to Welsh Government to support the recommendation to the Minister.
10. The delivery plan was based on feedback from the sector, engagement with spokespersons, and known demand for support. Three iterations of the delivery plan have been submitted, however, Welsh Government officials have made further requests, which are not deliverable within the current resource available. In addition, expectations from the sector and growing demand for wider improvement support, with reduced funding capacity now requires further political consideration and direction.
11. The delivery programme for the digital allocation within the grant funding was presented to, and approved by, the WLGA's Digital Leadership Board on 15 April 2024. Welsh Government representatives attended this Board meeting. Funding has subsequently been allocated to a number of strategic activities and projects as approved in the programme, and these have been confirmed with relevant councils and other stakeholders.
12. An externally facilitated review, to align improvement, digital and data agendas commenced in December 2023, in accordance with the recommendations of the Jack Straw review approved by members in May 2023 and is expected to conclude in the next few weeks.

¹ The Digital Transformation Fund and Digital Skills Fund is grant funding administered by the Digital Team to Council to deliver digital projects.

² Academi Wales is the centre for excellence in leadership and management for public services in Wales. Established in September 2012, it operates under the portfolio of the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning.

Proposed Delivery Plan

13. The grant funding for improvement has largely been used to provide proactive corporate improvement support, with a reserved amount of funding (approx. £50k) for reactive targeted improvement support, in the event of significant regulator findings or unique emerging corporate threats.
14. The proposed delivery plan for 2024-25 (see Appendix 1 for last version submitted to Welsh Government), was set within the context of supporting financial resilience and sustainability in the context of the root causes of failure from lessons learned from statutory and non-statutory interventions in England, which aligns with corporate improvement. Recently published statutory guidance applicable in England, which draws on the lessons from previous failings defines 7 overlapping good practice themes to deliver the best value duty. While these themes are interdependent it was identified that strong governance, culture, and leadership underpin effective partnerships and community engagement, service delivery, and the use of resources.
15. Whilst the Best Value Duty does not apply in Wales, the overarching principles align with the requirements of the Performance Duties within Wales: 'The Best Value Duty relates to the statutory requirement for local authorities to make arrangement to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Best value authorities must demonstrate good governance, including a positive organisational culture, across all their functions and effective risk management. Within Wales the performance requirements are defined as 'the extent to which a council is exercising its functions effectively, using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively, and its governance is effective for securing the above.
16. The corporate improvement offer does not have a direct impact on the main financial pressures, e.g. social services demand, homelessness, cost of funding climate change and cost of failing to respond, etc. the broader ambition and commitment within the WLGA corporate plan is to work across the WLGA and externally to integrate and align improvement support and generate capacity to assist local government with these significant challenges.

Improvement Support Demand

17. The first Panel Performance Assessments (PPA's) are due to commence in July 2024 and will occupy a significant amount of the team's capacity over the next two years. PPA's are not funded through the improvement grant, the WLGA council has agreed to provide reserve funding to support delivery of the first round.
18. Although the delivery plan is set within the context of supporting financial resilience and sustainability, there is a pressing need to look more broadly at the pressures on local government to deliver truly impactful improvement support. Key areas highlighted by the sector include, social care demand, housing and homelessness, education improvement, and workforce capacity and capability. Welsh Government priorities and the recognised need by the sector to focus on equality has resulted in demand for equalities specific support, which isn't sufficiently provided for this year.

19. Based on current demand and planned work in 2024-25, just over £740k of expenditure is already committed as follows:

Leadership	£254k
Senior Member Leadership Programme	£120k
Solace Chief Executive Programme	£60k
Mentoring support	£26K
Top team development support	£15k
Progressive Community Leadership Programme	£33k
Performance & Service Improvement	£53k
Data Cymru support	£43k
Peer Review	£10k
Governance & Decision Making	£10.5k
Governance & Audit Committee Support	£5k
Risk Management Training	£5.5k
Targeted Support	£12.5k
Core Costs	£410k
Total	£740k

The remaining £60k is required to deliver targeted improvement support and assist councils with opportunities for improvement identified through PPA's, which is a very modest amount for the likely demand. This funding would also have to cover any further requests for top team development or mentoring support. To allow additional funding to be redirected to support potential demand, we could cancel planned expenditure to support risk management training and delivery of the progressive community leadership programme, which would generate an additional £38.5k. The WLGA could refuse to fund the Senior Member Leadership Programme, expected to be £120k this year, however, this is a valued development programme which would likely cease.

20. Welsh Government officials have indicated an expectation to include improvement support for the ongoing implementation of Corporate Joint Committee's and a specific objective around financial resilience. However, we do not have the capacity in terms of officer time or funding to provide further support in these areas unless these areas are prioritised over the current areas within the delivery plan.

