rainmaker

Local Government

COVID-19: A sustainable response plan

April 2020

Purpose of this White Paper

This White Paper is designed to support senior leaders in local authorities responding to COVID-19. It categorises challenges faced by local authorities into broad themes. It then explores each theme by articulating how those challenges can manifest themselves. Finally, it suggests high level strategies to address those challenges as this new way of working becomes the 'new normal' in a post-COVID world.

Introduction

For many years, we've known that work is about outcomes and not time and place. For many organisations, that realisation has been forced upon them at very short notice. COVID-19 and the measures being put in place to protect the NHS require very different ways of thinking about work. Local authorities (LAs) are also impacted by this but face an additional set of challenges that are as unique as they are varied.

For LAs, many of the internal and external services are delivered face-to-face and often require complex contact between officers and customers, residents, partners and suppliers.

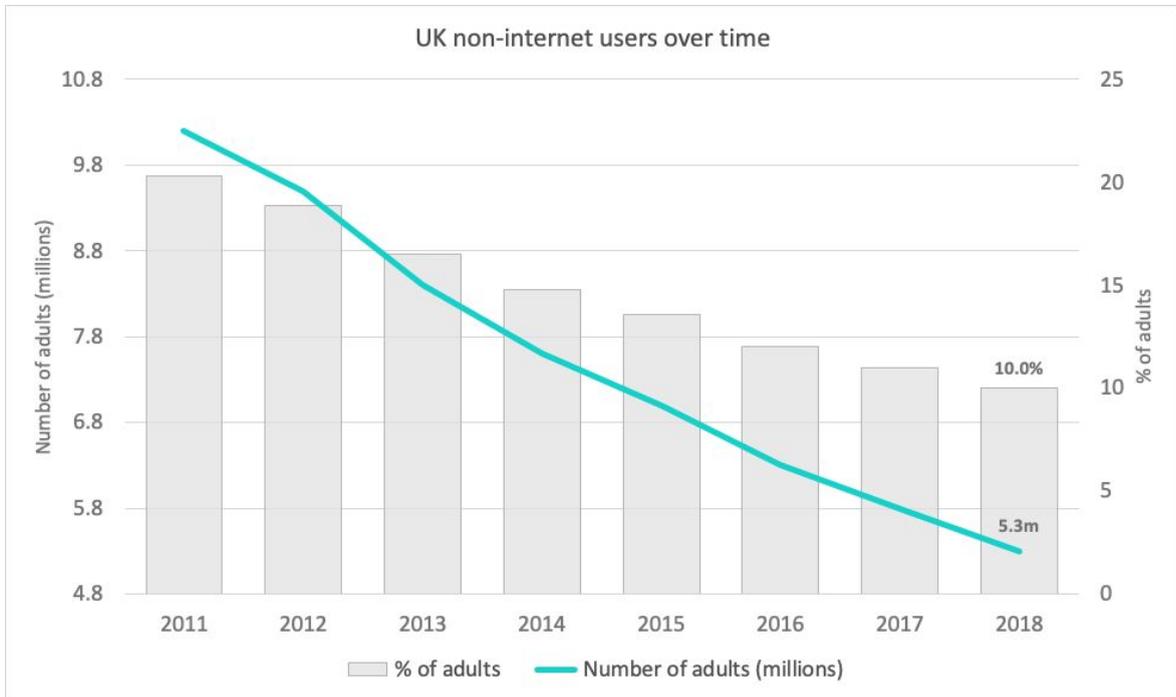The differing types of contact to consider are:

- Statutory (vulnerable people);

- Transactions (births/deaths);

- Interactions (consultations, advice);

- Information (leaflets); and

- Other general services, including interactions with emergency services - Police, NHS, Fire.

With face-to-face contact restricted, these interactions now have to be enabled by technology. Inherent in this are assumptions about both the access to technology and the digital literacy of the participants, which may not be valid.

