

Briefing

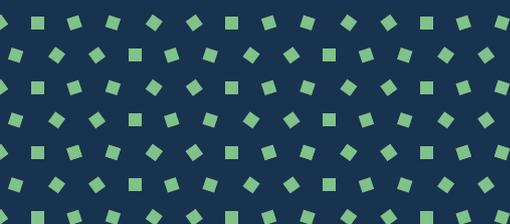
# The future of contact centres post-Covid-19

July 2020



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# Introduction

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated lockdown, social distancing and other measures that have been put in place, has forced councils to rethink how they deliver their services. More than this, the very purpose of councils, the facilities and services that they offer, and the contribution they make to the social and environmental wellbeing of their residents and places has been brought into sharper focus. Now, councils are turning their attention to what happens next.

Socitm has presented its prospectus for the future in Planting the Flag (PtF).<sup>1</sup> The prospectus lays out foundations for sustained change, namely Reset – Reform – Recovery:

- › **Reset** – a change of mindset to embrace digital, data and technology
- › **Reform** – redesign services to be simpler, easier, more accessible and proactive for users
- › **Recovery** – focus on better outcomes for people, communities, businesses, and for the place and the world in which we live.

The prospectus presents eight building blocks for change. Each represents an opportunity for councils to take deliberate action to sustain their new ways of working and to extend support for their communities by embedding innovative digital practices and processes where these have proven benefits.

It has been twelve weeks since the Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown in England, alongside lockdowns across the rest of the UK. However, councils have continued to deliver their usual range of services, alongside new services needed by vulnerable citizens and others as a consequence of the pandemic. As we look beyond the pandemic, there is a growing body of evidence indicating a preference from councils, their

staff and those they serve, to continue to work in more flexible ways, rather than reverting back to how things were. More broadly, a recent YouGov poll quoted in The Guardian indicated that just 6% of the UK public want a return to how things were before the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced a break with traditional service delivery by councils. Our Covid-19 digital impact survey reveals that, across the UK and around the world, councils have transitioned rapidly to digitally-enabled delivery methods.<sup>3</sup> Changes that previously would have been the subject of lengthy and complex transformation programmes have been achieved in a matter of weeks and sometimes days, presenting a significant break with the past.

By examining the experience of Dudley Council through the pandemic, this briefing sets out to review the purpose of contact centres, whether a change of mindset is enabling a redesigned approach to what have until now been physical services, and whether better outcomes can be achieved by alternative methods of delivery.

The content of this briefing is based on an interview with Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital at Worcestershire County Council, former President of Socitm and, until recently, Head of Digital and ICT Services at Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, supplemented by other case study material collected by Socitm during the pandemic.

## Purpose of contact centres

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Do you remember a time, in conversation with a neighbour, where you were unsure of a particular service, but thought it was in the remit of local government? And the conversation, usually, ends with the typical phrase: “Why don’t you contact the council?”

This is where contact centres come in. The purpose of a contact centre is to act as a communication hub for citizens; to answer their queries and manage on-going conversations between individuals and the council on matters of service delivery, statutory entitlements, complaints, or praise.

The purpose for visiting a contact centre is varied and multifaceted and goes beyond merely completing a transaction. For some, visiting a contact centre offers social interaction; this may be their only form of communication with another person that day. For others, visiting is out of habit and routine and what they have become accustomed to doing for months, years or even decades. In other words, “this is how I get my service done”.

In Dudley, before the nationwide lockdown imposed by the Prime Minister, the platform for contact centres was multi-channel, consisting of telephony, walk-ins, webchat and portals. The two main physical sites were Dudley Council Plus and the Repairs Management Centre (RMC), the latter including telecare. There was also a presence in a number of libraries across Dudley.

Politics will no doubt feature in this debate. Councillors have views on the need to have a physical building and belief that it is not possible to fully serve the community without such a space. The last three months, however, have dispelled this myth. A wider case now needs to be made to the rest of the organisation that alternative, more efficient and more effective provision for services can work and still meet the expectations of service users.

