

# Fixing the Plumbing

Principles of the Local Digital Declaration in action

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**UKAuthority**



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# 1. Foreword

## Local Digital Declaration – a force for good

**A**WS has been working with UK local authorities for nearly a decade and in that time, we've been fortunate enough to be involved in some truly exciting and impactful projects. This paper highlights some of those projects within the context of the Local Digital Declaration.

MHCLG's Local Digital Collaboration Unit is leading an ever-growing Local Digital community working together to deliver more user-centred, cost effective local public services through open, collaborative and reusable work.

### Heart of the community

At the heart of this community lies the Local Digital Declaration itself and its underpinning five core principles. As the number of local authorities signing up to the declaration continues to grow I am delighted to read in this report how AWS customers have taken the principles to heart and embedded them into their own working practice – delivering

truly excellent results and building a foundation for innovation into the future.

The declaration complements the Government's Cloud First policy and it is encouraging to see our customers harnessing the power of cloud to transform local services as part of the effort.



Kris Burtwistle, UK&I Local Government Lead, Amazon Web Services



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Councils on the journey to cloud and committed to the Local Digital Declaration now have the tools, the framework and the opportunity to reinvent their approach to people, process, technology and, perhaps most importantly, culture.

Indeed, cultural change is a key part of the declaration - Principle Five - requiring strong and visionary leadership to see the art of the possible in a new digital world and to take people across the organisation with the digital pioneers on this journey.

### Customer obsession at the core

Amazon itself operates under a set of fourteen leadership principles, but at the core of this - number one on the list - is customer obsession.



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Amazon's mission is to be the world's most customer centric company. So in all things, we start with the customer and work backwards. In fact, roughly 90-95% of our roadmap is driven by what our customers tell us matters to them. In this, we see a strong synergy with the aims of the Local Digital Declaration and we look forward to continuing our partnerships with local authorities to meet the needs of their organisations and their citizens.

To help our customers build excellent services on AWS platforms we've published a number of papers giving guidance on architectural best practice. These resonate closely with the declaration principles of working to open standards, with flexible, modular building blocks and robust security and governance controls.

To further support government reuse and collaboration, we've gathered examples of government and public sector produced open code, tools, and standards that reformers in the public sector can immediately use in a new resource: [Open Government Solutions](#).

[Open Government Solutions](#) points to open source and public resources published by government agencies and other public sector organisations around the world. Reusing what others have found to work enables governments to realize the benefits of open source solutions, such as increased speed and agility, reduced costs, and improved efficiency.

This paper with UKAuthority sets out to highlight some of the successes our customers have achieved through adopting the Local Digital Declaration principles. We commend and celebrate their success today and look forward to sharing further stories as our customers deliver exciting new digital services for their citizens.

**If you'd like to know more about what we do and how we could help to achieve some of your business and technical goals, please visit our [website](#) or reach out to me and my team: [burtwist@amazon.co.uk](mailto:burtwist@amazon.co.uk)**



## 2. Fixing the plumbing

Local government received a shot of adrenaline for its digital transformation efforts in the summer of 2018

**T**wo years old now, the Local Digital Unit in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published the [Local Digital Declaration](https://localdigital.gov.uk/declaration/)<sup>1</sup>, an affirmation of the ambition for local public services that it put together with the Government Digital Service (GDS), a collection of local authorities and sector organisations including public sector IT association Socitm.

It reflects MHCLG's intent to play a leadership role, working with councils rather than dictating an approach to the development of common patterns and digital solutions that can be reused across local government. It is aimed at fostering an increase in collaboration, and pushing digital towards the centre of decision making in local authorities.

The declaration is part of a programme that incorporates a number of elements, including financial support for pilot projects with the potential to be widely replicated and adapted. Other features include the sharing of what has been learned, the continuous improvement of cyber security, and encouraging the digital workforce to share ideas and engage in communities of practice.



It is underpinned by five principles, in an effort to achieve cultural and technology shifts throughout the sector. More than 40 organisations were originally involved in their creation and 180 organisations have now signed up to them.

### The five principles

- 01.** *We will go even further to redesign our services around the needs of the people using them. This means continuing to prioritise citizen and user needs above professional, organisational and technological silos.*
- 02.** *We will 'fix our plumbing' to break our dependence on inflexible and expensive technology that doesn't join up effectively. This means insisting on modular building blocks for the IT we rely on, and open standards to give a common structure to the data we create.*
- 03.** *We will design safe, secure and useful ways of sharing information to build trust among our partners and citizens, to better support the most vulnerable members of our communities, and to target our resources more effectively.*
- 04.** *We will demonstrate digital leadership, creating the conditions for genuine organisational transformation to happen, and challenging all those we work with to embrace this Local Digital Declaration.*
- 05.** *We will embed an open culture that values, incentivises and expects digital ways of working from every member of our workforce. This means working in the open wherever we can, sharing our plans and experience, working collaboratively with other organisations, and reusing good practice.*

1. <https://localdigital.gov.uk/declaration/>

Nearly two years after the publication of the declaration the feedback from the signatories has been positive, with reports of projects in which it is clearly making a positive difference.