Internet interactions with public authorities or services is increasing over time
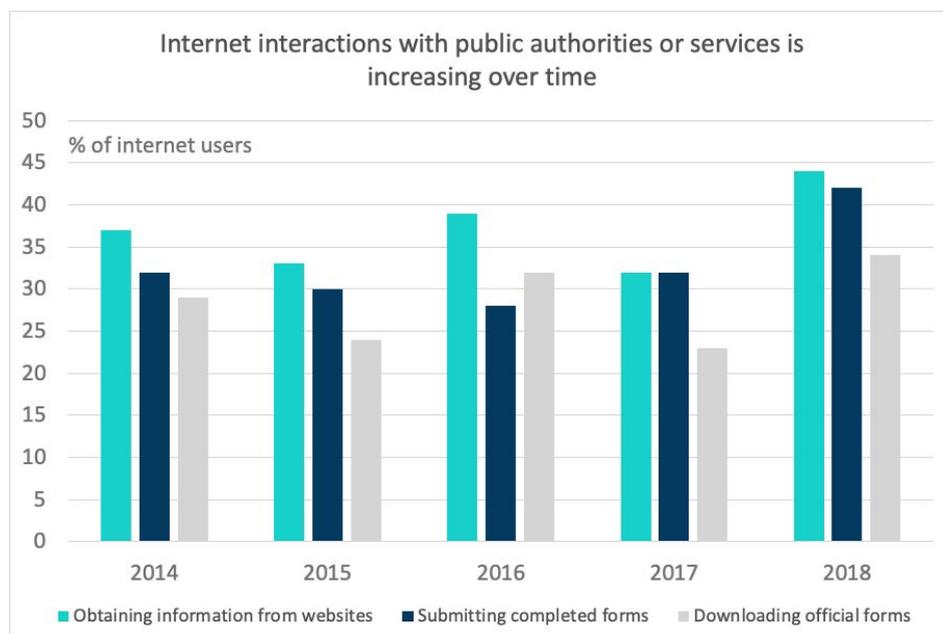
According to the Office for National Statistics, Exploring the UK's digital divide report[1], the increasing use of the internet for local authority activities has implications for those who are not equipped to take advantage of this technology, or are unwilling to do so. Whilst there is a marked increase in online interactions, as outlined below there are still gaps that cross geographic and demographic divides.

Some LAs will face greater challenges in finding additional alternative remote ways to support residents, customers, partners and suppliers.

UK non-internet users over time

% of population with zero Basic Digital Skills

Regional breakdown not available for N. Ireland as base is too small

Local authorities in Wales in particular have a much larger divide to cross when trying to communicate with their constituents. 19% of the Welsh population have none of the five essential basic digital skills -

- communicating
- handling information and content
- transacting
- problem solving
- being safe and legal online

Challenges

Grouping the challenges referenced above into five broad themes helps articulate what they are, understand their impact and ultimately deal with them.

These themes are:

1. **Behaviours and Culture**
   Internal (officers and members) and external (customers and residents)

2. **Process and Governance**
   Aligned business and technology processes

3. **Skills and Tooling**
   Technology to enable and empower teams that cross organisational boundaries

4. **Capacity**
   People, process and technology

5. **Cost efficiencies**
   Overspends will be tolerated in the short term but the financial landscape of local government has not changed

Behaviours and culture

This theme applies equally to internal local authority officers and members, and external partners, customers and residents. People used to interacting face-to-face can struggle in a world connected through Teams, Hangouts, FaceTime and Zoom. Specifically, local authorities need to think about the following:

1. **COVID-19 has created a virtual organisation** (in some cases overnight), no longer aligned with any single organisation or location-based working style i.e. someone's line manager, experienced colleague or trusted confidant is no longer sitting right next to them. *What are the implications of that? How will you connect, manage, motivate and align a remote workforce?*

2. **People are going to be working around their children and/or relatives**. In some cases, perhaps even family members who are unwell. A happy family is key to a happy remote worker so you need culture and behaviours that not just tolerate this reality but truly enable it. *There is an immediate requirement to adapt to flexible working.*

3. **Business continuity and disaster recovery plans** for local authorities were more than likely predicated on a number of completely reasonable assumptions (at the time). These are no longer valid. *How do you assure yourself that your new DR/BC plans are fit for purpose in this new world?*

4. **The mental health of your workforce is likely to become more fragile the more isolated they become**. How do you enable a culture of honesty and trust that empowers people to speak up when they're struggling or think a colleague might need some support? H*ow do you support your teams through this?*

"COVID-19 has thrust us into physical isolation and distancing. Organisations need to ensure that new working practices are designed to prevent it being social isolation too."

