

Welsh Vital Digital Information Project, Phase 1

This project undertook research into how to maintain long term access to records held on principal Council line of business systems (meaning software/applications that supports the running of a function of the Council) in Wales. A partnership of six Council archive services from across Wales received Welsh Government funding to:

- Understand the barriers or issues, strategic, organisational and technological, involved in providing long term access to Council records to ensure authenticity and trust where records have been kept for a long period of time.
- Develop a proposed solution to the problem, and help to develop the next phase of any work required to move this process on.

Systems such as these can have a relatively short operational life span, and there may also be additional issues around bit decay or corruption, version obsolescence and operating system failure. However, the records that these systems hold may be required to be kept for longer than that system's life. For example, adoption records must be legally retained for 100 years. As such, without due consideration of retention requirements, these systems can present a critical risk to Councils, not only in terms of data continuity, but in meeting statutory responsibilities for citizen access and long term democratic accountability.

The steering group and consultants employed on the project therefore also looked at understanding the barriers and opportunities for the archive services whose remit includes ensuring that the corporate memory of the council is preserved, and for whom undertaking digital preservation for the records held in these systems is increasingly a fundamental requirement.

The work examined the context of 'digital transformation' within principal Councils and Welsh Government. The key finding was that the idea of 'digital transformation' is now commonly used as a shorthand phrase to refer to digital tools, technologies and approaches to support the fundamental re-design of local services so that they deliver better outcomes, in a more targeted and timely fashion, at less cost. At national level there is a vision that digital will contribute to national strategies and the objectives of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The broader context to the management of records and archives within Councils, as carried out by archive services and information/records management services, was also explored, as was the work that has been done collaboratively by the professional sector group Archives and Records Council Wales (ARCW) and the National Library of Wales since 2009 to develop an open-source digital preservation system.

The current situation for the retention of records in line of business systems was examined. The research found that even with the limited information available, the numbers of systems and data retention requirements mean that different Council functions have differing levels of complexity for data continuity.

The digital preservation activities currently undertaken by the participating archive services were benchmarked against the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) Levels of Digital Preservation matrix. Most archive services are struggling to meet even the lowest levels of NDSA in some areas. In addition, the ARCW digital preservation system was also benchmarked; this system was shown to meet the highest levels of NDSA in most areas.

Thematic analysis of the stakeholder interviews was undertaken to identify barriers and opportunities for Councils and archive services when preserving and providing long term access to digital information, particularly in line of business systems.

A series of case studies relating to the preservation of digital information from line of business systems and collaboration in digital preservation offer learning opportunities for Wales. These include activities such as advocacy and training, specific collaborations, practical solutions and technical approaches.

Findings and Recommendations

The research found that while archive services in Wales have been working collaboratively to develop digital preservation solutions to ensure the continuity of some forms of digital data, lack of capacity and resources remain critical issues. The ARCW digital preservation system may provide some technical solutions, as may other preservation developments, but lack of recognition of the issues, and resource constraints on developing solutions are inhibiting progress. Behaviour change, policy frameworks and processes, and investment in technical solutions are all required to ensure long-term data continuity

Four key themes were identified in addressing these findings:

1. Undertaking advocacy with decision-makers
2. Building relationships within Councils
3. Developing practical digital preservation work within archive services
4. Strengthening the ARCW Digital Preservation Group and system

Detailed recommendations underpin these four themes.

Next steps

The Steering Group is taking forward the recommendations from the report. Involvement in the group has been widened to include all local authority archive services in Wales, representing all 22 principal local authorities.

An additional funding application has been submitted to the Local Government Digital Transformation Fund for a test-bed project to pilot suitable, feasible and acceptable collaborative approaches to digital data continuity for children's and family services records. If the funding is obtained, this project would run until March 2022.

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