



Local Government Association Action Learning Sets

Transformation Programme - Learning Document

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Introduction

Context

The need for councils to run transformation programmes is growing as local government strives to meet the evolving needs of their communities while managing constrained budgets and increasing demands.

Delivering transformation effectively is challenging. Changing a process does not change culture. Technology can be implemented, but not fully embraced and expected savings can be unrealised.

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned [Shared Intelligence](#) (Si) to deliver a series of action learning sets (ALSs) between September 2024 and March 2025, as part of the LGA's wider [transformation support programme](#), which recognises the need to support the capability for large scale change in local government.

The aim of the ALSs was to support councils to problem-solve and act on delivering their transformation programmes. In particular, they were focused on giving councils a peer learning experience to enhance transformation skills and confidence.

ALSs provide an opportunity for close collaboration in real time between groups of individuals with similar challenges about real-life issues or tasks. ALSs bring peers together to share learning to identify what works well or less well. They focus on action and provide the opportunity for participants to test ideas and reflect on the effect of their actions.

The transformation ALSs brought together both councillors and officers. By working with both the operational and political sides of delivery, the aim was to create a forum for councillors and officers to discuss their project issues, increase accountability on actions and create stronger political and managerial partnerships.

This document aims to share learning in relation to the themes discussed. These are:

1. People change and ensuring sustained buy-in to transformation programmes
2. Collaborative working and community capacity building
3. Focusing whole council attention on a large transformation service area
4. Optimising the potential for advanced digital technology
5. Delivery models
6. The transformation delivery capacity challenge
7. Finance and cost savings
8. Developing a data driven approach to customer insight

The notes about these themes describe some of the challenges raised by participants and some of the suggestions floated by peers to consider in addressing them. These summaries are necessarily compressed compared with the live action learning experience which allows for a full exploration of context. To mitigate this, we have also provided some longer illustrations of issues that individuals brought to the sessions in order to convey how the action learning method has been applied in practice. All illustrations have been written in a way that does not identify the council or individual who presented the issue, in line with the confidentiality protocol agreed by participants.

Themes from the action learning

People change and ensuring sustained buy-in to transformation programmes

This theme highlights a common challenge: how to secure genuine engagement from colleagues to deliver change. This applies among elected members and at all levels of officer seniority.

Challenges include:

- Making transformation everyone's business. One action learning question highlighted the difficulty of encouraging senior operational leaders to engage with wider corporate leadership responsibilities alongside urgent day to day work.
- Building support for IT and digital transformation and the associated investment. This was expressed as a challenge for a member champion in persuading political colleagues of the case for investment.
- How to describe conceptual ideas like target operating models in a way that engages staff?
- How do councils best help staff deliver and embed their changes on a daily basis?

Possible approaches emerging from the discussions included the benefit of finding ways to encourage collaboration and recognition of shared problems that transformation should address.

There was also emphasis on the importance of clear narrative – focusing on presenting evidence of what has worked elsewhere and explaining how transformation plans support residents' needs.

Discussion also recognised that transformation could involve technical terminology, concepts and diagrams. Communication to staff must focus on making it accessible and allowing staff opportunities to ask questions in a safe environment.

Practical suggestions and steps:

Finding common ground

- Finding and discussing common issues across directorates and use this to develop relationships and a shared platform for change.
- Recognising that this is a cultural issue, consider the times when people are most open to change – for example as new joiners or promotes - and focus training here.

Collaborative forums

- Workshops, away days, and joint sessions between senior officer leadership teams and cabinet members can provide safe spaces to discuss key challenges, unite on shared goals, and foster collaborative planning.

Demonstrating impact through narratives

- Storytelling and case studies of successful change programmes from elsewhere can help illustrate benefits and build buy-in.
- Relating corporate targets to customer needs and demonstrating their impact on residents can make them more meaningful and engaging.

