



Business

How local authorities are
capitalising on Covid-driven
digital change



Using technology to overcome post-pandemic challenges

The pandemic had a dramatic impact on local councils, and citizens and organisations will feel its effects for years to come.

Issues of inequality were exacerbated as demand from the most vulnerable members of society rapidly increased, while pressure on local government spending was felt more acutely than ever.

Beyond the pandemic, policy issues such as the future of adult social care, levelling up and the national spending review are ever-present considerations for local council decision-makers. And annual increases in people needing local services and the rising costs of delivering those services will mean councils will need to spend an extra £15.9bn annually by 2030.

Yet despite these challenges local councils have responded emphatically to protect and support their communities.

Helping schools adapt to remote learning. Creating additional capacity for care to alleviate pressure on the NHS. Closing offices overnight and redeploying employees to other frontline activity such as household waste and recycling centres.

There was no job too small for local authorities.

The government has now reiterated its commitment to levelling up and reducing geographical inequalities in the wake of the pandemic. And investment in digital change and opportunities will be essential in ensuring nobody is left behind as the UK moves forward.

83% of the public named local employment opportunities as the secret of progression in PwC's recent 'Future of Government' research

“It’s been full-on this past year, but it’s not been an overnight success story. I think a lot of the foundations we’ve put in place over a number of years have come to fruition at the right time and the pandemic has just accelerated things. We’ve not started with a blank piece of paper. The conditions for success were in place; the pandemic has just given that added impetus to take it forward.”

Laurence Ainsworth, Director of Public Service Reform, Cheshire West and Chester Council

We partnered with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) to understand the scale of all these changes and their impact across the UK, surveying decision-makers and employees in public sector organisations to find our answers.

Taken from a small set of local and central authority respondents, our research suggests the pandemic accelerated digital progress in the sector by 5.3 years.

This rate of progress is the joint fastest of any sector and significantly higher than the public sector average of four years.

Our research suggests this acceleration led to the following increases in local and central authorities during a time when some might have expected these numbers to fall:

6.4% increase in employee productivity

5.6% increase in employee satisfaction

5.6% increase in customer satisfaction

While digital change was a necessity for local authorities during the pandemic, the benefits of embracing technology have quickly become apparent to decision-makers.

More satisfied customers and happier, more productive employees are just the start. And there are economic advantages to be had, too.

Moving forward, digital adoption will potentially add £13.4 billion to UK GDP by 2025 – a figure that could be £100 billion by 2040.

Across both the UK public and private sectors, hybrid working could boost regional economies by up to £33.3 billion as workers relocate and spend locally, and allow an estimated 3.8 million people previously locked out of the UK workforce to enter employment.

As with any moment of significant change, there are certain organisations at the forefront of this period of digital transformation. And in some cases they were embracing technology long before the pandemic struck.

This report explores how these organisations have adopted technology and what we can all learn from them as we embark on our own digital transformation journeys.

[Read on to find out more.](#)



“Now is the time to capitalise on the role councils can play as leaders of place and ensure they remain relevant in 2030. Local government recognises the need for change.”

‘Future of local government’ PwC report, 2021

Greater Manchester Combined Authority: A digital strategy with people at its core

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) is committed to working with its communities every step of the way. When it came to starting Greater Manchester's own digital revolution, GMCA decided to put people at the heart of its strategy.

The organisation saw the potential of public and private partnerships working in tandem to deliver a world-class digital infrastructure.

GMCA has invested more in full fibre than any other region in the UK, installing 2,700km of new fibre-optic broadband infrastructure – enough to cover three times the distance between Land's End and John O'Groats.

This new network will connect more than 1,700 public sites and help unlock further investment across the region.

But this investment is in more than cables. As part of the tender process, GMCA set out several social value commitments to bring further benefits to the region, including a number of bold investments in local initiatives.

These include:

Early years digitisation

Giving children the best start in life. By switching paper-based checks to digital, health visitors can improve life chances for children up to 30 months old

Fast track digital workforce fund

Already backing 14 projects to support businesses and address skills gaps. It helps scores of residents enter well-paid creative, digital and tech roles

Cyber talent programme

Encouraging a cyber ecosystem by retraining to support smart development. It helped more than 75 SMEs with their cybersecurity

Cyber foundry

Helping more than 170 of the region's SMEs in partnership with four universities. Providing support to bounce back from problems caused by the pandemic

Greater Manchester is on course to become 100% digitally enabled. And the city is determined to achieve this goal in a way that ensures the benefits are felt by everyone.

Sara Todd, Lead Chief Executive Greater Manchester Digital Portfolio & Chief Executive of Trafford MBC, told us, “Mayor Andy Burnham’s great passion is digital acceleration. A few years ago it was seen as only the territory for techies and enthusiasts.

“But just look at the way our digital economy has accelerated enormously over the last few years. And lots more people are making that significant leap towards digital as a result of the pandemic.