5. **Departments must quickly identify poor existing behaviours** driving siloed operations, process duplication and services not working in sync, otherwise they will become further fragmented by the rapid and mass implementation of remote working. Concepts like daily stand ups, transparency, co-creation, trust and professional vulnerability will be alien to them. *How will you drive the collaboration and information sharing that is the lifeblood of problem solving?*

Process and governance

So much critical local government work assumes everyone is in the same room at the same time, looking at the same version of the truth. They aren't anymore.

Decisions around service start or continuity will get made with a paucity of information or won't get made at all. There is a real need to rapidly make the least worst decision, knowing the situation will change rapidly and decisions need to be revisited quickly - in days and weeks - rather than relying on a dogmatic annual cycle of reviews. If this doesn't happen, processes underpinning service delivery won't be triggered or will fall down midway. Local democracy will stall. Specific examples of this are:

1. **Adult and Children Social Care 'Front Door'**
   An effective 'Front Door' service that responds quickly and appropriately to social care needs. This can include Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) with all the challenges of separate organisations (LAs; Police; NHS etc.), using different technology to build up a fuller picture of an individual child and decide the most appropriate course of action.

2. **SEN Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)**
   Ensuring the most appropriate support is in place for vulnerable children as well as ensuring 'business as usual' by dealing with assessment requests and processing backlogs. Looked After Children specifically will have an existing EHCP delivered through schools. They are now at home with family/carers and will want to know how that support will continue.

3. **Resident Engagement Panels**
   Making decisions, recommendations or raising concerns about local housing policy, service delivery and stock maintenance.

4. **Headteacher Meetings**
   Normally a forum for discussion on exclusions, managed moves, in year admissions, funding, etc. Now they'll focus on school closure, provision for the children of key workers, how schools can work together to deal with staff sickness, and the like.

5. **Sharing Customer Records**
   The appropriate sharing of customer records across the organisation by analogue means or well established relationships to ensure a complete customer record and single source of truth information.

6. **Freedom of Information / Subject Access Requests**
   Searching across a range of technologies and data stores to establish a comprehensive response to any given request. The rapid deployment of remote working technologies will give rise to some level of shadow IT, making this difficult.

7. **Democracy**
   Cabinet meetings, planning meetings, scrutiny and oversight sessions, councillor surgeries and party political meetings supported by the local authority all need to be enabled.

