

Finding the opportunities for radical transformation in local public services

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Reflections from our PD Session on 27 November 2025.





On 27 November 2025, we brought together a community of practitioners, experts and change makers from across local government for our latest PD Session, reflecting on the need and opportunities for radical transformation in local government. As well as 40 people joining us in the room, over 90 people joined online - representing a wide range of councils and people close to the sector.

Our experienced panel brought hands-on experience of the challenges involved in transforming local public services, and importantly, experience of what can be possible with vision, ambition and determination.

Hamida Ali: leads on devolution at the Future Governance Forum and also co-facilitates leadership development programmes for councillors for the Local Government Association.

Eddie Copeland: is Director of the London Office of Technology & Innovation, London local government's collaborative innovation team.

Vincent van Beek: leads work to enable user centred service transformation through bold new approaches to technology as part of the team at Mijnservices in the Netherlands.

In this write-up we reflect on the discussion and what this can mean for the local government year ahead. We're hoping that 2026 can be a turning point where local public services can build impactful partnerships, look beyond the need to remain 'safe and legal', and use 'test and learn' approaches and curiosity to make bold steps towards more preventative approaches. Active and sustained support from central government and regulators will also be key to achieving this.

We remain hopeful about the future for local public services.

Through Public Digital's work with local authorities, we have seen clear evidence of how using relational and multidisciplinary ways of working, user-centred design and a 'test and learn' approach can deliver bold innovation at scale.

We've also seen how customer experience across council services can be improved and wasteful failure demand reduced by adopting user-centred design that puts people at the heart of services.

At the same time, we're seeing the beginnings of a profound shift in the way that Whitehall works with local government, and a growing number of voices calling for change in how local authorities operate.

Amplifying this and building the coalition for change that local public services desperately need is vital.

If your organisation is part of that movement, we would love to hear from you.
Get in touch at workwithus@public.digital

Local government is too important to simply be allowed to fail

The work of local councils and mayoral authorities is at the frontline of public service delivery, playing a critical role in much of our lives. This is instrumental to:

The places we live: our streets, pavements, local economy, libraries, parks and open spaces, local transport, social housing, planning and community safety, and much more.

Support that people depend on: including social care, safeguarding, special education needs and supporting people affected by homelessness.

They also play a vital convening role through their work engaging with and supporting local community organisations.

However, the combination of soaring demand for critical, legally mandated services and increasingly pressured finances is leaving councils in crisis, with many on the precipice of issuing Section 114 notices (aka 'declaring bankruptcy.') Others are having to raise Council Tax while simultaneously cutting back much needed services and financial support for local community activity.

Unsurprisingly, the public feels dissatisfied: local services appear to be deteriorating while bills continue to rise. At the same time, those responsible for service delivery are increasingly at risk of becoming burnt out from the effort of trying to keep things running.

It's a gloomy picture, but not one where we are powerless.

We asked our panel to share their reflections and thoughts on how we can find a more optimistic future for local public services.

The shift to prevention is fundamental

Without a significant shift from managing demand to reducing demand, a growing number of councils will find themselves unable to deliver the services their residents need, or play an impactful role in their local place. The pressures on services make it hard to shift focus from responsive delivery to prevention, but making this shift can't be considered optional.



I often ask people to describe to me the future they would like to be able to say we've achieved in any given area - social care, homelessness, digital. Then I ask them to tell me what the future looks like if we change nothing.



Eddie Copeland,
London Office of
Technology & Innovation





The 'Barnet Graph of Doom'¹ is now over 14 years old, and Barnet Council's forecast - that the funding available for local public services would be entirely consumed by the costs of adults' and children's social care in the next 20 years - is well on its way to being realised. Compounded by the soaring cost of support for both special educational needs and homelessness, the funding crisis faced by councils is real and acute.



It's councillors who have to make those decisions and it's horrible. You hear politician after politician saying 'this is not what I went into politics for, to make a choice between parks and libraries over children's social care because one is statutory and the other isn't'."



Hamida Ali, Future Governance Forum

Eddie challenged the common assumption that the way to tackle the effects of these pressures is to place all of our leadership focus and resources on 'bucket 1': the work of running councils' core services as efficiently as possible.