“We aspire to be a world-class, digital-first region. Not because we want the badge. But because we don’t want to leave anyone in Greater Manchester behind, whatever their background, age or circumstances.”

GMCA believes that access to the digital world is a basic human right and wants to work with all its partner services to continue to level the playing field.

“With the Greater Manchester spirit, we can work together, across our sectors and across our boroughs to build back economic resilience and make sure that no one is left behind.”



“If we can get connected and stay connected, we can move mountains.”

Sara Todd, Lead Chief Executive Greater Manchester Digital Portfolio & Chief Executive of Trafford MBC

City of Edinburgh Council

Equipping citizens with digital skills to tackle poverty

Bold digital transformation means Edinburgh can create better outcomes for its citizens, faster. Council services that once took weeks are now completed in hours.

Depute Council Leader Cammy Day leads the City of Edinburgh Council's three-year smart city drive. Cllr Day believes digital innovation will help "tackle the increase in unemployment and poverty we have seen because of Covid."

Cllr Day told us, "Digital technology is the way forward. Not only to save us money, but because it's the right thing to do. We have plans to be the best in Europe.

"To some, tech is only for geeks. We see it as visionary. It transforms our approach to CCTV, through collecting bins and monitoring air quality to providing a better service to communities. We want our citizens to access services in two or three clicks.

"Edinburgh is already one of the top cities in the country to live and work, and technology will help make that even better."

Sentiment around digital change at the City of Edinburgh Council is positive. Adam McVey, Council Leader, said, "Technology is a great enabler. We've seen it used in many ways we never thought of during this pandemic, not only to keep our own service running but to enjoy our festivals virtually and to visit our libraries online."

Stephen Moir, Edinburgh's Executive Director of Resources, echoes this positive outlook. "We're creating a generation of Edinburgh citizens who are digitally literate," he told us, "equipping them with digital skills for the future.

"We have accelerated some things directly as a result of Covid. We facilitated the democratic process of Edinburgh remotely. With all our members able to participate."

As City of Edinburgh Council moves forward, digital is at the very forefront of its strategy to improve the lives of its citizens – again, with a focus on putting people at the centre of transformation.

"Digital is now at the heart of the way we work," said Stephen. "Previously we would've taken three weeks to clear 400 applications from landlords. When we automated that clearance process, we had 80% cleared in three hours, freeing our staff up to focus on the complex ones that needed a conversation.

"Our approach to automation is not to reduce jobs. We have used it to remove the need for our people to get involved in unnecessary, high-volume work.

"There's more time for empathy, judgement and face-to-face human interaction. We're the fourth biggest employer in the city. We don't want technology to cut things; we want to do things better."

"Fundamentally, this is about digital inclusion and enabling all our residents to have greater access to and benefits from technology. We are a much more agile organisation now and our ambition to go further and use technology and data to create a fairer, greener and more inclusive smart capital city has only been enhanced by our experience over the last 18 months."

Depute Council Leader Cammy Day

Wolverhampton City Council

Using technology to support recovery and growth

Wolverhampton City Council's Head of ICT, Jai Ghai, told us his department and others like it across the UK went from "unsung heroes" to starring roles during the Covid pandemic.

The city's leaders believe it has created a great digital opportunity. Maintaining that forward momentum is critical to strengthening its services and rebuilding the economy in 2021.

"We had to scale things up overnight," said Jai. "Thankfully, we had already been investing in the infrastructure that came into play. And that showed. Staff had to work from anywhere and everywhere. They didn't have to be desk-bound any more.

"We had to mobilise so they didn't feel alienated working from home. One of our earliest and best decisions was to roll out Microsoft Teams. In just one week, we went from 300 users to more than 4,200. In ordinary times we wouldn't have rolled it out that way."

In fact, the pandemic meant Wolverhampton City Council brought forward much of its digital transformation strategy by a whole year.

"I've been in IT for 22 years," Jai told us. "And for the first time in my life, I have this opportunity where senior executives understand the power of data."

"This is now the new normal. We want to use this opportunity to roll out a lot more online channels. We want to enable better outcomes for citizens and residents."

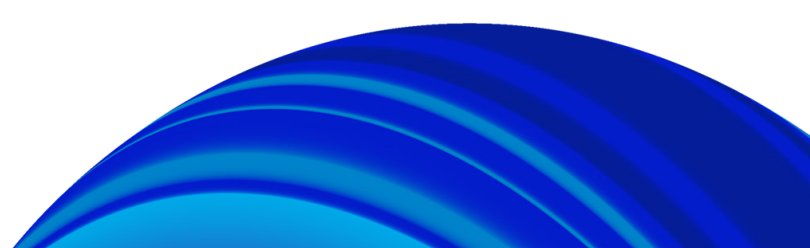
Even before Covid, the Wolverhampton economy felt the benefit of digital transformation. More than 64 local businesses went online as part of the Retail Revival programme.