There won't be capacity to enable every process or governance structure at the same time. Choices will have to be made. What can you prioritise? What can you pause? What can you stop?
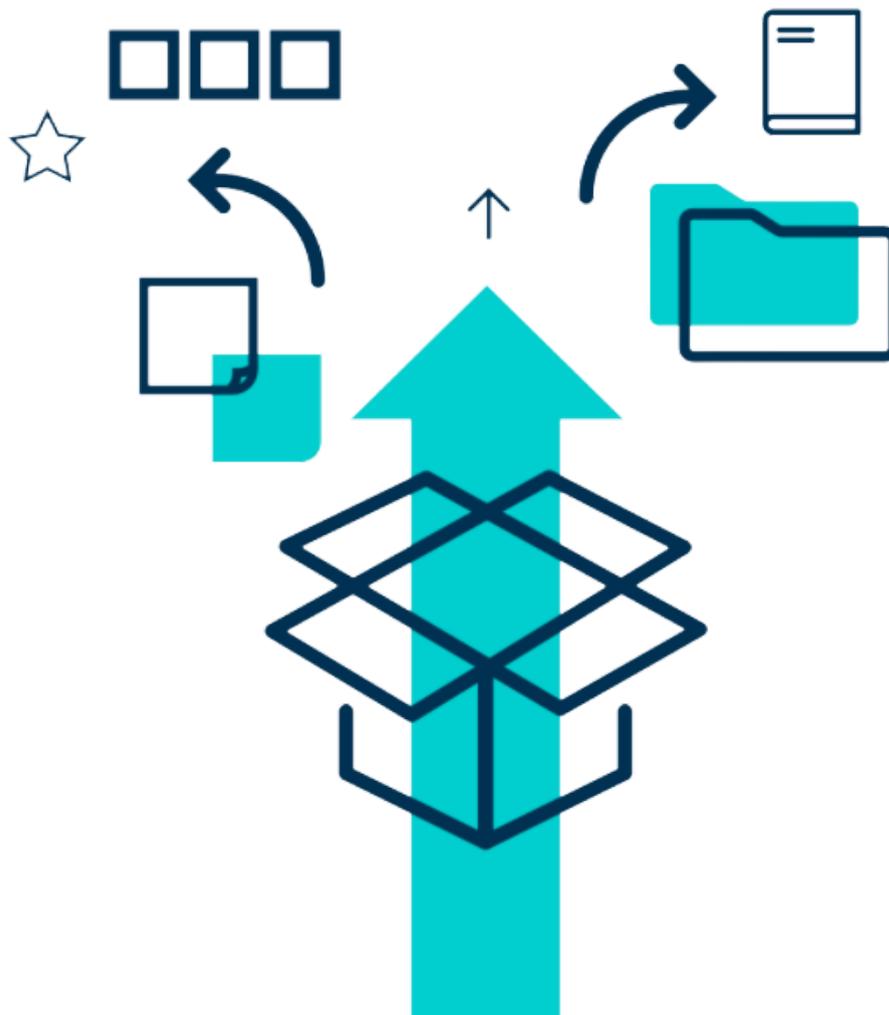
Skills and tooling

This theme addresses how a local authority may not have the tools or the skills to maintain the necessary dialogue needed with all stakeholders including citizens whose needs are not being served. It also addresses the limited appetite and capability in the community to access digital services and enact digital transactions. How do you ensure the most vulnerable residents can access the services they need if they're not connected or are intimidated by online services?

> **Over half of all adult internet non-users were over the age of 75 years in 2018[2].**

The ability to meet citizen needs is changing much more rapidly. The health of citizens and their means to care for themselves or dependents can change overnight, and at the same time the continuity of supporting services are also in a state of flux.

Much more rapid citizen engagement, consultation and decision making is needed rather than the funnelling of demand into queues or monthly review panels. Put simply, the cadence of decision making is increasing and this requires administrators, professionals, citizens and their representatives to have a means to rapidly engage, solve problems and Work Out Loud on the best course of action.

Regarding your workforce, the tools they are likely to need to Work Out Loud are:

1. A collaboration platform (e.g. Slack, Teams, Trello, etc).

2. A secure video conferencing platform (e.g. Teams, StarLeaf, etc).

3. Remote access to network services and resources.

4. Access to cloud-based services (e.g. PaaS / IaaS for mission critical apps).

5. A quiet place in the home to work and possibly a more outcomes and flexitime focused approach.

6. A robust, high speed internet connection.

A mechanism is also required to consult and engage citizens and service users on this toolset. Conversations must still be possible, needs understood and rapid and effective assessments made as an ongoing dialogue, rather than scheduled interactions with case workers.

The skills required to successfully Work Out Loud are more about your embedded working practices than about your tools. It isn't that your workforce doesn't have the soft skills required, it's how they demonstrate them in a completely alien environment. No open plan office with familiar faces, established routines have been disrupted and ad hoc problem solving discussions are now less ad hoc. People are in a new world where they are only connected by a phone or a laptop - *all day, every day*.

How can a workforce be empowered to translate their critical thinking, communication, creativity, collaboration, emotional intelligence, flexibility, adaptability, productivity and accountability to the new normal?

Working Out Loud

We believe working out loud is key to successful remote working and achievement of outcomes, ensuring teams are fully aligned at all times. This is a concept we employ across Rainmaker on every project.

Be Inspired

Teams should work-out-loud because it inspires and engages everyone across businesses.

Working as one team, with real time collaboration, creates momentum to deliver value add outcomes irrespective of team location.

Share Knowledge

When teams work out loud they are able to share knowledge with others in real time. This provides a more innovative and collaborative atmosphere for people no matter where they are working, and produces more robust outcomes from multiple perspectives.