21. In previous years the programme has delivered support around Equalities and addressing the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ARWAP). Support around equalities will be limited to officer time to support the officer and Cabinet member networks and ensuring that equality is a consistent theme across improvement support. Under a previous iteration of the Improvement Programme, specific funding was available to support the *equalities agenda*, which included funding posts. Continued support to address implementation of the ARWAP is not available. This limits the support available to Councils with the delivery of Welsh Governments ambitions on the equality agendas. To provide the desired level of support, would need investment in a post and funding to commission support.

22. Whilst we are supporting the Solace Chief Executive Programme, there is a wider support need to develop the pipeline of Directors and Statutory Officers. Recruitment to these roles has been challenging in recent years. Support is available through Solace

but at a cost to councils (£500 per delegate) and with diminishing budgets, there is a risk that these opportunities won't be accessible to all councils unless funded nationally.

Conclusion & Longer-term Arrangements

23. As highlighted, meeting demand, and providing impactful improvement support within the current grant funding arrangement is challenging. Absorbing the cost of delivering the Leadership Programme, on top of inflationary pressures, has significantly reduced funding capacity at a time when the sector is seeking more improvement support. Members are asked to consider the sufficiency of funding and prioritise areas for inclusion within the final delivery plan.
24. Members are also asked for views on requesting that future funding is provided through the settlement and top slice, to assist with strategic planning and better alignment with the WLGA Corporate Plan, and to provide a level of certainty for the Improvement Team. Although new in post, this approach aligns with the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning's intention to reduce the number of specific grants and bureaucracy of administering.

Recommendations

25. Members are invited to:

- 25.1 Consider the report, the level of funding available for improvement, and provide direction on improvement priorities for inclusion within the final delivery plan.**
- 25.2 Approve the delivery plan (subject to members direction on priorities) for final submission to Welsh Government, and proposal to request future funding via the settlement and top slice.**

Report cleared by Cllr Rob Stewart

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Appendix 1



Digital and Improvement Grant 2024-25 Objectives and Outline Delivery Plan

Introduction

The Improvement Programme has received grant funding of up to £800k per annum, over the last three years based around the core themes and annual objectives which were established within the business case in 2019-20. As we are at the end of the initial 3-year commitment, we have been evaluating what has worked well, where support has been most valued and what support is required as we move into the next phase of delivery. Over the medium term the programme will be focused on supporting councils' financial resilience and sustainability, through the provision of support for developing strong leadership, good governance, performance, and risk management arrangements.

The Chief Digital Officer and Digital Team are core funded via the revenue support grant (RSG). The team also administers grant funding of up to £1.35m per annum on behalf of Welsh Government to support local government to fulfil the overall aims of the digital programme to:

- Foster collaborative digital transformation and innovation across councils in Wales.
- Help councils bring together digital tools, technology, and skills, to deliver efficient services that meet their customer expectations.
- Help councils work together to achieve better outcomes for their customers.

During 23-24, the Digital Team's approach has evolved to focus on more strategic areas, including key local government service areas (social care, education) and national priorities (Welsh benefits, Connecting Care). Priorities have been identified by working closely with the WLGA's policy teams, local government services, the national CDOs and other key stakeholders. This approach is also in line with the Digital Team's corporate objectives to add value to the WLGA's policy teams and support local government to improve services. This approach has been approved by the Digital Leadership Board and will be further developed during 24-25. The grant funding will contribute to the delivery of activities within this strategic framework.

Welsh Government has indicated its intention to issue a single grant offer letter for the £2.15m of grant funding to support more collaboration between the grant funded work of the improvement and digital teams.

Collaboration and Joint Working 24/25

The WLGA has commissioned an independent review to improve alignment between Digital, Data and Improvement support. This work has commenced and will be completed in 2024-25 to help inform a new approach across the three areas to provide a more cohesive offer of support to councils from 2025-26.

In the short term, the following activities will be put in place to ensure there is as much collaboration as possible within the constraints of the current funding structures:

- Regular meetings between the Head of Improvement, the Chief Digital Officer and the Chief Executive of Data Cymru to discuss activities and identify areas for collaboration.
- Jointly reviewing outcomes of the panel performance assessments to identify where the digital team's activities can support the needs identified.
- Working together across improvement, digital and data on knowledge and information sharing including communities of practice, webinars, shared resources etc.
- Reviewing jointly our contacts within local government to ensure alignment, joint communication, and reduced duplication as appropriate.
- Jointly reviewing needs identified by councils to ensure a joint response to support where appropriate.
- Joint governance review to understand existing arrangements and investigate whether shared governance arrangements can be established to better align the programmes.