“Rehumanising” transformation programmes

- Inviting staff to informal opportunities to discuss transformation objectives and the associated changes. For example, “coffee with the chief exec” type initiatives between staff and senior leaders to demystify terminology and complex diagrams.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Digitalisation almanac tool](#)

Outputs from LGA Roundtable on Community Engagement:

- [Presentation: Co-design in transformation – Newham’s co-design standards](#)
- [Presentation: The Consultation Toolkit – Reigate and Banstead Borough Council](#)
- [Transformation roundtable summary: Co-design, community engagement and consultation in transformation](#)

Figure 1 Illustration of an action learning problem

How can I encourage political colleagues to embrace the imperative of IT and digitally enabled change across the whole organisation?

Context:

A council has an experienced cabinet that recognises the growing need to embrace transformation and change, with some also recognising the imperative of IT and digitally enabled change. However, this shift is proving to be difficult with other political colleagues who understand why transformation and change are needed but do not share the same sentiment with digital and IT change. Some are resistant to the proposed change due to a lack of understanding or awareness of technology and its benefits and concerns about the cost of investment.

The issue is whether there are ways to continue to press the imperative of digital change and address the concerns of those who are resistant.

Solutions suggested by other participants:

- Facilitating a workshop led by an independent party to create a safe space for issues or fears of digital change to be discussed and addressed.
- Recognising that to some colleagues, this may be more an issue of a general reluctance to change methods/approach, rather than a resistance to technology. To address this, it may need senior leadership to promote a culture of embracing new ways of working.
- Demonstrating more real-life examples of how digital change is being used on a day to day basis and the benefits accumulated by this.
- Reframing digital change as something that can solve tangible problems in the council. This can be achieved by looking through the council's transformation plan as it exists, and matching it with relevant portfolios to show how these plans aim to address existing issues.
- Highlighting the long-term savings achieved through increased efficiency.
- Utilising existing and upcoming LGA tools. For example, the [digitalisation almanac](#) explains the key drivers for digital transformation for a local authority.

Response

The proposed solutions highlighted the need for lead members to work with cabinet members as individuals as well as a collective group, and the need to understand the individual reasoning as to why some colleagues are reluctant to digital change.

The participant who outlined the issue planned to:

- Review the council's transformation plan from the point of view of the different cabinet portfolios, to identify how digital change can help solve existing problems.
- Involve the council's Chief Operating Officer in advising on benefits to highlight.

Collaborative working and community capacity building

This theme explores the challenges councils face in building capacity within communities as part of an approach to reduce demand and improve pride in place. Doing this successfully also requires a cross-council approach. This means there are internal and external facing challenges, including:

- Bringing council departments and partners together in the way they collaborate on community priorities and work with communities.
- Maintaining a single view of what the council is doing in different communities in order to promote efficiency and cohesive change.
- Empowering communities to take ownership of local initiatives and contribute to wider goals such as sustainability and net zero targets.
- Ensure that partnerships with communities are equitable and inclusive, particularly in areas with lower existing capacity?

Practical suggestions and steps:

Tools and resources for communities

- Focusing multidisciplinary action through local area committees. This can focus on high-need areas and coordinate internal and external partnerships.
- Support these by enabling frontline workers to collect and share data about areas with lower community capacity
- Engaging local businesses and other key local people with influence as partners and demonstrating the benefits of investment in local areas can also enhance community-led improvements.

Communication

- Use staff surveys to assess how well different teams collaborate and identify areas for improvement. This may help to encourage collaboration as a shared responsibility rather than a top-down directive.
- Use internal communications to celebrate good practice.

Accountability and continuous improvement

- Conduct deep dives into areas where collaboration is not working well to identify underlying issues and implement targeted interventions. Regular reflection on lessons learned, combined with structured engagement with community stakeholders, will help sustain momentum and drive long-term impact.
- Consider a “community councillor” model, where members are closely involved in information-sharing. This can also help generate political buy-in.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Transformation roundtable on participation, co-design, community engagement and consultation in transformation](#)

[Newham’s codesign standards](#)

[Stockport Design Code](#)

[Reigate and Banstead’s consultation toolkit](#)

Focusing whole council attention on a large service area transformation

This theme explores the challenges councils face when implementing large-scale transformation in a specific service area, that requires support from multiple teams. Challenges that were discussed covered areas around ensuring there is buy-in and an understanding of roles and responsibilities across the council, as well as challenges around maintaining quality of service delivery and managing risk while transformation is going on. Challenges included:

- How can councils ensure that transformation programmes receive buy-in across the organisation (for example from IT and corporate services) and are not seen as the responsibility of a single service?
- What strategies can councils use to maintain service quality while delivering efficiencies in high-demand service areas?
- How can councils create a culture that embraces change and innovation while managing the risks associated with transformation?
- What mechanisms can councils use to ensure that transformation efforts result in long-term sustainable improvements rather than short-term fixes?