For example, there are currently cash kiosks to pay for various council services such as council tax, parking fines or white goods collection. Yet, as council offices have been closed, no one has used the cash

kiosks and the majority of citizens have subsequently shifted their behaviour with one-third making payment via direct debit, one half using telephone payments and a small number using pay points. This demonstrates that habit and routine can be changed when other options are unavailable to citizens.

Taylor observes:

*“As consumers, we do not expect organisations in the private sector, such as Amazon, to have a physical space but we do in the public sector as part of our wider business objectives of social responsibility. Whether that is a legitimate reason for keeping with the status quo needs to be thoughtfully considered.”*

Emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, the council should build an understanding of the social, economic and demographic makeup of those who use contact centres, the future role that the physical buildings will have in the local landscape and their wider social responsibility in delivering services to achieve better outcomes for all concerned, while asking: can digital methods meet the aims and ambitions of the citizens that they serve?

## Digital and contact centres

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During Covid-19, local government employees have demonstrated greater judgement and situational awareness of the challenges that their local residents and communities face whether these are mental health issues, employment issues, increasing numbers of welfare recipients and/or access to relevant support, while considering how virtual, digital delivery methods can alleviate the burden for individual residents and communities.

Dudley has the potential to become a cashless council and lessons could be learned from other European models. For example, there is an increasing trend in Sweden for shops and restaurants to refuse cash payments. Holland’s transport system, for the most

part, only accepts card or mobile payments, and given the circumstances that we find ourselves in, who would want to pay with cash? "Not me!", said Sandra.

Prior to lockdown, the council ran a customer engagement exercise on individual attitudes to digital approaches. The exercise was with three demographic groups:

- those who are currently digitally engaged,
- under 25s,
- and those who face challenges with using digital services.

The results from the engagement demonstrated that participants from all three groups found digital alternatives to be inclusive, offering choice in accessing services and having the potential to overcome barriers such as language by assisting communities where English is not their primary language.

We should remember that a physical building can present barriers to accessing services, which may include structures that inhibit an individual from getting where they must go; cost to attend a physical place; psychological barriers in terms of how an individual feels about the service or their state of mind; difficulties in being able to travel to a building; cultural and language barriers; or attendance based on a belief that "just going" will actually resolve the individual's issue, but where the help that can actually be offered is not available in that contact centre.

As Dudley Council, together with many others, starts to remove their finger from the 'pause button', discussions are taking place to consider the future of office accommodation, its purpose, what it will look like and how it will function in the future. Intrinsicly linked to these considerations is the role of the physical contact centre. For example, do we allow people to walk-in to report problems; deposit keys at the end of tenancy; bring documents to prove identity and/or eligibility, and sign documents. Could these functions be redesigned to remove the need for physical interaction?

Automation is key for contact centres to swiftly and effectively address the needs of citizens. Digital tools such as self-service portals can enable services to be entirely automated. Removing mundane repetitive manual processes through the use of automated processes and back office virtual assistants, enables employees to focus on more challenging and complex circumstances that require their judgement and professional expertise to be exercised.



## Covid-19 and contact with residents

Dudley has provided its employees with tools and equipment to enable them to work remotely, which included laptops and peripheral equipment, Microsoft Teams, training on new systems and ways of working; and extending the use of the digital mailroom so that external post could continue to be issued.

For residents, additional web forms were developed for new or amended services as well as implementing a new online booking system for trips to the household waste recycling centre. The council's website and online newsletter have been key communication channels.

It is a myth to think that council services have been shut down during lockdown. Rather, council services have been continuing at pace. A summary of the services that Dudley has delivered over the last three months is shown in the following chart:



## Employee response to digital channel shift

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Everyone's concept of balance in their lives is different. While some staff never want to go back to the pre-pandemic ways of working, others have a strong dislike for remote working, perhaps due to a challenging home environment, feelings of isolation, difficulty in separating their home and work life or missing those familiar, spontaneous 'watercooler' conversations with colleagues.

However, Taylor maintains that many employees at Dudley Council like the change, giving organisations the opportunity for 80% office and 20% remote based working to be reversed. For this reversal to be sustained, attention needs to be given to supporting employees and their mental wellbeing, while ensuring they have the digital skills and capability to continue to work remotely for extended periods of time in the right environment.<sup>4</sup> Managers will also need to adjust, changing their mindset away from 'presenteeism' and inputs to one focused on outcomes and supporting their teams, often via digital channels.

