

Briefing

# Transformation or evolution?

What's right for local government

October 2022



# Introduction

## Where will technology evolve next?

The word 'transformation' is often used for service design projects within public sector organisations, but is that right? Should the description be upgraded to something more embracing?

An 'evolution' of process suggests optimising the delivery of services as something which is continual. It's embedded within the culture of an organisation and everyone has it front of mind.

This briefing from our partners **SS&C Blue Prism** explores the idea further, featuring an authority they have worked with to demonstrate this while also considering where technology for local government will go next.



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## In which direction does the evolution of local government technology go next?

I choose the word evolution carefully, as I think local government should position change as a perpetual state and not a specific project. I was speaking to a senior council executive who tried moving his council away from the term 'transformation' but lost the battle with members who rather liked the word. I agree with him wholeheartedly in that transformation, to me, suggests a temporary period. It's also a word that can be loaded with negative connotations to those for whom transformation is there to support, namely the officers. We have seen many years and many phases of transformation and I think, if we're truthful, many of these have left an impression of disruption, upheaval and cost; it hasn't always lived up to its promises. Much better, then, to position change as an evolution – something that isn't a project and is rather part of the organisational DNA, which is done by and to everyone within the organisation.

This is also necessary because we are now in a world of continual change, whether that's legislative, societal and/or technological. Shifts in demand and need are happening so frequently that a static organisation and large-scale projects cannot keep pace.



## So, what does the evolution of local government look like?

The old saying tells us that if we want evidence of the future, look to the past. In many ways, this holds true. For all the large-scale system rationalisation projects – centralisations and decentralisations – the fact is, that technology-wise, local councils are not much better off than they were 10 or 15 years ago. Hundreds of line-of-business (LOB) applications, legacy technologies, mixed estate of cloud, on-premises, SaaS, browser-based systems, alongside all those spreadsheets and access databases that do all the real heavy lifting!

But if you look closely, there is a gradual change. As usual, it's not happening everywhere, but it will be soon.

That change is the increasing use of new technologies — not to replace those line-of-business applications, but to become the connective tissue between them. Whether the new technologies are joining up applications, data, or service user journeys, rather than focusing on the traditional business systems, this new breed prioritises business efficiencies, allowing councils to maximise their investment in traditional technologies *and* their people.

I often say that councils never get smaller, just bigger with more unused bits. This is in reference to the need for councils to continually address new services whilst needing to retain everything that's gone before.

Line-of-business applications are certainly improving and taking on board solutions to these 'connectivity' challenges, but the truth is that no council will be able to fully irradicate many of the legacy technologies they have. And it's not a technical issue but rather a matter of practicality; the 'rip out and replace' option is too (tick as appropriate reader):

- Expensive
- Risky
- Resource heavy
- Disruptive

Also, councils have always worked very differently from each other. Even when legislation and systems are the same, neighbouring councils will always find different ways of digitising the activity. This leads to a perpetual

state of workarounds and 'making do' in systems – often through no fault of the vendors. In turn, applications struggle to support the officers using them and they struggle to fully support the citizen, regardless of whether it's a simple transaction journey or something more complex. Applications need to properly join data to support and enable fully informed professional decisions.

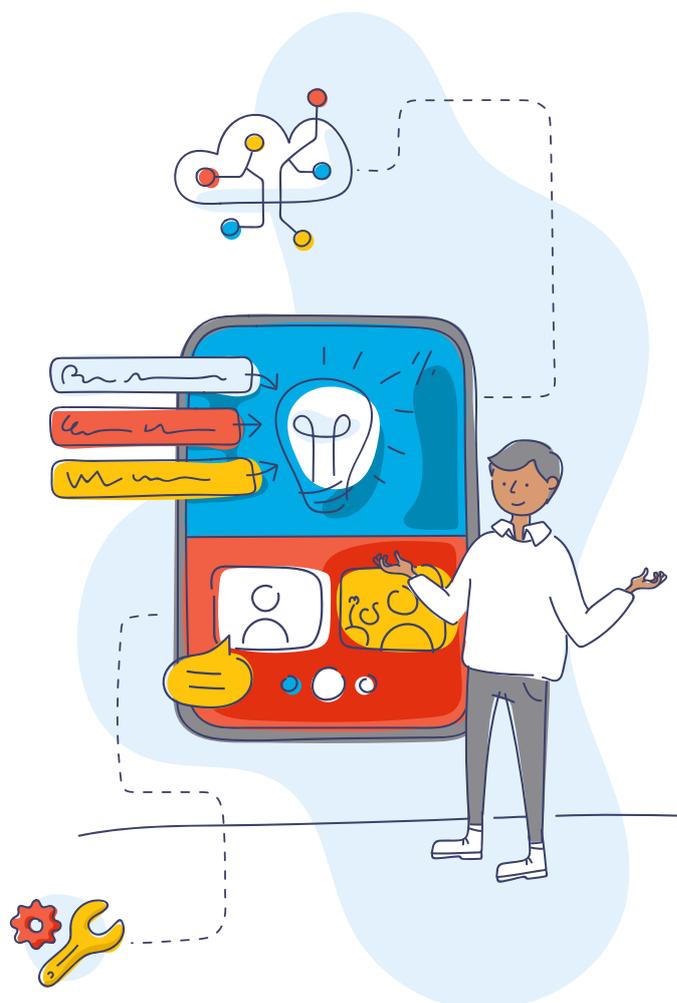
These new technologies are often not specific to local government because they don't address the legislative/citizen needs and, instead, address the organisational need. I mean new productivity tools beyond your standard 'office' type solutions – tools like intelligent automation, low-code, AI decision engines, data lakes etc that are agnostic of sector, or even business area, and are a tool to support a more structural change to how the organisation functions. Importantly this new breed of tools do not implement a rigid, unchanging way of working but rather support agility and flexibility. Tools that are able to evolve in exactly the same way that the needs of the council are. To remove the need to 'make do' within legacy systems and instead develop a digital foundation which better supports citizens and officers.

A great example is how Suffolk have automated the processing of welfare referrals from the police. Through the use of Blue Prism's intelligent automation platform, they were able to train a digital worker to read the emailed document, extract the relevant data and process it through the Social Care system. Receiving about 1,200 of these referrals a month, automation will save thousands of hours of social work time. More importantly, these referrals are processed within an hour now, where it may have taken 3-5 days at busy periods. This leads directly to better outcomes for the citizen. What's more, there was no business disruption and no change to existing systems or working practices! Less work for the professional. Better outcomes for the citizen. Win, win.

Another example is Caerphilly who, at the height of Covid-19, rapidly put in place an automation to process Free School Meals applications to ensure that no child in need went hungry. The common factor, again, was that systems and processes weren't changed but rather supplemented and made more efficient.

This example hints at another area of where need will drive the evolution, namely for the delivery of new services. As mentioned before, councils need to react and respond rapidly to changing need and demand. Procuring a new application to process a new service requirement isn't going to cut it; fortunately, the new breed of supporting technologies enables councils to react with much more agility. No one can confidently predict what changes are coming down the track, so these new tools must be adaptable, augmenting the more static LOB applications.

So, we are moving gradually into a world where councils need to consider how they best operate two types of technologies – those LOB applications alongside the 'connective' tools. Change is the only constant in local government and, by properly combining technologies, we can move away from the transformation we don't need to the state of continual evolution we do.



## About this briefing

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