

In **Our** View *Focus*



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FEATURING COVERAGE OF



Share Scotland, 18 November

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LOCAL COUNCIL VIEW

We should have the authority to continue with virtual council meetings



Parish and town councils – I prefer to call them local councils – have gone from being reactive talking shops where septic tank drainage and planning applications were the meat of the agenda to organisations which deliver services within communities, operating on budgets ranging from a couple of thousand pounds to over £2 million. They are not all forward and dynamic thinking, but I believe Covid had an impact on this. We were granted this new power to hold virtual meetings and – for some a little more slowly than others – we all embraced it. We felt safer with some of our councillors still shielding and at last the public was showing a bit more interest in what we were doing. We did all make mistakes, but on the whole it worked well and we got better at it.

And then, bang – back to face to face meetings with no halfway house and no recognition that Covid was still very much with us. We could see that these had a positive effect on physical well-being and our engagement with our local communities, and we let them go. Local councils should be able to decide the best format for themselves: face to face, virtual or hybrid. And yet there has been no government action, except for a call for evidence. No wonder people lose faith in us.

Virtual meetings are more accessible and can increase diversity – it is incredibly hard for someone who has never been to a council meeting before to walk into that arena. I always liken it to walking into church for the first time and you're not really sure where to sit. And we can't forget behaviour. I was lucky: the meeting I had that was challenging was virtual. I was holding that meeting in my office, a place I feel safe and secure, and didn't have to drive home distressed and anxious after it. I was able to put people in the virtual waiting room.

Maldon District Council was not so lucky. Its recent equivalent was a physical meeting, which saw a disruptive councillor with a megaphone even arguing with the two police officers who turned

up. I believe the ability to have virtual meetings can have a very positive effect on the behaviour of some difficult people. While government remains inactive on the introduction of sanctions for frankly appalling behaviour, maybe virtual platforms give us the ability to take action and do our part to restore public confidence in our systems.

We do need to think about people for whom online options are not easy. Don't tell him, but my husband is a witty, clever, intelligent man, a whizz with numbers and engineering, but watching him navigate a website is painful because he is dyslexic. I love him, but I get frustrated watching him do that. You don't love him – although to be honest if you met him you probably would – but you need to make systems accessible for him.

I am often so disappointed in the level of knowledge, understanding and interest that people have in local councils. It's really important that we encourage more people to take an interest and get involved. We need to keep pressing government to make the necessary changes to legislation to enable virtual meetings in some form. I believe we do have the authority, we just need to be granted the power to use it.

Jackie Weaver

Chief officer, Cheshire Association of Local Councils, whose efforts to impose order on a virtual meeting of Handforth parish council became famous earlier this year

This is an edited version of Jackie Weaver's speech to Share Scotland on 18 November

Recording of speech: bit.ly/32z94WD

National Association of Local Councils: nalc.gov.uk

Scotland must make use of device programme says digital director

The Scottish Government needs to take greater advantage of its work to connect hundreds of thousands of citizens, Geoff Huggins, digital director at the Scottish Government, told the opening session at Share Scotland.

Its Connecting Scotland programme, delivered with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, has already provided 52,000 households with technology and connectivity, and the government plans to reach 300,000 by the end of the Scottish parliamentary session in 2026. Huggins said the public sector needs to take advantage of this. "How can we get the maximum value from citizens being online? Simply giving people

the technology and connectivity is not sufficient in terms of ensuring people get the benefit," he said.

Huggins added that doing so would require changes in both technology and organisations. Technological changes may include smart search and referral systems which allow citizens to find and refer themselves while retaining control of their data. But on the organisational side, many services such as food banks are delivered locally by small community and voluntary groups which lack digital strategies.

Huggins said that many smaller organisations adopted technology during Covid-19 but are now looking at what to retain and what to drop, and many will need support if they are to continue using digital options. "While Covid has catapulted us forward in many ways, we've got a lot of work to do to harness that momentum and ensure that we get the benefits," he said, inviting people who want to collaborate on this to contact him.

Asked about how much organisations should return to pre-pandemic practices, Huggins said that face to face meetings work well for some who are unable or unwilling to use digital channels. But he added that work to support people shielding uncovered previously unknown issues of food poverty. "It lifted the lid on the degree to which different channels are effective for people," he said. "The big challenge is both keeping things that worked, but then mutating them into better service pathways."



"Simply giving people the technology and connectivity is not sufficient in terms of ensuring people get the benefit"

*Geoff Huggins,
Scottish Government*

Top Talent focuses on digital accessibility

Some local authority staff do not know how to create accessible documents, according to research presented by Socitm's latest Top Talent cohort to the event. "We have a legal obligation to ensure our web content is accessible to all users, including disabled people," Jennifer Lees of North Lanarkshire Council said, as well as driving inclusion. But Perth and Kinross Council alone hosts 17,000 documents on its website, which can be created by anyone in the local authority.

