

Members, Data and Digital: A Background Briefing Note For An LGA/Eduserv Sponsored Roundtable Discussion

Introduction and Background

What do we mean by 'Digital'?

There is much written about 'digital', but what it means in reality is not often defined. For example, what will be different for a 'digital council'? Or, where it is described, it often gravitates towards the technology in practice: i.e. "more, better, or new IT".

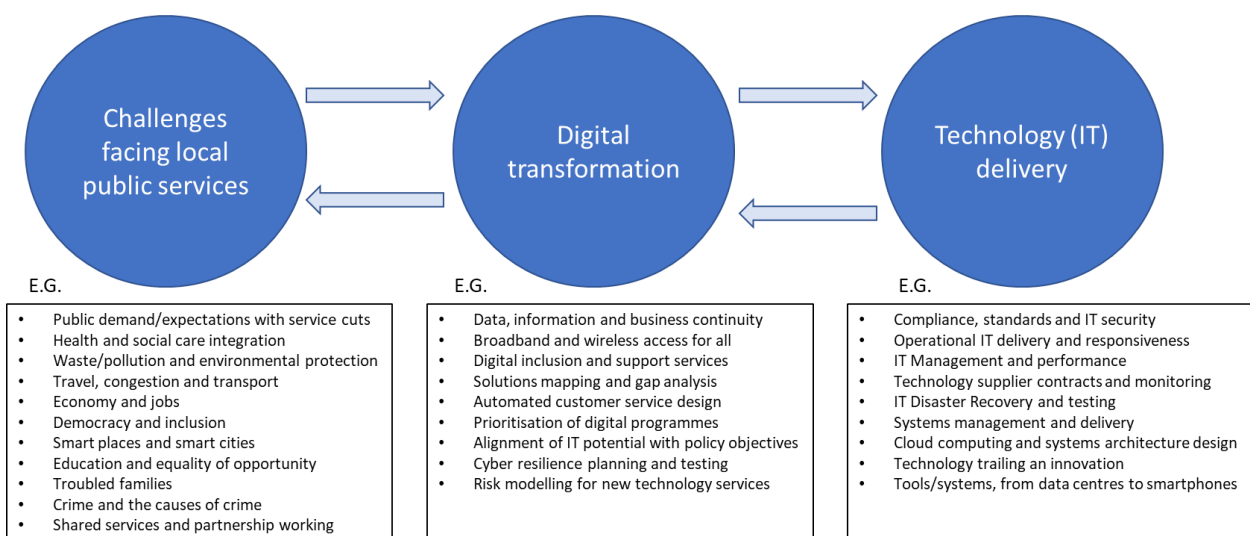
Yet most people agree that digital is not primarily about technology, although the IT matters and can be the key enabler or blocker to digital delivery.

A simple definition might be:

Digital is... a complete change to roles, structures, governance, services, processes, risk models, policies, style and cultures to exploit the potential of data and technology.

Digital is more about new models of operation and ways of working which exploit the possibilities of technology. It's about how the IT is used to solve public service challenges, such as growing demand, troubled families, waste, health and social care integration, devolution, and just better services provided more efficiently.

This means that 'digital' requires changing governance, performance management, rewards systems, risk models, decision-making practices and data management methods (to give just a few examples), ensuring safe and effective automation and self-service delivery, designed around the needs of citizens.



It's also about doing this in councils in ways which ensure transparency and democracy, as well as empowering and trusting employees and the public to do more for themselves. And above all, therefore, digital is about the cultures, practices and behaviours that reflect these new ways of working, not 'clever technologies'.

Evidence suggests that members are not always as close to this reshaping of public services as they need to be. Recent research, for example by Theo Blackwell (past Cabinet Member, LB Camden) undertaken for the LGiU, showed that whilst the top priorities for digital programmes in councils were efficiency, customer services and modernisation, the top concerns for members were data protection, digital inclusion and community connectivity.

Of course, these are all important, but the changing landscape for local public services and for the communities they serve are so fundamentally impacted by digital change, that members must be involved from the outset. That involvement needs to include design principles, programme prioritisation, risk profiling and benefits realisation, not just approving procurement decisions of final digital strategy plans.

A member 'digital champion' must therefore be an active participant, not just hold a cosmetic digital title, with the necessary skills, experience, enthusiasm and support from their council to fulfil that role.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that members are not always involved in this way. Officers may be nervous because they want a business case for a digital programme to be watertight before members are presented with and can scrutinise options. Or they may even fear that members might not fully understand or support a fledgling digital strategy.

Purpose of the Roundtable

The purpose of the Roundtable discussion is to consider, under Chatham House Rules, the attitudes, awareness and concerns of members about digital programmes in their council and how this affects their roles and their interactions with the communities they represent.

It will build on work such as the research by the LGiU, LGA and Eduserv, but seeking new insights and guidance for members, by members. Many members are already digitally aware and are confident in the use of modern IT. But whether they are already 'digital practitioners' or not, they need to be able to influence the design, development and delivery of the digital transformation agenda in their council.

This Roundtable event will seek to identify some practical guidance for members, such as what questions they should be asking, how and when they should be involved and what to expect from their councils. For example, key decisions, policy formulation, risk monitoring and prioritisation of investment.

Some possible questions members could ask about their council's approach to digital (and which could be considered at our roundtable event) include:

- Are digital policies, principles and strategies in place to prioritise developments according to members' interests and priorities, and so reflect the risks and benefits for citizens?
- Are members involved from the outset of digital projects and programmes, focussing on areas of greatest concern to members, such as cyber risk, digital inclusion, local jobs and shared services as well as wider efficiency, modernisation and customer service?

- Is sufficient attention given to the collection and use of data in the strategy and the proposed solutions? It is the data that will fuel the digital systems and give them the potential for improved innovation, commercial opportunities and interlinked operations.
- Do members get the support from officers to enable them to play a key role in setting direction and policy for digital activity – decision-making, prioritisation, business case sign-off, procurement, risk monitoring, due diligence and benefits realisation planning?
- Is the lead member for digital an active participant, or more of a figurehead to review final proposals and investment decisions?
- In particular, do members get the data and information that they need to understand community needs better, handle their case work and monitor the performance of their councils, including ensuring that data risks (whether from sharing or from analytics) are being well- managed?
- In representing community interests, members will want to ask how well-prepared is their council to respond to growing risks and concerns about data use, from GDPR readiness to artificial intelligence deployment?
- Are members able to brief the public adequately on their council's digital programmes, and do they do so?
- Do members understand the resource demands required for digital development in their councils, in terms of skills, capacity, investment and in the balance between in house and external provision?
- Is enough being done, in the view of members, to ensure that digital inclusion is being achieved locally: in how services are designed, the support given, accessibility (including broadband locally), so that digital programmes are truly more personal and inclusive and people to not feel disenfranchised?
- From a member perspective, Is there too much focus on the 'IT' and not enough on the 'culture and people' issues? Is IT still oversold and under-delivering (which is often the case) and what should be done about this?