The research for this paper involved a series of conversations with digital leaders in local government that yielded generally positive comments on how the declaration has influenced thinking in the sector.

The declaration has been described as a “reinvigoration”, providing a new sense of mission and confidence. With exactly 100 councils in England having partnered on at least one of the projects supported by funding, it appears to have provided fresh momentum, inspiring many councils to experiment with digital projects.

A widely held view emerged from the conversations that the declaration has apparently achieved the right balance in providing guidance without being over-prescriptive. It reflects the [GDS Government Design Principles](#)<sup>2</sup> and complements the [Local Government Digital Service Standard](#)<sup>3</sup> developed by the LocalGov Digital practitioners’ group. The declaration has responded to a need for principles similar to those created for central government by GDS, but without creating an equivalent body for local government, for which there was no widespread demand.

One of its strengths has been the emphasis on services and culture presented in non-technical

language, which has made it understandable to senior leaders and heads of other services, and to local politicians whose support is often crucial to

providing the backing for investment and transformation plans.

This has made it easier to draw them into discussions, helping to highlight some fundamental learnings from past digital initiatives, and helping to articulate in a concise form how to do things

differently. In turn, some digital teams feel it has helped to increase the standing of the work they are doing inside their organisations.

It has also contributed to breaking down the ‘not invented here’ syndrome that is sometimes evident, making senior officials more open to the idea of picking up solutions that have been tried and tested by other authorities. The argument in favour of this has been around for years, but the fact that MHCLG has got behind it, and that the principles leave scope for solutions to be adapted rather than directly replicated, has given it more weight.

There is also a view that it encouraged councils to be more outward looking in discussing digital services with their employees and residents. While they may not be making a direct reference to the declaration, its use of everyday language and emphasis on an open culture and trust does a lot to frame the discussions in terms that are widely understood, and encourages others to provide input on the ambitions.

In addition, it has fostered collaborations between authorities, sometimes on a regional scale. It added to the momentum that led to the setting up of the [London Office of Technology and Innovation](#), and is encouraging small groups of councils to work together with the scope to go beyond the initial projects. Indeed, in the spring of 2020 a fourth round of funding is looking to take forward discovery projects from the previous rounds, building further on thriving collaborations.

*“The Local Digital Declaration enables us to supercharge some of the networks we have and use them with a new sense of momentum, so CIOs are talking a common language beyond that of contract management and joint procurement. It has really jolted conversations around service design and the reshaping of digital services.”*

Theo Blackwell, Chief Digital Officer, Greater London Authority



2. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/government-design-principles>

3. <https://localgov.digital/service-standard>

There have also reportedly been signs of the declaration influencing the thinking of some IT suppliers, who are taking note of the principles and being ready to talk with councils about how they can be put into practice – especially in the use of modular building blocks and open standards. It involves a shift in mindset for some of the legacy suppliers, but a few are seeing it as the future direction of the market.

Meanwhile a number of leading authorities have worked hard to ensure that the declaration influences everything they do in the digital field - for example, the London Borough of Hackney and the regional shared IT service, LGSS. As with all new initiatives there are of course early adopters and those who follow, but overall it is proving its value as a tool for gaining digital traction within an organisation.

There have also been different interpretations of what it means in practice to be user-centric or abide by an open culture, and warnings that it requires careful thought about the relationship between technology, service delivery and customer service teams.

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*“At LGSS the declaration has legitimised a lot of work we were doing. It’s some other voice speaking the same language we have used with heads of service, and helped us point to other organisations with record of success. And it is written in normal language, not from an IT point of view, about how to build great services for people.”*

Dan Blundell, Digital Technologies Manager, LGSS

Designing services around the declaration involves taking account of all three and ensuring that they are focused on the customer experience. This will be more complex if any of the operations are outsourced, and it will be easier for a council if it has control of all the levers to develop and manage solutions.

Overall the declaration has had a positive impact, and momentum will grow as the next round of funding for pilot projects from the MHCLG Local Digital team maintains the emphasis on adhering to the principles.

The core strength is that the declaration was developed by a collection of people and organisations, with a strong influence from within local government, rather than being a diktat from the centre.