Although council employees are working remotely, they are still using the same systems which is a bonus. There has been a massive increase in the use of video conferencing, interactive chat and digital collaboration tools. The council is now recording 1,000 Microsoft Teams meetings per day. Two-thirds of all its network traffic through its firewalls is generated by Teams, all the more extraordinary given that Teams only went live across the council in April 2020. A considerable amount of user support material has been peer-produced, including the creation of blogs and sharing other learnings through trial and error. E-learning was already in place at the council, and this is now being augmented through virtual classroom training facilitated by Teams.

## Future of contact centres

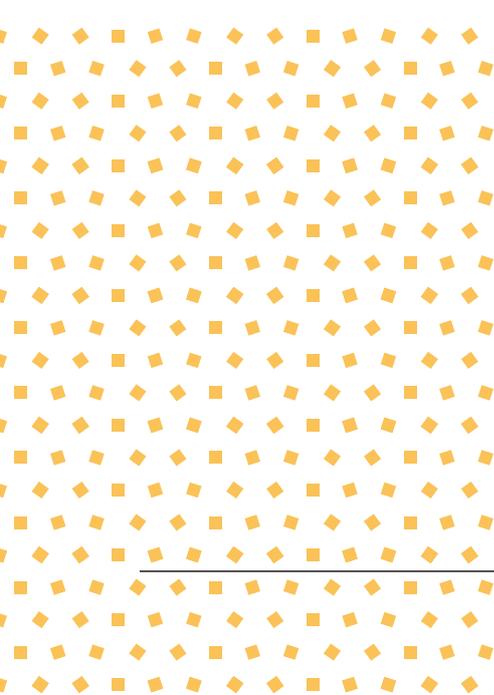
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Looking ahead, Taylor observes:

*"If anything, the last three months has shown that councils can do things differently when forced to do so. It's just a shame that it took a pandemic to drive change forward."*

Within councils, not just Dudley, there is certainly a desire not to go backwards or to fully re-embrace traditional ways of working. Recent weeks have shown the positive merits of digital and remote-working gather momentum and accelerating widespread acceptance.

Digital should be a tool of empowerment that increases choice by inviting people to access services differently and at times of their choice, rather than a cost cutting exercise or an excuse for the council not to speak directly to citizens.



By way of contrast, in 2019, we quoted the exasperation of one chief executive talking about eligibility for resident's parking permits:

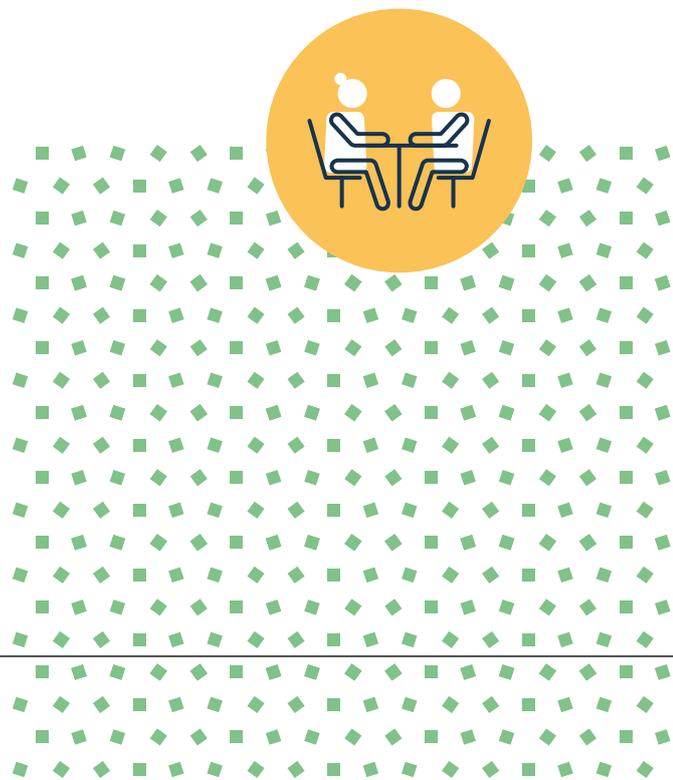
*"The council prints a bill from digital information, posts it, then asks citizens to re-digitise it as an image and send it back."*<sup>5</sup>

This is an example of persisting with analogue methods and retaining unnecessary bureaucracy when the data already resides with the council.