Truly Transparent

When teams communicate openly using collaborative tools and ways of working they are able to share progress and updates in a more accessible format. This allows teams to be more agile and innovative.
This takes practice and encouragement.

Be Brave

It's all about openly narrating people's work as they do it, so others can contribute or learn.

Failure is the mother of success, so people need to learn collectively as a team, fail faster and break new ground.

In a workforce with an average age of mid-40s who may have been in their post for extended periods, there can be a digital literacy gap.

This can manifest as low-level technology issues at a granular level including:

1. How do I set up a meeting using Teams/Outlook or Slack/GMail/Hangouts or any combination of these?

2. How do I share my desktop, or how best can we review a report or other document in the meeting?

3. How can I share files from my G Drive / OneDrive / DropBox?

4. How do I use OneNote/EverNote and how do I use them to drive a virtual paperless meeting?

5. How do I move between channels and maintain continuity (e.g GMail / Slack or Teams / Outlook)?

Ongoing support is needed for users to make best use of tools, but also to help teams adapt their working practices to take best advantage of the tools provided. This should be considered as an iterative exercise that takes place over time as teams become accustomed to new ways of working.

Without these skills and tools, a remote worker will struggle. Productivity will decline as will service delivery. Residents will be left exposed and unsupported.

Capacity

People, Process and Technology

What is the impact of having rapidly implemented remote working practices and technologies on your culture, people and the processes they rely on to do their work?

The old measures that you used to manage and monitor capacity risk have changed, including:

- How you measure productivity and effectiveness after losing the nuances of 100 years of interpersonal working practices.

- Identifying and addressing new bottlenecks caused by continually evolving ways of working, e.g. service desks, contact centres, achieving quorum in decision making.

- Aligning available technology to where your people are and the new patterns they are working (including unpredictable availability).

- Rapidly aligning available people to where the greatest need is, due to changing demand or a reduction in productivity.

Rethinking and changing how you monitor, rapidly adapt and manage capacity in this new world will be critical, both in the early period and ongoing as situations evolve.

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The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday's logic.

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– Peter Drucker

Austrian-born American management consultant, educator, and author, whose writings contributed to the philosophical and practical foundations of modern business

Cost efficiencies

The recent financial challenges facing local authorities may have to be ignored to enable short term tactical responses to COVID-19. Overspends will be tolerated (even necessary). But the financial landscape hasn't changed. If anything, the financial stimulus package offered by the government coupled with the impact of COVID-19 on local economies means local authority funding could come under even greater pressure. Very quickly, there will be a requirement to demonstrate that any solutions are sustainable. Digital shouldn't be an adjunct to the service, it should be the service.

Whilst on that journey don't forget to take advantage of the quick wins and gains you will undoubtedly find as you respond to this situation. In other words, if you create a digital service to meet the remote needs that have now arisen, do the work to understand if you can stand down or make more efficient the existing service. Avoid duplication or at least remove it as you proceed.

There is no need to boil the ocean as this will take too long. Much better to identify and act on parts of services at a time so you see real change and benefit bit by bit.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly there are immediate priorities to address in shifting to remote working.

However, the current impetus for change will create new norms around how teams collaborate and engage. We see an opportunity - and indeed a necessity - here for local authorities to move away from being reactive, from processing backlogs and from rigidly adhering to scheduled reviews. Instead we see a more fluid approach of the right people collaborating to make the right decisions at the point they arise - and importantly - revising these decisions and the services they inform more regularly given the changing nature of the COVID environment.

With this backdrop, proper exploitation and integration of technology and empowered teams will be a game changer. They'll enable an effective response to COVID-19 and ensure adaptability to meet future pressures and changing requirements.

Taking on new technologies and ways of working is an evolution, it won't be perfect immediately and will require effort and collaboration across your entire business ecosystem. But the outcomes of that effort will far outweigh the challenges created by playing rapid catch up if no immediate action is taken.

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Sources:

[1] Office for National Statistics (ONS)

[2] ONS 6. How does digital exclusion vary with age?

Department for Education Essential Digital Skills Framework

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