While bolder, 'bucket 2' approaches can feel like risky distractions from the 'core business' that councils must focus on, Eddie asked us to imagine a future without having also tackled the causes for demand continuing to rise - with councils buckling under unrelenting and unmanageable pressures.

Hamida shared the example of Sheffield, where the Council is working with partners and shifting budgets and resources to support preventative work.² Critically, this means transforming the way the Council works alongside local partners to shape and deliver their services within places and communities.

As Hamida highlighted, despite the serious pressures on local government finances, there is still a large amount of public money spent through councils. Challenging delivery models to use this as effectively as possible and reduce demand for more acute services, rather than waiting for circumstances to deteriorate to the point where statutory support comes into play, is both a financial and moral imperative.

The challenges are big, so the solutions need to be radically bolder

While the demand and funding pressures on local government are clear, these are often compounded by some of the traditional ways of working in local government:



Focusing on 'safe and legal' responses to the challenges at the expense of also working to achieve more radical transformation.

Looking inwards to internal challenges, with a focus on organisation boundaries - rather than harnessing the capacity and creativity of the whole place, and missing opportunities to use the collective power of the sector as a whole.

Grabbing for 'magic bullets' without sufficient focus on the hard (and often boring) work required to secure the benefits of new service models, ways of working and technologies.

An alarming level of supplier capture, with insufficient active shaping of markets for the services that councils need.

Orchestration, leadership, meaningful engagement, experimentation and storytelling are the key ingredients to doing anything successfully, particularly when you're solving problems across a set of institutions.

Hamida Ali, Future Governance Forum



The emphasis on being ‘safe and legal’ (focusing on the structures and processes of change) is understandable. But allowing that focus to limit ambitions while continuing to operate within current service models inevitably leads to responses which are ill-equipped to tackle the problems councils face. This risks becoming a ‘doom loop’ that locks in current constraints and works as a barrier to the real transformation needed.

As Public Digital’s Gavin Beckett has recently written: “Today’s crisis needs a new breed of senior leaders – whole system leaders shaping their council’s capabilities to work collaboratively with all partners across the whole place.”³ Leading change outside of the defined historic and ‘statutory’ structures, adopting dynamic operating models⁴ and using a ‘test and learn’ approach to open up and scale radical new approaches⁵ will be key to meeting the challenges that local public services face.

Councils also need to be able to resist the lure and marketing of ‘magic bullets’, which too often distract from the real potential for more radical ideas. For example, AI is an important and potentially transformational new technology that offers big potential.⁶ But success depends on first doing the hard work that will let us harness the potential. We need to cut through the marketing hype and focus intentional and curious experimentation on making sure that AI delivers actual benefits and positive outcomes for people.



AI is very useful, don’t get me wrong. We’re doing lots across the LOTI community - incredible examples - but nearly all of it is about optimising what we’ve got.



Eddie Copeland, London Office of Technology & Innovation

³ <https://public.digital/pd-insights/blog/2025/10/harnessing-the-changing-landscape-of-local-government-to-create-internet-era-organisations>

⁴ <https://public.digital/dynamic-operating-model>

⁵ <https://public.digital/test-and-learn>

⁶ <https://public.digital/ai>

The false security of 'safe' options and 'sticking with the pack' also leads to continued stagnation in supplier markets. This works as a powerful barrier to new approaches and ideas - with councils following suppliers' innovation agendas rather than their own, and missing opportunities to show real place leadership.

Supplier capture is a continuing challenge despite years of talking about 'collective buying power'. This fails to achieve any traction when the market can see little actual evidence of councils working together to reshape their supplier base, and where collective action doesn't often go much further than aligning procurement processes. Instead, we need to see councils working together to use the sector's scale to challenge incumbent suppliers and open up to new partners.

Vincent shared practical experience from the Netherlands, where a radically different approach to technology is strengthening levers to shape the market. As well as bringing in new supplier partnerships, this approach is changing the behaviours of incumbent providers - who realise that their future success will depend on stepping outside of their comfortable lock-ins.



We're now collaborating with our suppliers who are buying into our thoughts and our ways of working. The suppliers we have also want to deliver. They also want to make a difference. And what we see now is we're working together so much more and so much more efficiently.