Discussions are already taking place in preparation for the second spike of coronavirus and life after the pandemic. The council has initiated a traffic light system. For employees categorised as red, it is essential for them to be physically on-site for their job to be completed. Those classified as green employees can complete their work uninterrupted from home. Taylor says:

*"Having as many people at home is the best way to combat the virus and we are doing all we can to make sure our most vulnerable and at-risk employees are shielded."*

Active discussions are taking place in Dudley Council with reference to Socitm's Planting the Flag prospectus and its matrix of building blocks. Overall, a view is emerging that the retention of physical contact centres should address a specifically identified need rather than serve a habit. There will be a much stronger focus on digital enablement, whether it is supporting those who require relational services that still require an element of human interaction, or those requiring transactional services, which can be completed through a digital channel.



## Conclusion

Dudley has embraced technology and digital approaches to remain connected with their residents and communities during the pandemic, in ways that would have previously been thought of as unimaginable. There is a clear appetite to maintain homeworking policies and the organisation will support these practices going forward.

Some of the major changes include:

- › an expansion of remote working;
- › the development of an online booking system for visits to the household waste recycling centre;
- › an expansion in the capacity of the digital mailroom;
- › and an increase in online learning and resources.

A number of the changes impact directly on the future role of contact centres and the opportunity to rethink their current form.

As Jane Eckford (Member of the CCA Standards Council and Industry Working Group) says:

*"I'm weary of suggestions that customer contact centres or call centres are a thing of the past. This idea is posited repeatedly by digital change theorists who don't quite understand that..."*

*Contact centres are omni-channel digital platforms.*

*'Voice' is digital.*

*Digital is really about how you connect thoughts, ideas, people and location in more fluid, empathetic, ways to respond to implicit & explicit need.*

*Digital supports leaders who are fundamentally interested in customers to look back into the organisation from their point of view.*

*It's this customer advocacy that's truly disruptive and good - whilst digital in the hands of strategists/implementer/process owners somehow lacks game-changing thinking."*<sup>6</sup>

Councils need to embed a culture that visualises emergence from the pandemic not simply as a one-time event after which normal business resumes. The continuing roll-out of technology and digital approaches, offers people a "voice" that "connects thoughts, ideas, people and location", by responding appropriately to their needs. This culminates in alternative working practices, better outcomes and increased satisfaction from residents, which should become the norm in sustaining a purposeful role for councils in an ever-changing world.

The benefits of embracing digital change are two-fold:

- › **For the council**, it will encourage better and more targeted services that can address the needs of residents faster. The council will also be able to plan and provision future service requirements with better accuracy.
- › **For residents**, digital quite simply offers better access to public services with the prospect of a better outcome for them and their communities.

## References

### Source

This interview was conducted while Sandra Taylor was an employee of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

### Appendix

<sup>1</sup> Planting the flag - a new local normal: [socitm.net/download/planting-the-flag-a-new-local-normal/](https://socitm.net/download/planting-the-flag-a-new-local-normal/)

<sup>2</sup> Just 6% of UK public 'want a return to pre-pandemic economy: [bit.ly/2O69l8V](https://bit.ly/2O69l8V)

<sup>3</sup> Covid-19 digital & ICT impact survey results: [socitm.net/download/covid-19-digital-ict-impact-survey-results/](https://socitm.net/download/covid-19-digital-ict-impact-survey-results/)

<sup>4</sup> Coronavirus makes smarter working hit home: [socitm.net/download/coronavirus-makes-smarter-working-hit-home/](https://socitm.net/download/coronavirus-makes-smarter-working-hit-home/)

<sup>5</sup> Barking and Dagenham: using data and technology to improve people's lives: [socitm.net/download/report-barking-and-dagenham/](https://socitm.net/download/report-barking-and-dagenham/)

<sup>6</sup> Jane Eckford FInstLM, FRSA, LinkedIn: [bit.ly/3faZQBo](https://bit.ly/3faZQBo)

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