Matthew Cain, head of digital at Hackney Council, sums it up with the observation: “It means the Local Digital Declaration has the chance for a deeper and longer lasting impact than previous initiatives.”



# 3. Local digital collaboration

MHCLG's Local Digital team is building a nation-wide community

**The [Local Digital Declaration](#) is part of a programme under which MHCLG's Local Digital team is building a community with organisations aiming to develop local public services through a collaborative approach, with an emphasis on solutions that are open and reusable.**

MHCLG has used the declaration to draw local authorities together, and in 2018 launched a £7.5 million funding round for a series of pilot projects dealing with specific challenges for local government – with the proviso that each should involve more than one local authority. This was followed by a second stage of funding in September 2019 for the projects that showed the most promise, and a call for a further round for new proposals, applications for which closed in the same month. A fourth round was launched in January 2020.

The emphasis has been on fundamentals - [#FixThePlumbing](#) - rather than exploring emerging govtech. The first round helped to improve the understanding of issues affecting core services, as well as building the opportunity for councils to replace some legacy systems with solutions better suited to the new challenges of a digital world. Among the examples in the group to receive a second round of funding are the project involving Stockport, Leeds and Manchester to provide children's social workers with better family context information to speed up their decision making; and Southwark, Hackney, the Greater London Authority and Surrey Heath working on a user-centred digital planning application system.

The Local Digital Collaboration Unit is working on 'productising' learnings so they can be easily replicated

and adapted in other councils, and encouraging a more modular approach to how services are built and compiled. This includes encouraging councils to work in the open and share their learnings and help open up the market to a wider range of SMEs.

The Local Digital Fund awarded grants to seven new projects in October 2019, bringing the total number of collaborative digital projects funded to 23 since September 2018. Exactly 100 councils in England have partnered on at least one of these funded projects. The fund has also been used to deliver digital training to over 1000 council employees. A fourth round of funding (spring 2020) aimed to further boost momentum by providing support for projects that received backing under rounds two and three. Six councils - Southwark, Lambeth, Greenwich, Buckinghamshire, Croydon and Barnsley – [won shares of £1.2m for the further development of such projects](#).

The Local Digital programme is also paying attention to relevant cyber security and resilience issues – a weakness in some legacy infrastructures that use old software that is no longer supported – and retaining a focus on the user experience. In March 2020 it [began work on a pre-discovery](#) as a first step towards supporting councils on this front.

The team has three key ambitions for the long term: building the capability to create more user designed services, iterated products and better communications between teams; a different software landscape with more reuse and adaptability; and councils breaking away from long term contracts for end-to-end services, taking opportunities for new technologies to provide new services.

## Keep up to date with MHCLG's Local Digital team

**Web:** Visit <https://localdigital.gov.uk/> to read more and sign up to the Declaration

**On Twitter:** Follow [@LDgovUK](#) [#LocalDigital](#) [#LocalDigitalFund](#)

**Sign up to the newsletter:** <https://localdigital.gov.uk/newsletter>

**Join the LocalGov Digital community:** <https://localgov.digital/membership>

## 4. Hackney drives value designing services around user need

**First principle:** *'We will go even further to redesign our services around the needs of the people using them. This means continuing to prioritise citizen and user needs above professional, organisational and technological silos.'*

**The experience of Hackney Council in meeting this first principle of the Local Digital Declaration – to go further redesigning services around the needs of people using them – has led to different ways of thinking and engagement between different groups in developing services.**

Matthew Cain, the council's head of digital and data, says that the declaration has led to a pluralistic approach: "There have been a number of conversations with other local authorities on technology engagement that were not initiated by IT teams to IT teams," he says. "It has been instances like housing people speaking to housing people about technology, which is a more powerful conversation.

"It means that you have the opportunity to embed changes in a more lasting fashion."

An example of the approach taken by Hackney has been its development of a service to support tenants with rent arrears. This began as a project to move away from using a legacy housing application to collect income, but collaboration with other housing services led to an understanding that some of the patterns of behaviour were a function of the way the software worked - which was not always the most functional way to collect rents from tenants.

This fed into a series of changes, such as using GOV.UK Notify to communicate with people as soon as they fell into arrears - but ensuring that the message was not uniform: the choice of language varies according to factors such as the level of arrears and awareness of any extenuating circumstance. This reflects that principle of designing the service to be relevant to user circumstances - which in turn will produce better

outcomes for residents and the council.

Cain says that this approach has required Hackney's housing staff to become confident in new ways of working with tenants and prioritising their work, and that there have been challenges in ensuring that the officers on the housing estates can see the same data as the central team.