Lees and colleagues carried out research with 13 staff at planning services, which found that they all considered using plain English when creating documents but were much less likely to include alternative text for images. Asked by event chair Kevin White about planning documents created by other organisations such as architects and planners, Lees responded: "It's about local authorities setting the bar, leading by example and encouraging our partners to produce documents in accessible formats."

See more

Connecting Scotland:
connecting.scot

Socitm Top Talent:
bit.ly/3cj9uLY

Recording of event:
bit.ly/3FQZ0vt

Putting it in writing could help avoid workplace 'horrible hybrids'

Hybrid working should be treated as a new way of working rather than just a mix of existing options, BT's principal innovation partner Nicola Millard told the event. She said that its problems include proximity bias, such as those attending meetings remotely being unable to participate fully and the risk that 'out of sight, out of mind' management neglects remote workers.

"We're going to see some horrible hybrids emerge in the next 12 to 18 months," she said. "The key is to learn from our mistakes and get better at doing it, rather than revert back to 'it didn't work, let's go back to where we were before the pandemic'."

Millard added that hybrid working can benefit from more structured processes so remote staff working at a range of times are on the same footing as those in the office during normal hours. This can include setting tasks that generate something in writing, rather than a meeting.

Managers can learn to network digitally, although she said that some miss the ability to see how things are going by walking around the office: "Senior leaders have been really struggling," she said.

But she said that an organisation whose staff can work from anywhere should enjoy a range of benefits.

These include less absenteeism and better employee retention, particularly for those returning from maternity or caring leave, as well as better customer service and improved productivity, including as a result of less travel. Offices should be able to shrink in size, which along with reduced travel should cut financial and environmental costs.



"The key is to learn from our mistakes and get better at doing it, rather than revert back to where we were before the pandemic"

Nicola Millard,
BT

Digital Office to support telecare transition



Scottish local authorities are receiving guidance on how to maintain and improve telecare services as the UK withdraws analogue telephony over the next four years, the event heard. No new analogue telephony services will be introduced after September 2023 and existing ones will be switched off in December 2025. However, telecoms providers are already shifting some customers to digital broadband-only options, which can cut them off from telecare services.

Martyn Wallace, whose Digital Office for Scottish Local Government has recently

published a guide to digital telecare, said that a national business case for digital telecare has just been agreed: "We're using that to go back to the Scottish Government to look for funding to help support potentially purchasing one collaborative alarm receiving centre platform for Scotland that all councils can use," he said.

Currently, there are 28 alarm receiving centres at different levels of technological development.

Digital Office for Scottish Local Government telecare work: bit.ly/3r7rQ1o

Millard added: "From a diversity and inclusion perspective, the digital workplace is fantastic," including for those on the autistic spectrum who find it difficult to work in a physical office and people in wheelchairs who, during the pandemic, have been able to attend events on an equal basis.

She said that offices will still have a role, as about 30% struggle with remote working. This group often includes younger people who are more likely to lack space at home to work and appreciate office life, although she added that many also look for flexibility in the way they work.

Recording of session: bit.ly/3lb519s

Shetland gains from virtual events and remote working

The pandemic has allowed staff at Shetland Islands Council to attend more events as these have moved online, its executive manager for ICT told a panel session.

Susan Msalila said the council had previously only been able to let staff attend the most valuable events, given it typically required three days out of the office and cost hundreds of pounds to attend something lasting a day. "Before the pandemic, although events purported to be inclusive and purported to be able to attend virtually, it really didn't work," she said.

But with everyone moving to remote access, Shetland staff have taken part in training, conferences and

webinars on an equal footing to others: "That's been a huge benefit."

Shetland has been trying to encourage the adoption of remote working for a long time, but before Covid-19 some staff and managers were reluctant. "The pandemic has turned that on its head," Msalila said. She has staff working on three of Shetland's 10 inhabited islands, and some would have been cut off by disruption to ferry services: "The fact they were able to work from home made a huge difference to them," she said, adding that she has been working from her sitting room at home since March last year.

It has also helped staff retention, with one analyst currently working from Athens where he returned to look after his parents during the pandemic, although the council is not generally keen to recruit people who do not want to move to Shetland.

Shifting services online has also helped schools, many of which have very few pupils, to collaborate digitally with each other and with citizens, such as by holding virtual parents' evenings. "Folk are so much more comfortable working online," as a result of Covid-19, Msalila said.

Aberdeen City Council helped to support virtual education by issuing 24,000 Chromebooks, its chief officer for digital and technology Steve Roud told the session. But this led to network capacity problems at schools when pupils returned to classrooms with their devices, he added.