Vincent van Beek, Mijnservices, Netherlands



As well as the leadership needed from councils, there is also an important role for central government and regulators to play in creating the conditions for bolder transformation.

Hamida referenced some positive changes like longer term funding settlements (which should enable councils to plan more strategically, rather than in 12 month bursts), and the opportunity to rewire how central and local government work together that is currently being explored through the Test, Learn and Grow programme.⁷ Hamida also highlighted the role that a mission-led approach can play in bringing people and organisations together around shared goals, but noted that the focus on missions in public services appears to have diminished - with the risk of missing an important opportunity as a result.



Overall, leaders in local public services must be incentivised to explore radical transformation, and rewarded for stepping outside of their lanes. Too often, leaders find themselves caught in an accountability trap, where regulators and legal duties reinforce the status quo and create a barrier to more integrated working and bolder ideas (such as shifting resources to preventative working). This needs to change.


A shared priority is what drives the collective, even when that might compete with or be counter to the institutional objective driving behaviour in particular organisations.



Hamida Ali, Future Governance Forum

Collaboration is about more than just sharing experience

Local government is adept at sharing knowledge, learning and experience, working through formal and informal networks, cross-sector professional bodies and also through sector organisations like the Local Government Association (LGA) and SOLACE. But the practical doing of bolder change is much harder to deliver.

Examples of implementing deeply integrated shared services between councils have proved challenging, with most gradually fading away after the initial enthusiasm was unable to maintain momentum. Other funded initiatives like the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Local Digital programme have been able to catalyse collaboration on a range of initiatives, but have struggled to gain the traction needed to extend beyond the initial stages.

There are some notable exceptions to this, such as LocalGov Drupal, initially a Local Digital funded project. This is playing a pivotal role in helping to transform online access to council services, and is currently used by 60 councils and supported by an ecosystem of 23 suppliers.⁸ However, examples of sustaining, impactful collaboration remain disappointingly few.



Once we started collaborating, we realised that we all had the same goals. Across the 342 municipalities, we were all doing the same work, which was a waste of time and money.



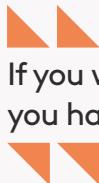
Vincent van Beek, Mijnservices, Netherlands



Vincent shared his experience in the Netherlands, where Mijnservices have adopted principles of using open source, cloud based software, reuse of code (including GOV.UK Notify from the UK's Government Digital Service⁹), user-centred design, and collaborative development. These principles have enabled them to extend a new digital services platform approach across the Netherlands' largest cities, and start to broaden its reach to link up with national government services. An approach based on starting small, learning through doing, and scaling out has proven its value, and is building significant impact, progress and momentum.

While the diversity of councils and services makes adopting this sort of model complex, the possibility of taking a similar approach in the UK is no less feasible - and nor is the potential to extend it beyond the delivery of digital platforms. But as things stand, public services in the UK fall far short of realising the potential that could be achieved with a real commitment to purposeful collaboration.

Crucially, this is about more than starting up lots of pilots. The 'and Grow' part of the Test, Learn and Grow programme is crucial if innovative approaches are to be scaled and become the new normal for local public services. This requires patience, leadership commitment, and active attention to the conditions for scaling and embedding change.



If you want a proper service,
you have to invest. It takes hard work.

Vincent van Beek, Mijnservices, Netherlands





There is exciting potential for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) to play a role in driving this sort of collaboration. We heard from Eddie about LOTI's work to accelerate innovation across London, and Public Digital has been part of supporting Liverpool City Region in the development of their Office for Public Service Innovation (OPSI).¹⁰

The planned growth of MSAs and the devolution agenda provide an important opportunity to increase the ambition and impact of transformation at a regional level. Public Digital is proud to be a partner, alongside LSE and Inner Circle Consulting, on an initiative by Bloomberg Philanthropies, to help build the capacity of the UK's new MSAs.



Encouragingly, there is also evidence of an appetite from Whitehall to look at how central government can work differently with local government and help support the conditions that are needed. Along with the Test, Learn and Grow programme, there is also the timely launch of GDS Local, which was announced days before our PD Sessions event in November. We hope these efforts will complement the work of the MHCLG Local Digital team, the LGA, and other sector groups to help build momentum for more radical and citizen-focused change in local public services.