Heather Clark, Wolverhampton City Council's Strategic Projects Manager, said, "We recognise the importance of digital across all the things we do. It plays a critical role in supporting recovery and growth.

"In the past, digital was seen as something separate. Now it should rightly be at the centre."

And the shift to digital is already paying dividends.

Less than two months after local businesses joined the Retail Revival programme, they hit £1 million in combined online sales – an impressive 41% increase in revenue.



"The City of Wolverhampton Council recognise the absolute critical importance of digital and becoming a smart city whilst ensuring we maximise the benefit locally, tackling the digital divide supporting residents to get online, improve digital skills, support businesses to digitalise and introduce Smart technology to support the delivery of services."

Cabinet Member for Digital City, Councillor Obaida Ahmed

A united ambition to deliver improvements across the UK

Councils across the UK have expressed their desire to connect, upskill and better serve their people. And they understand collaboration is key to achieving this.

They recognise the importance of the government's aim to 'level up' the nation by providing next-generation fibre broadband to every home by 2025.

The cross-party Local Government Association (LGA) comprises 335 councils across England and the 22 Welsh unitary councils. It gives local government a strong, credible national voice.

The LGA set up its Digital Shift Programme to support councils as they adopt new online tools and technologies and adapt to the shifting economic landscape.

"Access to fast and reliable digital connectivity is no longer a luxury – it is a necessity," said LGA Digital Spokesperson Cllr Mark Hawthorne. "The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of good-quality and affordable internet access for businesses and communities across the country.

"From keeping in touch with friends and family to

ordering online shopping or working from home, connectivity is key.

"As place-shapers at the centre of their communities, councils have a fundamental role to play in helping enhance the digital connectivity of their local areas.

"With better-connected residents and employees, councils can unlock new ways of engaging with local services.

"And they can keep pace with the expectations of communities increasingly surrounded by a digital world."

Cllr Hawthorne concluded, "To make sure the government can reach their 2025 target, councils need more funding to help support telecommunication providers to deliver improvements on the ground.

"We have asked the government to use the Spending Review as an opportunity to empower councils to place a local digital champion in every local area to help facilitate delivery and support providers to install gigabit-capable broadband as quickly as possible."

"The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of good quality and affordable internet access for businesses and communities across the country."

Cllr Mark Hawthorne, LGA Digital Spokesperson

How can we help you?

“The risk is the centrifugal forces in place that are trying to pull people back to what it was before. We need to work quite actively and purposefully to try and avoid that happening, so retaining the good things that happened during Covid – very quick decision making, clarity of purpose.”

Mark Gannon, Director of Business Change and Information Solutions, Sheffield City Council

The organisations we’ve explored in this report are setting the standard for others in the sector to follow.

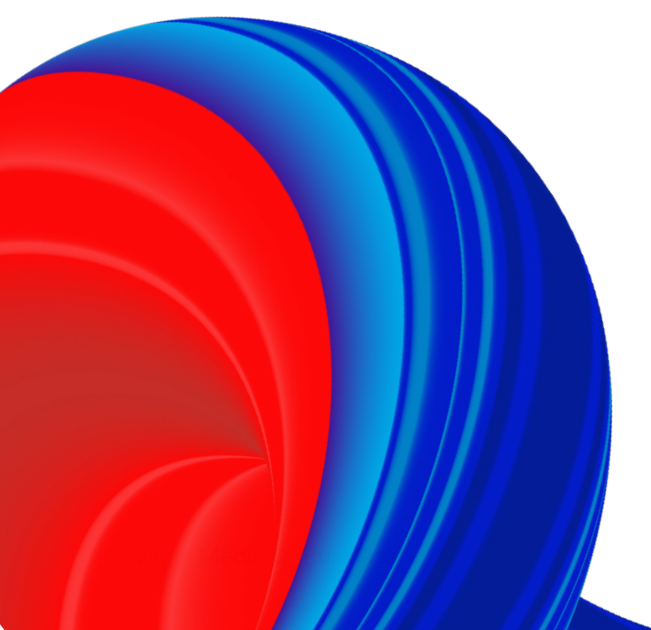
We partner with local authorities to help them become better connected, deliver more services digitally and support effective hybrid working for their staff.

Local authorities still face issues. But by working hand in hand with central government and the right service providers, these organisations can continue to improve citizen experiences and ensure nobody is left behind on the digital transformation journey.

There can be no going back to the old ways of working.

Now there is an opportunity to:

- Rethink local councils’ role in society and change how they approach digital investment, placing people at the centre of strategies
- Build more flexible working arrangements for the workforce to empower staff
- Embrace technology and the automation of delivery of digital services to create a more efficient system for citizens and employees alike
- Improve contact between public and private organisations in the sector through the use of collaboration tools and a stronger network



“In the past it felt like we were banging on people’s doors. It’s the other way around now – people see the role of technology to deliver better services to customers and communities and are really anxious to see change quickly.”

Brian Roche, Director of IT, Belfast City Airport



Business

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