Discussion focused on finding mechanisms to engage the widest range of staff to see transformation as something to which they can actively contribute. Where IT support is needed, it was recognised as important to engage digital teams as early in the process as possible to design changes in from the outset.

Practical suggestions and steps:

Supporting staff

- Develop a shared vision by engaging senior leaders, middle managers, and frontline staff from the outset so that transformation is viewed as a collective responsibility rather than a top-down directive.
- Establish cross-departmental working groups or governance boards to oversee transformation efforts. This ensures that all teams are accountable and actively contributing to the changes.
- Develop shared objectives and performance measures to formalise collaboration.
- Provide training and professional development opportunities, particularly around digital transformation and innovative ways of working, so staff at all levels feel supported in delivering transformation. Action learning sets can help managers navigate complex change by co-developing solutions with peers.

Embracing digital technology

- Ensure that IT departments are engaged early in transformation projects to help address barriers related to data security and system integration.

Delivering efficiencies for the long-term

- Conduct regular reviews of transformation initiatives to assess progress and adjust strategies where necessary. Engaging external peers, such as through Local Government Association (LGA) peer challenges, can provide valuable insights and benchmarking opportunities to drive continuous improvement.

Useful links from the LGA:

[LGA peer challenges](#)

Resources from LGA Transformation Roundtable on creating council vision for transformation:

- [Presentation: Creating the council vision, principles, and strategy for transformation – Leeds City Council](#)
- [Transformation roundtable summary: Creating the council vision, principles and strategy for transformation](#)

Optimising the potential for advanced digital technology

This theme explores how councils can maximise the benefits of digital transformation while ensuring changes are sustainable, informed by resident and community voices, and aligned with organisational priorities. It focuses on how councils can build trust in digital transformation, make the case for investment in technology with long-term benefits, and integrate new tools such as AI in ways that improve efficiency while maintaining service accessibility and quality.

Challenges included:

- How can councils build trust and confidence among staff, residents, and partners as they implement digital transformation?
- What strategies can councils use to justify investment in digital programmes that do not yield immediate or cashable benefits?
- How can councils ensure digital transformation is shaped by resident voice and maintains accessibility for all?
- What governance and risk management approaches can councils take to balance innovation with accountability?

Discussion covered the benefit of developing a compelling vision for digital change that is based on need, and that is clear and transparent about the purpose for transformation and potential impacts on the workforce. It is helpful also to find ways to engage residents about changes that affect them in order to build confidence in change.

Practical suggestions and steps

Communicating a clear vision and purpose

- Promote the potential impacts of digital transformation, informed by multi-year financial planning, impact assessments with research partners, and learning from other councils.
- Leverage external networks and best practice, such as the LGA's AI hub, digital inclusion networks, and peer learning opportunities, and other councils, to strengthen approach to digital transformation.

Collaboration

- Embed co-design of services, involving staff, partners, and residents to build confidence in change.
- Utilise local digital inclusion networks and access forums to ensure services remain accessible.

Risk management

- Ensure a suitable balance between the ambition for digital transformation and the resource and delivery risk.
- Ensure clear oversight mechanisms and risk management processes.
- Ensure digital transformation is integrated into wider organisational change programmes, and that new tools are properly tested, aligned with resident needs, and supported by sufficient training for staff.

Useful links from the LGA:

[LGA digital networks](#)

[LGA's AI hub](#)

[Case studies of good practice around council's AI use](#)

[Derby Council's chatbot](#)

Delivery models

Some discussions focused on the challenges councils face with ongoing management of arm's length delivery models and aligning this with their transformation objectives. Challenges described included:

- Sharing savings objectives with local authority trading companies (LATCos).
- Changing the scope of LATCo delivery.
- Improving returns from shared services by extending the customer pool.