Recording of session: bit.ly/310Fad0

Socitm works on benchmarking, identity and care

Socitm Improve's benchmarking scores of councils for technology innovation have improved during the pandemic, its technical consultant Matthew Fraser told the event. The service, which has involved 19 Scottish local authorities over the last decade, is planning to start a Scottish group on benchmarking user satisfaction early next year.

The UK needs a national digital identity solution, Socitm argues in new report announced at Share Scotland, to provide people-centred solutions and support preventative rather than crisis-driven work. It will need to work on distributed basis, place the citizen in control, be built in a modular fashion and make provision for the digitally vulnerable.

Local authorities could use data generated by devices to support care clients by sending them personalised messages, such as to remind them to take medicines or to warn about cold weather, Socitm Advisory's client services director Jerry Hall told the event. The service is working with authorities including South Ayrshire Council on making telecare services more innovative.

Socitm Improve benchmarking: bit.ly/3r6BuBB

Digital identity report: bit.ly/3xkp6Po

Technology enabled care white paper: bit.ly/3CNLeTn



"Before the pandemic, although events purported to be inclusive and purported to be able to attend virtually, it really didn't work"

Susan Msalila,
Shetland Islands Council



Nations and regions news

Scotland

Aberdeen City Council will develop digital music education services, including the use of video lessons and an online site for each instrumental team, which it set up during the pandemic.

bit.ly/3oSMTC2

Wales

Swansea Council has joined **Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council** in requiring potential suppliers to have either Cyber Essentials certification or to be a member of the Cyber Resilience Centre for Wales.

bit.ly/3oRsfsR

Northern Ireland

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has allocated money to 39 projects voted for by citizens through an online participatory budget system funded by the Community Foundation Northern Ireland.

bit.ly/3nR9WhF

Republic of Ireland

The Local Government Management Agency, on behalf of the republic's 31 local authorities, has chosen Civica's Spydus library management platform to support 330 branch and 29 mobile libraries.

bit.ly/30V1zZs

North-east England

Sunderland City Council has signed a 20 year contract for 5G mobile infrastructure with BAI Communications, as part of its work to become a smart city.

bit.ly/30O8hAs

Yorkshire and the Humber

Rotherham Council, with the city's NHS clinical commissioning group, has launched a free digital counselling and support service for children and young people aged between 11 and 25.

bit.ly/3oTccQ1

North-west England

Knowsley Council, Liverpool City Council and **Wirral Council** are planning to use data and algorithms to find people who may benefit from social care support, which will be offered through GPs.

bit.ly/2Za5EZ0

West Midlands

Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership, along with seven local authorities, has launched an interactive website that details the area's local development plans.

bit.ly/3nETINW

East of England

Tendring District Council in Essex says that data visualisation helped it cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, including by setting up dashboards on service performance.

bit.ly/3DIbK1J

South-east England

Epping Forest District Council will provide residents of more than 6,500 homes that it manages with a new self-service portal, as well as allowing housing staff to work remotely.

bit.ly/3xetZts

South-west England

North Devon Council and **Torrige District Council** have jointly launched Dscvr, an app to showcase businesses, events and promotions in northern Devon.

bit.ly/3r06wLu

London

Bromley Council has implemented a new waste reporting service for citizens, designed by SocietyWorks, that integrates directly with its contractor's systems.

bit.ly/3kUPx9y

Local and national event calendar

November 2021		
Date	Event	Location
30 th	Share Local – Midlands	Virtual
December 2021		
3 rd	Share Local – South-west	Virtual
9 th	Leadership Academy Alumni 2021	
January 2022		
28 th	Share Local – Scotland	Virtual
February 2022		
9 th	Share Local – Yorkshire & Humber	Hybrid
11 th	Share Local – North-west	
18 th	Share Local – North-east	Virtual
22 nd	Share Local – East	
23 rd	Share Local – Northern Ireland	
25 th	Share Local – London & South-east	Hybrid



Full details of all our events can be found online at: socitm.net/events



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8a Basset Court,
Northampton,
NN4 5EZ

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Editor:
SA Mathieson

Editorial advisors:
Martin Ferguson
David Ogden

Production & design:
Magdalena Werner
Benjamin Hughes

Contact us:

Advertising: hello@socitm.net
Feedback: inourview@socitm.net
General enquiries: 01604 709456

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In a world that needs to work differently

**Socitm Advisory are *the* proven experts
trusted by the Public Sector**



Driving **modernisation**
in the public sector through
delivering **independent,**
expert consultancy and
innovative advice in
technology change

Bringing inspiration to public services

In the last 6 years, Socitm Advisory have provided **£1.1m** to our sister membership organisation: Socitm. This has been re-invested into Local Government initiatives, training and development and products and services.