The Chief Digital Officer, Head of Improvement, and the Chief Operating Officer for Data Cymru as members of the WLGA Senior Management Team, are integrated into the wider work of the WLGA and regularly attend WLGA political meetings with Senior Members and Leaders. We engage with partner organisations to align and strengthen capacity for digital, data and improvement support to local government. This has increased the profile, demand, influence, and impact of our collective work and enables the sharing of intelligence to support improvement and policy development.

The objectives and outline delivery plan below outline how the WLGA will deliver grant funded digital, data and improvement support during 2024-25. The delivery plan aims to support financial resilience and sustainability, in the context of corporate failings identified from the lessons learned from statutory and non-statutory interventions in England. This will support councils to provide improved, efficient core services for the residents.

Purpose: Support financial resilience and sustainability, increase skills and capacity to transform, improve service delivery.			
Objective 1: Performance and Service Improvement	Rationale	Outline of Activities	Desired Outcomes
Help councils to use digital tools and approaches to improve council services	Digital strategy for Wales. Cyber action plan for Wales.	Focus on key sector and national strategic priorities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Care • Welsh Benefits • Cyber Resilience • Education 	Improved service delivery for customers, efficiency savings, collaborative solutions implemented across multiple councils.
		Address key service and operational needs and challenges in digital across Welsh council service areas, examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing of Digital Services • Sharing of Internet of Things Learnings • Supporting Bilingual Translation and Interpretation • Digital inclusion • Accessibility 	
Supporting councils with the delivery of statutory performance duties. Coordination and delivery of Panel Performance Assessments (PPA).	Core duties of the improvement team to support councils with their performance duties.	<p>Reflecting and refining the PPA approach during roll-out.</p> <p>Continuous recruitment of Peers, in particular wider public sector peers to support the One Welsh Public Service ethos.</p> <p>Using intelligence gleaned to share good practice across the sector, e.g. webinars.</p>	<p>Maximising and demonstrating the value of sector-led improvement., in accordance with statutory requirements.</p> <p>Improved outcomes for Councils and residents.</p> <p>Supporting the One Welsh Public Service ethos by encouraging use of peers from</p>

	Robust performance management framework is critical to ensure that councils are using resources efficiently and effectively to achieve objectives. This should be a tool to support councils with difficult decision-making in the current financial climate.		the wider public sector to participate in PPA's.
Supporting councils to strengthen their approach to self-assessment. Working with Welsh Government, Audit Wales and Regulators on areas identified for improvement.		Working with the network, WG and Audit Wales to upskill practitioners and refine approaches to self-assessment and reporting styles.	Improved performance framework within councils which drives improvement and early intervention, with streamlined effective reporting.
Sharing intelligence across the digital, data and improvement teams to ensure opportunities to respond to identified needs and add value to the work of each team.	Targeting support for councils to areas of identified need should ensure the greatest impact on council improvement.	Regular formal meetings between the three teams to share intelligence. Sharing data on needs and priorities identified.	Evidence-led decision making on allocation of resources leading to better outcomes for councils and residents.

Objective 2: Leadership, Capacity, Skills, and People	Rationale	Outline of Activities	Desired Outcomes
Supporting the development of strong political and professional leadership within councils, including preparations for succession planning.	Weak leadership is an indicator of failure as reported in lessons learned from interventions in England. Number of new Chief Executives in recent years and further	Working with SOLACE to fund the delivery of a Chief Executive Programme for Wales.	New Chief Executives are supported to understand the full requirements of the role and develop a network of peers. Interest in these roles has diminished in recent years, so this should incentivise career progression.

	<p>turnover expected. No current offer of support.</p> <p>Anticipated turnover of knowledgeable Leaders expected, so need to support succession planning.</p> <p>Valued elements of the programme.</p>	Continuing to support the Leadership Programme for Senior Elected Members.	Equipping councillors with the knowledge and skills to support strong political leadership for current and aspiring Leaders and Cabinet. Supporting succession planning.
Supporting personal resilience and development.	Recognition of the challenging environment within local government and the need to provide some wellbeing support.	Providing coaching and mentoring support for senior political and professional leaders.	Improved wellbeing and resilience.
Support councils to implement a digital culture; maximise the impact of their people on service improvement; and enable customers to take full advantage of those improved services.	<p>Although it is widely recognised that digital tools and technologies present significant opportunities to improve service delivery, it is ultimately the people delivering or receiving those services that will determine the success of any changes.</p> <p>Without addressing digital culture (values, beliefs, behaviours, policies, procedures, access, training etc.), digital will not achieve its potential.</p>	Ensure all projects address cultural issues including change management, training and digital inclusion.	<p>Improved service delivery for customers.</p> <p>Efficiency savings.</p> <p>Improved recruitment and retention.</p>
Continuing to support a culture of sector-led improvement across local government in Wales, though the provision of networking opportunities, seminars/webinars to share learning, and development of a suitable offer of peer support.	<p>Expectations and demand from the sector.</p> <p>Identified need to raise skills and knowledge levels.</p>	<p>Supporting Networks/Communities of Practice</p> <p>Hosting Webinars/Shared-Learning Opportunities</p>	Sector approach to responding to common issues, sharing of intelligence and resources, leading to better use of resources and improved outcomes for councils and residents.