Discussion highlighted that, as transformation changes the culture of the client organisation, consideration is also needed to make balancing cultural changes with arm's length delivery organisations work.

It also showed the ongoing importance of strong governance of arm's length delivery models to be clear on what was expected.

Finally, a discussion of how to develop the customer base for a shared services arrangement highlighted the ongoing need to work at marketing.

Practical suggestions and steps:

Building trust and relationships

- Whether with LATCos or shared services, collaboration is key. It is important to approach any changes to service scope or KPIs as a collaboration between the client council and the delivery organisation. This allows change to be built from the bottom up, not imposed.
- If there are particularly difficult challenges consider a task and finish group, involving members to help align goals politically, operationally and culturally.

Showcasing impact

- Demonstrating successes — such as savings, efficiency improvements, or real-life examples — can help build confidence and pride in a delivery organisation.
- This can also help shared services highlight their unique selling points for attracting new partners.
- This should be done with targeted marketing as well - targeting potential partners with similar systems, needs, or priorities can create opportunities for extending shared service collaboration. This highlights the need for marketing skills if there is a strong wish to extend shared services.

Governance and accountability

- Governance needs to be right to ensure arm's length organisations continue to deliver benefit for the client council. Board structure and membership should be reviewed periodically with consideration to involving the council as a shareholder.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Improvement and Assurance Framework](#)

Managing and working with strategic partners to transform – 17 October 2024:

- [Presentation: Managing and working with strategic partners to transform – Luton's journey](#)
- [Transformation roundtable summary: Managing and working with strategic partners to transform](#)

Figure 2 Illustration of an action learning problem

How do we improve the trust and confidence in the services delivered by an arms' length delivery company (a local authority trading company)?

Context:

A local authority's trading company (LATCo) was established but without significant re-specification of services that had previously been delivered through a commercial supplier. Specifications to the LATCo, and new services were also added for the LATCo to deliver. Despite the company being owned by the council, there is currently no council shareholder sitting on the board.

Despite pressure to deliver revenue savings there was limited cooperation in working towards this. There were also concerns about whether the LATCo was keeping up with the skillsets needed to deliver across the breadth of its services.

The issue was how to rebuild a shared approach with the LATCo, to look for constructive ways to operate in a financially stretched environment.

Solutions suggested by other participants:

- Change the current governance structure, with some council shareholders sitting on the LATCo board to hold accountability.
- Working with the monitoring officer is key, to ensure a clear governance structure is present, and to protect the council and the council's money.
- Developing a task and finish arrangement which reviews where the LATCo currently is, and where they need to be in terms of governance arrangements and delivery. This can check whether the LATCo has access to the full skillsets needed. This approach should involve members, officers and those employed by the LATCo to ensure a collaborative approach is taken.
- Direct engagement with peers, who have specific expertise on this matter.

Response

The proposed solutions emphasised the need to review the governance arrangements and to focus them on promoting more collaboration between the local authority and its LATCo. Discussion generally emphasised the value of discussion with representatives of other authorities who have parallel experience.

As an action, the individual will have a follow up conversation with one of the officers present to discuss in depth how other local authorities are managing their relationships with arms' length operators. The individual will also look to implement a task and finish type approach and will start by creating a timeline for tasks/services that need to be reviewed.

The transformation delivery capacity challenge

This theme explores the challenges councils face in being able to make transformation happen when their staff capacity is so limited. Experiences discussed included:

- Capacity constraints mean some councils have to rely on existing senior leaders, with significant business-as-usual responsibilities, to deliver new transformation initiatives. There is limited capacity to appoint dedicated programme directors. This can result in slow progress, a lack of capacity for detailed coordination with other programme managers, and a lack of sustained focus on change.
- The impact of cumulative staffing reductions over several years means that there is a fragmented understanding of baseline whole business processes. This creates a challenge when implementing automation and digital solutions, as there is little capacity to model how technology should be deployed to deliver end-to-end services.

