

Cllr Introduction to... Digital Political Leadership

Resources Pack

Purpose of this Pack

- On 30th March 2021 the LGA ran a session with speakers on the topic of Digital Political Leadership
- This pack provides a range of resources relating to that event to help both those who attended at the time and those who didn't
- It contains
 - The scope of this issue
 - Expert councillor contributors
 - Peter Fleming
 - Joyce McCarty
 - Neil Prior
 - Notes from Delegate discussion
 - Key Resources
 - Summary: Questions to Ask

Slide(s)

3

4

5-8

9-11

12-15

16

17

18

The Scope of this Issue

- Digital tools and methods, including better use of data, represent a significant opportunity to change the way our councils work, and they have an impact on the lives of our citizens and our businesses. For many councils the Covid-19 response - necessarily using remote technologies, has accelerated awareness of the potential and practice.
- Leading a digital/data transformation agenda as a politician is not easy, especially under austerity and with so many other possibilities calling for attention. Digital transformation is cross-council and is demanding of colleague members and of officers.
- How, as an elected member, can you show appropriate leadership of this agenda, to create the conditions in which great digital work happens?

Expert Councillor Contributions

We heard from:

- **Peter Fleming, OBE**, (Leader of Sevenoaks council and Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board) on “**Supporting Innovation**”
- **Joyce McCarty**, (Deputy Leader and Digital Champion at Newcastle City Council) on “**Whole Place Digital Leadership**”
- **Neil Prior**, (Cabinet Member for Transformation at Pembrokeshire County Council, Deputy Chair of the LGA’s Improvement and Innovation Board, and Deputy Spokesperson for Digital and Innovation at the WLGA) on “**Making the Case and Bringing People Along**”

Notes that follow are ones that we made on their talks, rather than being text provided by the councillors.

Cllr Peter Fleming – Supporting Innovation – Key Points (1)

- Importance of *failure* in innovation – key concept of “fail fast, fail frequently” – acknowledgement that this can be hard in public sector, and our services are very complex – this argues for incremental and experimental approaches.
- Central government often cited for great innovation in digital but of course their context is different, often very simple transactional services at great scale – councils do many complex services for individuals.
- Important to challenge assumptions – *why do we do it that way?* Most valuable people in a council are *those who have just joined* because they find it easy and natural to ask that question.
- Members and officers find it difficult to abandon current ways of doing things, but we have to question whether services can be provided digitally in order to shift resources to human contact where that is most needed.
- Key to distinguish between “wants” and “needs” and focus on needs – and people with needs may not be the most vocal.
- Research shows that *staff want to work differently*, more remote working, and based on output rather than time - Covid has accelerated this and shown that it is possible, including productivity gains for many.

Cllr Peter Fleming – Supporting Innovation – Key Points (2)

- Residents have changed their expectations of service during Covid and more generally – eg 24 hour access online. Sevenoaks is moving to 7 to 7 for human contact.
- 8 rules for customer service
 - Train your staff
 - Don't make promises you can't keep
 - Be helpful
 - Address complaints
 - Answer your phone – strong view that councils need to remain accessible by telephone
 - Listen
 - Throw in something extra
 - Take the extra step

Cllr Peter Fleming – Supporting Innovation – Key Points (3)

- *We are fundamentally people to people businesses*, but our basic transactions need to be as simple and easy as possible – for example why can't payment options be the same as private sector websites.
- Customer focus and digital simplicity applies *internally* too – support functions should be making other staff's lives simpler.
- Its important to understand *risk appetite*: your own and your organisation's, understand how to take people on the journey
- *The next generation of workforce will have very different expectations*: their education, leisure time and social media use is collaborative by nature – they will expect collaborative working practices and internet-era tools and may work elsewhere if you don't have them.
- Key principle of *sharing open data* and allowing local innovators to use it. Example from Kent of an individual who built a schools catchment area app.
- Make clever use of technology that's already in peoples' pockets – eg [Street Bump](#) in Boston which uses accelerometers in every smart phone to detect potholes while driving.
- Look to innovative business models too – eg Uber have *surge pricing* at peaks times – should we be thinking of this eg for parking charges and to encourage behaviour change
- Something like a housing benefit interaction could provide us with the information to provide 6 other services, saving enormous time and for the benefit of residents
- Finally: "What if we could" – as a response to "we can't do that".

Cllr Peter Fleming – Q&A

Question	Answer
As we are now digital is the proportion of people without access to digital now becoming insignificant?	PF: It is becoming irrelevant, in the last 3 years 75% of 16-65-year olds have a smartphone and 90% of the population have access to internet. Everything we do as a council should be built around the resident and the individual. This means that not all the people will be accessing services digitally. Therefore, not all services are best delivered digitally.
How can I free up officers to deal with complicated issues that can't be addressed through a chatbot?	PF: It is essential to give officers who are the first point of contact the skills to answer 90% of the question's residents ask. It's also about giving residents a little bit extra and seeing if people need additional help with something else. In my council, we have tended to focus on the questions that are just in front of us and not thinking what questions the residents might need further down the line.