It's extremely positive to see practitioners with deep experience of delivery in local government take on leading roles in these teams and programmes. But there will continue to be a need for focused attention to ensure clarity around the different roles that teams are playing, and to make sure that these efforts become more than the sum of their parts. Councils will need to lean into this too, making sure that the work is genuinely collaborative and can become a catalyst for more ambitious, impact-driven change.

So, where to start?

The pressures of soaring demand, funding cuts, and rising expectations, combined with the major changes that will come through Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution, can seem overwhelming. There's no doubt that leaders in local public services face extraordinary challenges. But local government has already shown its ability to manage unprecedented adversity and bring inventiveness and energy to the task through its response to the Covid pandemic.



We did this during Covid. We couldn't deliver to everyone, so we had to figure out who else could provide for those needs.



Eddie Copeland, London Office of Technology & Innovation



The first and most important step is to recognise that large, complex challenges will not be tackled by 'simple' or quick solutions; nor will they be fixed by councils operating on their own. Even if significantly more funding were to become available, the demand side pressures, the complex factors that drive them, and the confusion of organisations and overlapping responsibilities will remain. There are, however, existing strengths that can be built on, and powerful examples of success to inspire the change we need.



We may have less money, but our toolkit has never been bigger. Thinking about the set of innovation methods, the tools, the creativity that we can bring to reform our services - the variables that we could change in a public service are enormous. And they include the public sector fundamentally rethinking what its role is.



Eddie Copeland, London Office of Technology & Innovation

Through Public Digital's work with local authorities, we have seen clear evidence of how using relational and multidisciplinary ways of working, user-centred design and a 'test and learn' approach can deliver bold innovation at scale while also mitigating against the significant risks that can come with 'big bang' changes.

This includes our work with Dorset, Nottinghamshire and other councils on 'Transforming the Front Door', improving outcomes for children and families while also increasing efficiency.¹¹ We've also seen how customer experience across council services can be improved and wasteful failure demand reduced by replacing 'industrial' customer service approaches with user-centred design that puts people at the heart of the service.

We're excited to see other voices like Catherine Howe, CEO of Dorset County Council, talking about this shift in how local authorities operate.¹² It's essential that others join this movement and help to build the coalition for change that local public services desperately need.

¹¹ [&](https://public.digital/pd-insights/client-stories/nottingham-safeguarding)
<https://public.digital/pd-insights/client-stories/supporting-dorset-councils-childrens-service>

¹² <https://www.curiouscatherine.info/2025/12/12/we-need-new-feedback-loops/>



At Public Digital, our hope is that 2026 is a year where we will see:

Recognition of the urgent need to make prevention as much a priority as delivering core responsibilities and staying 'safe and legal'. We would like to see this demonstrated through attention, active support and how people, time and money are allocated.

Partners working as an ecosystem, building bold and curious partnerships, working towards shared goals.

Empowered and curious local public "servants", resisting 'simple' fixes and taking more control of their strategic levers and their relationships with suppliers.

Recognition of the importance of avoiding the trap of 'false certainty' that is often characteristic of traditional approaches to 'transformation' - big plans and big fixed savings promises, which inevitably lead to big risks and big disappointment.

Bold ambitions, and working in quick and iterative steps to 'test and learn' from real users, scaling what works and pivoting where ideas don't achieve what was expected or hoped.

Local focus to rewire governance and funding, putting these into the service of transformation and recognising that much of traditional governance and assurance can actually block the ambition and change that's needed.

Sustained commitment from central government and regulators to also shift how they work and play an active role in supporting the conditions needed for locally led transformation to thrive.

If your organisation is part of that movement for change in 2026, we would love to hear from you.
Get in touch at workwithus@public.digital



Rob Miller is an experienced senior digital leader, with extensive experience across the local government and retail sectors. He helps organisations use technology and data to deliver better services for citizens, work in smarter and more sustainable ways, and reduce their costs.

Rob has led the transformation of digital, data and technology services, the delivery of large scale and high profile frontline services, and the development of diverse, skilled and innovative teams.

At Public Digital, Rob has worked with clients across our local and central government, health and charity sectors, including DEFRA, the Local Government Association, and the NHS.

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