Possible approaches emerging from the discussions highlighted the need to support senior staff in carrying out roles that span business as usual and corporate change. There is a training angle, and both the LGA and Leadership Centre have produced relevant resources. But there are also matrix approaches that provide a structural platform to help senior leaders embrace wider council business.

A wider reflection was that business cases for change initiatives need to reflect that some investment will be needed for establishing “as is” processes, for example, before working through how to deliver automation.

Practical suggestions and steps

Clarifying leadership responsibilities

- Consider developing or adapting role descriptions for senior leaders to emphasise the centrality of transformation support.

Embedding leadership across departments

- Encouraging directors to sit on boards outside their immediate service areas can provide fresh perspectives on transformation challenges and ensure that change is seen as a collective effort rather than siloed responsibility.

Building bottom-up engagement

- Invite interested staff to solve a problem in a more informal way, focusing on being inclusive to all. With senior backing to allow staff who volunteer to spend some time this develops capability for the longer-term and bottom up ownership of the immediate issue and solution.

Leveraging external expertise

- Build knowledge transfer into statements of requirements for external contractors, for example in to build staff capability in process mapping. Ensuring that external partners focus on upskilling internal staff will create long-term benefits rather than short-term fixes.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Director development training](#)

[Leadership framework](#)

[LGA Transformation Capability Framework](#)

[Councillor Transformation Toolkit](#)

Finance and cost savings

This theme highlights the challenges faced by local authorities in focusing transformation on driving cost savings and ensuring that transformational change is sustained beyond time-limited funding.

Issues discussed included:

- A lack of a council-wide and strategic approach to budget savings. This can mean that budget saving decisions are made too late and lead to reactive, rather than proactive decision-making. The end result is continued “salami slicing” off the top of services.
- Councils often receive external funding for projects, but face challenges in ensuring there is a long-term impact once funding expires.

Suggested approaches emerging from sessions highlighted the need for councils to embed a strategic and forward-thinking approach to budget savings, that aligns with the council’s corporate priorities. This approach can also help to ensure that the risk of unintended consequences to budget savings are minimised. The need to foster ownership of cross-functional outcomes was also mentioned, especially when roles and responsibilities for outcomes are dispersed throughout council teams.

Practical steps:

Strategic prioritisation and focus:

- Conducting a prioritisation exercise to identify key areas of focus, align resources with the council's main priorities, and reduce reliance on reactive "salami slicing" approaches.
- This needs to be supported by *ensuring there is a shared responsibility and ownership to deliver savings*:
- This could be achieved by creating a cultural shift that emphasises that savings and process improvements are everyone's responsibility. Training and co-production approaches can build a shared understanding of challenges and foster collaboration.

Embedding sustainability into externally funded initiatives:

- When councils receive time-limited funding, such as grants, they could proactively plan for sustainability. This could include integrating funded initiatives into wider transformation programmes, embedding learning across departments, and using funding to pilot approaches that can later be mainstreamed or form the basis of future funding bids.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Impact measurement framework](#)

[LGA Officer and Councillor Transformation Network](#)

Figure 3 Illustration of an action learning problem

Context:

A few years ago, the council embarked on a structured savings programme which looked across all budget lines. As part of the process, templates were used to capture potential savings across all budget lines; propositions were discussed with portfolio holders, followed by a whole cabinet discussion exercise, to decide which suggestions they wanted to take forward. However, more recently, this collaborative approach has faded, and savings templates are coming too late in the budget cycle. There is less discussion on a whole council service basis or the strategic medium term approach.

As a result, savings decisions are often left too late, leading to a “salami slicing” to find savings urgently, rather than a strategic approach.

The council does have a transformation programme which has been embedded in the corporate plan which outlines some saving areas but as yet without numbers.