Objective 3: Governance and Decision Making	Rationale	Outline of Activities	Desired Outcomes
<p>Developing strong governance and risk management arrangements within councils to assist with the delivery of outcomes through constructive effective challenge.</p>	<p>Poor governance and risk management are indicators of failure from the lessons learned from interventions in England.</p> <p>Valued elements of the programme with strong engagement and take-up across the sector.</p> <p>Recognised need to continue to develop scrutiny across local government.</p> <p>Recognised need to continue to develop the role of the Governance & Audit Committees across local government.</p>	<p>Continued offer of skills-based training and facilitation of self-assessment for scrutiny committees.</p> <p>Sharing good practice and intelligence to support risk management identification and responses.</p> <p>Continued development support for Governance & Audit Committee Chairs.</p>	<p>Constructive, effective scrutiny and challenge which strengthens policy and assists with early identification and intervention on poor performance.</p> <p>Raising the profile of effective risk management. Early identification and effective responses to mitigate threats and enhance opportunities.</p> <p>Increased knowledge and capability of Governance & Audit Committee members to constructively challenge arrangements within their remit.</p>
<p>Promoting and supporting a positive culture through good behaviours, and recognition of the value of equality, diversity, and inclusion.</p>	<p>Poor culture is an indicator of failure from lessons learned from statutory interventions in England.</p>	<p>Working with colleagues across the WLGA and WG to support civility in public life.</p> <p>Commissioning targeted support on request.</p>	<p>Inclusive working cultures that thrive on diversity of opinion and</p>

	Working through austerity will take a strain on working relationships, so reinforcing and supporting councils is critical to a positive culture.	Continuing to promote and embed the value of EDI across all areas of work.	provide constructive challenge, to ensure equality of service and better outcomes for residents.
Assist councils to make data-driven or data-informed decisions and share data.	<p>Data-informed decision making is an area for improvement as identified by councils and regulators.</p> <p>Data maturity in local government is low.</p> <p>Digital Strategy for Wales.</p>	Support councils to use existing, new and emerging technologies to improve their data maturity, and ultimately improve services, including via training, knowledge sharing, case studies and use cases.	<p>Improved service delivery for customers.</p> <p>Scarce resources targeted appropriately.</p>

Objective 4: Collaboration and Innovation	Rationale	Outline of Activities	Desired Outcomes
Support collaborative transformation and innovation across councils in Wales (and with other key stakeholders), helping councils work together to achieve better outcomes for their customers.	<p>A significant number of the services delivered by councils are common and are facing the same challenges. Working together to identify innovative solutions to common problems is both cost effective and likely to lead to better outcomes.</p> <p>Similarly, a number of the key service delivery challenges faced by councils are common across the public sector and there are significant benefits from cross sector learning and sharing.</p>	<p>Use the established governance framework and engagement mechanisms to ensure key stakeholders are contributing to / aware of collaborative opportunities.</p> <p>Focus on service-wide / national priority programmes (see objective 1) to ensure a multi-agency, cross sector approach to collaborative solutions.</p> <p>Horizon scanning of new technologies / digital approaches, and translation into support</p>	<p>Better outcomes for customers.</p> <p>Efficiency savings for councils.</p> <p>Knowledge and skills sharing.</p> <p>Effective implementation of technology.</p> <p>Shared solutions contributing to the one Welsh public service agenda.</p>

	One Welsh public service agenda.	Partnership working with a broad range of organisations to identify opportunities for innovation and collaboration.	
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Objective 5: Targeted Improvement Support	Rationale	Outline of Activities	Desired Outcomes
To assist individual councils to respond to significant emerging corporate risks which may have been identified through self-assessment, panel performance assessments or Audit Wales and regulator findings.	<p>Core theme of the improvement programme.</p> <p>Welsh Government expectations.</p>	Dependent on request.	<p>Improved services for residents/service users.</p> <p>Change in risk management assessment, feedback from council, and/or improvement conference.</p>