Cllr Joyce McCarty – Digital Place Leadership – Key Points (1)

Political Leadership

- Newcastle City Council has been on a ten year journey, motivated by the need to change ways of working, and which has also saved money
- As deputy leader and sponsor for digital, it is crucial to have political support across cabinet
- Political leadership by example – in an early action 10 elected members offered to have devices for their committee papers rather than a 2 x week papers drop, now everyone operates from a device. Business case payback in a year.
- Success of some early initiatives was important – early tough decision – taking away the facility to pay cash in a council building. Politically tough decision. Had to be absolute closedown of the service, leaving any possibility open would mean that people would adapt to continue to use the service. Financial benefits. Paypoint option eg at newsagents for those who absolutely have to use cash. Implemented with no complaints.
- Have to listen to people – learn from what people tell you – members key in this
- Another decision – to build trust by sharing Open data – even if it shows council in a bad light
- Using data to make right policy decisions – members making tough decisions – shaping the way services are delivered

Place Leadership

- A key part of the Newcastle Digital story has been the effort put into attracting inward investment, by creating a “Digital Newcastle” journey and ethos it becomes a place where digital companies want to be – recognising that they can choose anywhere in the world to be
- This means having the right infrastructure - open for business – connectivity across the city. Openreach first, more recently City Fibre, and now 5G across the city – delivered by private company investment, because they can see that the place takes this seriously. A political implication: have to take the complaints for how the streets are left after installation!
- Partnership work with with the digital sector, DWP (a major local employer) and two brilliant universities.
- Small things – Joyce sent an ecard to all digital providers in the city, encouraging people to recognise that they are part of the place journey. Digital businesses offer good quality jobs; and help to retain students graduating from the universities in the city
- Success generates more success – Newcastle has the [National Innovation Centre for Data](#) and the [Newcastle Helix](#)

Cllr Joyce McCarty – Digital Place Leadership – Key Points (2)

Digital Services and Inclusion

- Residents have totally different expectations – eg parcel delivery slots to the hour, compared to council expectations of “the next 40 days” for a bin
- Universal credit and digital-only was a trigger to the council to ensuring everyone could access
- Led to “Go Digital” programme for improving digital skills – staff, residents, tenants. Free wifi in many council and community buildings. Vulnerable residents have to have access to a digital offer
- During the pandemic: an app which said how busy the centre of town is – test and learn approach, university colleague developed and iterated it in partnership and it s now being used and developed as an app to help people travel in the city by public transport helping to achieve carbon reduction goals
- During the Great exhibition of the the North this was used as an opportunity to set up smart streets – eg litter bin monitors – empty only when needed

Results

- Covid showed unanticipated benefits of this investment as it was substantially easy for people to work from home and continue to provide services.
- Giving a family online access and the skills to use it saves £1,500 a year eg from on-line only offers.
- Awarded Smart City of the Year in 2019 and that recognition has brought further opportunities.
- Substantial benefits from making Newcastle an attractive location for digital businesses.

Cllr Joyce McCarty – Q&A

Question	Answer
With reference to your 'How Busy' app. Can imagine social value but not necessarily business value - how do you prioritise?	JM: The opportunity came from conversations with colleagues in Newcastle University. We were then able to develop a partnership with the people who developed this app. Due to its success we could go to central government to get more funding. I encourage you to think about expertise that is available locally but is no part of the council team. Also, think about using existing technology but using it differently.
Expand a bit more on the nature of resistance you encountered and how you overcame it.	JM: Member struggled with virtual meetings, so for the budget meeting we made special arrangements to make sure that one of our members would be with an officer in the civic meeting rather than being there virtually. We encourage a testing and learning approach. We try to listen to what members say when new approaches are introduced.
Talk about the relationship with officers, what do you look for them to do and what do you provide?	JM: We have an officer that has a good relationship with all the partners mentioned in my presentation. Talk to people in the universities and colleagues in the business sector. We organise brainstorming sessions with these partners to establish what we as a council could do to resolve our issues.
With some brilliant universities on our doorsteps, how do you build up those relationships with further education to implement innovative solutions?	JM: My relationship with the local university has been developing over the 8 years. However, the pandemic has brought people together with the common cause. I know several people in the university just because of my day-to-day work and senior leadership in the university are keen to maintain this relationship. Through our partnership we can hold onto talented graduates and create innovative opportunities in the future.

Cllr Neil Prior– Making the case and Bringing People Along – Key Points (1)

- Personal context: worked for 20 years in telecoms, media and tech sector; elected in 2017 and made Cabinet Member for Transformation
- Guided by a famous definition of digital from Tom Loosemore

Applying the culture, processes, business models and technologies of the internet era to respond to people's raised expectations.