Solutions suggested by other participants:

- Conducting a prioritisation exercise to understand what the council’s key priorities are, and what resources are needed to deliver these priorities. Benchmarking against other local authorities can be very helpful in understanding how much should be spent on each activity.
- Looking for opportunities for income generation to mitigate the savings cuts.
- Implementing an approach which helps give confidence and empowers officers to make the difficult decisions with regard to budget savings. There is a need to recognise that people shy away from the difficult decisions in budget savings, and so a method to combat this is needed (e.g. a session on budgeting – where staff work through the operating model of the council and their main priorities, and help recognise which areas may be less important than others in delivering against the main priorities).
- This links to ensuring that staff understand that it’s everyone’s responsibility to commit to savings, not just finance, and to hold each other to account.
- Building in time for reflection and making sure there is a space to ensure proposals are thought through and their implications are addressed. This will help remove the fear of savings having unintended consequences. An impact measurement framework, such as [this one](#), could help.

Response

The key reflection was the need to work at engaging the senior leadership team in drawing out the council’s key priorities and capacity requirements in the medium term (five years) are a platform for putting the savings requirements in context.

In the short-term (current financial year) round, there is an opportunity to work with the head of finance to link requests for finding savings to council priorities, set out in the council plan.

Developing a data driven approach to customer insight

This theme explores how councils can embed a data-driven approach to improve customer insight and service delivery.

The experiences explored were:

- Some service areas in councils struggle with data quality issues, outdated systems, and fragmented insights. Without a clear picture of the full customer journey, decision-making is often reactive rather than proactive. This undermines efforts to embed a data led approach to decision making.

The discussion highlighted the importance of ensuring leaders understand the importance of data – without this, there will be no motivation to fix issues. This may also involve the upskilling of senior members.

Participants also noted that data is a different domain discipline from IT. It is important to check that staff have the right skillsets to implement data related actions. It is important to bring those with effective data skills to the table. For example, Public Health teams are often a good source of data expertise.

Discussion also highlighted the need to be clear that the most important aspects and purpose of a data driven approach are the end outcome and user experience. Therefore, there is a need to create an effective narrative to link outcomes and data.

Practical steps:

Building leadership buy-in:

- Senior leaders and elected members need to understand the value of data. Training and upskilling decision-makers can help embed the use of rich data into the council's strategic priorities and ensure it informs policy discussions.

Bringing to life and capturing the user experience:

- Councils can enhance the priority placed on quality and use of data by demonstrating how it directly influences customer experiences. This can be done through focus groups, satisfaction reports, and case studies that illustrate service improvements based on data insights.
- Capturing real-life narratives on how the use of data has enabled change that has improved residents' lives and sharing this narrative about the impact internally and externally (e.g., on social media) can help build momentum and understanding.

Prioritising key outcomes:

- Councils can identify the most impactful service areas where data-driven insights can lead to tangible improvements. This could involve leveraging external tools, such as the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT), to highlight opportunities.

Useful links from the LGA:

[Low Income Family Tracker | Policy in Practice](#)

LGA Transformation Roundtable on Data:

- [Presentation: Using data in transformation – Cheshire West and Chester Council](#)
- [Presentation: Using data in transformation – Rushmoor Borough Council](#)
- [Transformation roundtable summary: Using data in transformation and change programmes](#)

Appendix 1: The action learning process

There were three action learning set groups, each of which met online three times.

In total the three ALSs engaged 11 councillors and 12 council officers from 12 authorities across England, covering a mix of district, metropolitan and unitary authorities.

Action Learning

Action learning enables collaboration in real time between individuals who face common workplace challenges or have comparable roles by bringing them together to exchange ideas and their experiences, to identify what works well and what works less well. Each session concludes with participants committing to taking one or more actions before the next session and to reporting back on progress. The key elements of an action research process are:

- Clarity about the task or issue that is being addressed and the issue-presenter's role in it, in this case enabling members and officers to find solutions to identified challenges in delivering impactful transformational change.
- Clarity about the people who are to be brought together in terms of role and seniority, in this case involving politicians and officers.
- A commitment from the participants to meet regularly, virtually for an agreed period and use the group to develop and test thinking and share experiences.

To function effectively a group should:

- Comprise between six and 12 people.
- Have a designated facilitator to drive the structure of the sessions.
- Provide time for participants to reflect on the learning they have gained from the previous session and from any steps they took between the previous and current session.
- Be prepared for the time commitments required for being involved in an action learning set. For participants, the requirement is to attend each session and to commit to trying to take action between sessions where relevant/possible.



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