

# Smart Towns

How can towns in  
Wales get better at  
using data?

## URBAN FORESIGHT

A multidisciplinary innovation practice that is dedicated to accelerating the next generation of technologies, services and policy frameworks for cities. We work with ambitious organisations around the world on projects that improve lives, protect the environment and boost local economies.

[urbanforesight.org](https://urbanforesight.org)

### Urban Foresight

The Catalyst, Newcastle Helix  
Newcastle Upon Tyne  
NE4 5TG  
United Kingdom

T: +44(0)191 814 2210

Flour Mill  
34 Commercial Street  
Dundee  
DD1 3EJ  
Scotland

T: +44(0)1382 549 947

E: [hello@urbanforesight.org](mailto:hello@urbanforesight.org)  
W: [urbanforesight.org](https://urbanforesight.org)

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## Executive summary

### The specific challenges faced by Welsh towns can be addressed with the deployment of smart city technologies and practices.

Smart towns could provide more efficient services, more empowered communities and support decisions on creating and managing high-performance town centres. This would address long-standing challenges but also make the most of this particular moment which combines policy leadership, post-Covid social changes, and a technology landscape which is increasingly interested in smart towns.

This potential led to the Welsh Government's Year of Smart Towns initiative – aimed at helping towns to use digital technology to support economic growth. Delivered by non-profit Menter Môn, the Year of Smart Towns (YOST) project is working in parallel with other investments from the Welsh Government's Digital Infrastructure team.

As part of YOST, Menter Môn recognised that data is a key component of smart technology deployment and that more could be done to promote awareness, availability and use of data relating to towns in Wales to support their smart development. They appointed Urban Foresight to complete a review and analysis of data use in smart towns in Wales.

Data about towns is a valuable tool for communities, businesses and public authorities to reach solutions. Research through engagement with 19 stakeholder organisations identified a wide range of strategic and operational benefits, from planning future resource use, to making near-real time decisions on how to target services.

Local authorities and town councils in particular find value in towns data, and generate value for the wider data economy. These authorities are typically the responsible stakeholder, or primary delivery agent, of digital infrastructure and data projects. Their engagement and capacity are key to successfully building smart towns throughout Wales.

This research determined a vision for data use in Welsh towns where:

**“Data is used to make decisions that result the development of Welsh Towns, at any level and on any timescale.”**

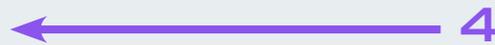
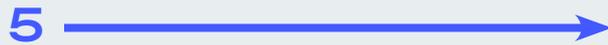
An audit of data available identified 179 separate sources of data relevant for towns in Wales, which demonstrates the scale of the potential for data use in decision making. This audit was compiled into an interactive online tool for exploring the data. Using this tool, it becomes simple to understand the connections between different datasets, filter data by category and attribute, as well as access direct links to databases.

[Access the online tools ↗](#)

Progress towards the smart town data vision is shaped by forces acting for and against positive change. This research categorised these forces into five barriers and five opportunities. They have been identified primarily through interviews with stakeholders with personal experience in town-level data-driven decision making. Their relative impact on progress towards the vision was rated and summarised in the chart below.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

**BARRIERS**

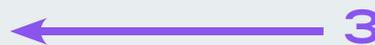
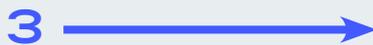


**Policy and funding**

Legislation, policy, funding and national strategies are all in support of town-level development using data-driven decision making and digital technology deployment.

**Culture and capacity**

The delivery agents of smart town and data initiatives are often public bodies. Years of tight budgets have necessitated a low-cost, risk-averse culture, with little capacity for experimentation or strategic oversight.

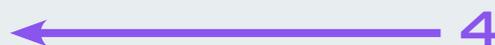
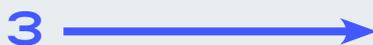


**Structure and scale**

The relatively small scale and straightforward structure of Wales's public authorities provides an ideal environment for leading digital transformation strategies, programmes and pilots.

**Data literacy and confidence**

From understanding basic statistics, to managing complex SQL databases, data skills need to be distributed and improved across all organisations for data-driven decisions to become the norm.

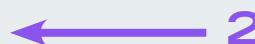


**Changing perceptions of towns**

Post-Covid, towns are rethinking their role as a place and looking beyond retail. They are facing a unique opportunity to make changes to the value they offer residents, businesses and visitors.

**Business case articulation**

Capabilities are needed in delivery agents to produce business cases for digital technologies that are fully costed and prove the economic viability of the technologies at scale and into the future.



**Technical market**

The digital technology market is thriving with organisations that offer proven technologies which are ready for deployment and scaling. There are towns that have already proven these benefits.

**Procurement challenges**

Small, agile technology suppliers are trying to sell to large, structured public agencies. Challenges in this area relate to culture, flexibility, and knowledge of data technologies.



**Starting from scratch**

Welsh towns are primed and ready to adopt digital technologies, often without the complicating factors of legacy technology infrastructure or practices.

**Data availability**

When trying to access towns-level data for analysis, stakeholders experienced barriers in availability, granularity and standardisation.

# Executive summary

A list of 55 separate recommendations to address the barriers and harness the opportunities was created from this research. These recommendations are prioritised against their alignment with achieving the smart towns vision, and mapped against the timescales and complexity

of their implementation. They have been developed in a research setting and are presented as recommendations for consideration and development, and are not current government policy. The “must do” category of the highest priority recommendations are presented below.

## Councils must:

1. Become a test bed for smart technology applications.
2. Create cross-cutting, top-down digital programme boards.
3. Create regional buying clubs for scaled solutions.

## BIDs must:

1. Bulk-buy data licences for all members.

## Welsh Government must:

1. Create a Smart Towns Standard for certifying towns.
2. Develop a test bed, lighthouse or pathfinder project that could build awareness and momentum in smart towns.
3. Make spending data available to all councils in Wales.
4. Establish innovation specialists who engage with towns on business case development and innovative technology procurement.
5. Ensure that funding schemes look beyond capital grants for equipment, and also provide revenue funding.
6. Establish a central body or network for promoting smart technology and strategic data use across Welsh authorities.
7. Provide training to delivery agents on creating business cases.

## Smart solution suppliers must:

1. Consider the needs and challenges of towns, and line solutions up against them.

## Menter Môn must:

1. Create business case frameworks for smart initiatives/investments.
2. Facilitate networking and links between places.
3. Promote this report and the frameworks and language within it.



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