- Early questions
 - Were the leaders of the organisation “digitally present”? (eg engaging, learning, networking via Twitter)
 - Was digital the preserve of the IT department?
 - Was there paper everywhere – walking through offices to see whether it *looks and feels* like a place in the Loosemore quote?
 - Was the IT strategy simply a technology list?
- Critical early moments
 - Conditional acceptance of a proposed IT strategy but only subject to rework and rewrite within the year
 - Willingness to challenge in the early days

Cllr Neil Prior– Making the case and Bringing People Along – Key Points (2)

- Developing thinking/making a case
 - Engagement in a workshop with officers
 - Building support – eg engaging scrutiny committee – showing eg [the internet minute](#) to show the growth of digital services; showing examples of innovation at other councils – selling the art of the possible
 - Then showed benchmarking data from the Society of IT managers – showed that authorities in Wales underfunded IT compared to England, and further than in Wales Pembrokeshire was one of the least funded
 - Successful in winning cross-party support
 - Asked for an immediate investment of £600k and ring fenced protection for four years
 - Crucially, the additional investment pot didn't have a list of projects attached – it was about being trusted to evolve and develop the right things
- Link to the Transformation Programme
 - Technology as a key strand of the programme, alongside Culture and Relationships
 - Technology strategy: Agile “smarter working” (flexible workforce), Digital (developing an appropriate external and internal digital offer) and People (developing to use tech appropriately in their work)

Cllr Neil Prior– Making the case and Bringing People Along – Key Points (3)

- Example Results
 - Reduction in staff sickness while people are working from home: productivity increase
 - A chatbot - [Penfro](#) - £30K investment – 200+ interactions per day 24 x7 – most interactions around waste – this greatly facilitated a change in waste collection arrangements
 - [myAccount](#) – 50,000 accounts out of 65,000 population (some second home owners in that) – as a hook for other services
 - Culture change – new mindset – continued investment in technology seen as the right thing to do
 - Increased digital presence from council officers – and use of facebook live for communication – indicators of embracing digital. Another example: an “elder statesman” councillor using FaceTime
 - Some “failures”: some service experiences are still poor, ordering bins, remote helpdesk support. Considered Robotic Process Automation in HR but case didn’t stack up. Still need work on social media.
 - Now can say “yes we are doing this” to the Loosemore quote – but we can still do more.

Cllr Neil Prior – Q&A

Question	Answer
Every officer and every councillor should be responsible for digital transformation. It shouldn't just be a role for one person. - Is this what success looks like or does it always need a champion?	NP: After our LGA corporate peer challenge, what we are thinking of doing is taking it from a cabinet owned transformation programme to a council wide transformation. If we can get the majority of the chamber behind an improvement programme for the council, it will lead to a lot of improvement.
We are currently introducing a chatbot and starting with waste so pleased to hear your comments. What other areas do you specifically use it for?	NP: I use the chatbot as a search facility. But the majority is used for waste, but you can ask all types of questions.
Is Twitter the right platform, when it only has a reach to around 1/4 of the population, who're disproportionately male (60/40)? Facebook and YouTube are bigger in reach and breadth of demographic by some way	NP: We know many residents are on Facebook, but they wanted to have a more outward look to find out what's happening across the UK. Twitter is the more professional network. But I use Facebook to communicate with my residents.
Partnership working with other public sector or other organisations – where is this on your agenda?	NP: This is part of our improvement plan, and peer challenge report, we have very strong communities and there is a lot that we could be doing with partnerships there. I have been a catalyst for looking beyond our immediate neighbours and this is shown through our work with LGA.

Discussion

In breakout groups we discussed a number of aspects about the relevance to the delegates where they are. Some core themes were:

- The transformative impact of remote working under Covid in forcing people onto technology platforms at scale and seeing how well they work, eg using collaboration tools
- Use of social media in communicating with residents but missing the personal contact with them
- The difficulty of innovating when stuck in inflexible IT Outsourcing contracts
- The benefits for smaller councils of shared services with other similarly sized councils to access capabilities that couldn't be justified by one council alone
- Concerns about data security
- Benefits of efficiency
- Important to involve users in developing new technologies – and to use members for testing

Key Resources

- The LGA has a wealth of resources devoted to digital leadership
 - [This is a good starting point](#)
 - [There are many case studies](#)
 - And an [online hub for Transformation and Innovation](#)
 - Which includes a [self-assessment tool for your council](#)
 - And the use of digital often features in [Corporate Peer Challenges](#) from the LGA
- Innovate-UK funded Catapults exist to help councils with this agenda
 - [The Connected Places Catapult](#)
 - [The Digital Catapult](#)
- Many other [resources were listed](#) as part of the other sessions in this series
 - Digital Inclusion and Connectivity
 - Smart Places
 - Data
 - Social Care
 - Councillor Communications
 - Cybersecurity

Summary: Some Questions to Consider Asking

- Does my council look and feel like a place that “*Applies the culture, processes, business models and technologies of the internet era to respond to people’s raised expectations.*”
- Does this wide agenda belong to an officer with a remit that is sufficiently broad in the organisation?
- How does our spend on digital compare with other authorities?
- How much do we know about excellent practice elsewhere and does it guide our ambitions?
- How are users engaged in service improvements?
- How are we engaged in improving connectivity and digital inclusion in our area?
- How important are digital business in our economic growth plans, how are we demonstrating that we are credible about digital to such companies?
- Do our finance team have the skills to make the business cases for - often complex – place and digital investments?
- Is there cabinet and wider council buy-in to the role that digital can play in our future?