**Matthew Cain, Head of Digital & Data, Hackney Council**

It was also the first project the council developed entirely in the cloud using the AWS platform. Working with AWS Advanced Consulting Partner, Made Tech, a containerised infrastructure was developed to simplify the way housing caseworkers access data. A web-based interface and visual tools were also developed to help staff resolve issues faster and save hundreds of hours by automating simple tasks.

Hackney uses AWS services throughout its digital architecture and can see the potential for building on this work to develop other services. For example, Cain points to one possibility being a new service for supporting customers facing court action over small payments by setting up a digital process to pay off a debt incrementally.

The council has also used the approach in designing new e-forms for its customer contact. It built a multi-disciplinary team including members from the 'meet and greet', contact centre and web teams, drawing on their combined experience of what worked for residents and any possible problems in the design.



The point was to understand how users would interact with the system, where support might be needed and to improve their journey through the process.

“The key is to focus on users rather than the technology,” says Cain, and this is feeding into Hackney’s strategy for fundamental change. This reflects elements of the council’s HackIT manifesto, which is based on four principles: make a start; learn through doing; understand its users; and build a multi-disciplinary team.

It has used this to further develop the online services on its website, with a redesign of content, improvements in the sign-on process and an increase in support for those who need it. This is helping it to improve the experience for vulnerable and stressed residents, reducing the time they need to get details changed, and providing savings estimated at over £100,000 for the first year.

Hackney’s experience points to local authorities developing a new approach to addressing their local challenges, bringing more people in at the early stage of defining a problem.

“It’s about ensuring we are looking across the whole system, not just maximising the power of technology and data to do things differently,” Cain says.

“Sometimes the solution is not more technology or more complex software or extra staff with smartphones; sometimes it will be about a different way of providing a service.

“Some of the most interesting and powerful work in the sector is taking place where a local authority sees itself as a place-based convenor, brings together residents with voluntary organisations, SMEs and the local skills base, and comes up with a clear problem definition. It can then run multiple experiments to deal with that problem.”

Cain relates this back to the idea of a more pluralistic approach to designing services, and the need for a new mindset in the organisation.

“For some of our deepest problems there is not one

solution,” he says. “Over the next three to five years, if we are to run financially sustainable organisations, we need to be confident in talking to our residents about how our challenges have multiple root causes, do not have a single owner and will therefore have multiple responses.

“We need to be effective as organisations in tackling those.”

Hackney has taken steps to promote the approach more widely by setting up an online library of its user research, encouraging other councils to also contribute what they have learned on relevant issues.

Cain said that it has been created to help the council to improve its understanding of its residents and to ensure that this collective knowledge base continues to grow rather than being confined to individual projects.

The library has been available through the [LocalGov Digital](https://research.localgov.digital/)<sup>1</sup> channel since mid-2019 and includes documents on different categories of research, including issues affecting council tenants and staff, customer accounts, user researchers in digital teams, planning applicants and community groups.

“By collecting user research in this way and making it publicly available it provides a transparent tool to make sure we are building incrementally and learning the right things from the right people,” Cain says.

He adds that if a council is serious about the declaration it has to align its customer proposition to service delivery and the work of technology teams. Part of it can be outsourced or insourced, but if there is a combination it needs careful planning, as hand-offs between outsourced and internal operations can be expensive.

Hackney’s preference for insourcing was a political decision that gave it more control, enabling that alignment of technology, service delivery and customer focus to design services around the user.



1. <https://research.localgov.digital/>

# 5. LGSS proves role of modular building blocks and open standards

*Second principle: 'We will 'fix our plumbing' to break our dependence on inflexible and expensive technology that doesn't join up effectively. This means insisting on modular building blocks for the IT we rely on, and open standards to give a common structure to the data we create.'*

**B**uilding solutions with reusable modules lies at the core of what the Local Government Shared Service (LGSS) does. Created by Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire County Councils in 2010, it has since taken on Milton Keynes Council as a third partner and is providing services for other local authorities, emergency services, arm's length management companies, schools and academies.



Dan Blundell, Digital Technologies Manager, LGSS

Dan Blundell, digital technologies manager for LGSS, says that the Local Digital Declaration has added weight to a lot of the work the organisation was already doing in developing services using modular components and open standards that could be easily replicated or adapted between its customers.

He says that instead of trying to provide a whole system for individual services, it looks at the capabilities needed – such as identity management – and either buys or builds that capability, ensuring that it conforms to open standards principles, and integrates into the service. And, perhaps most importantly, is reusable.

It has used AWS technology in a number of its applications, such as Amazon Rekognition for scanning images. This has been applied to number plate recognition by manual operatives, who can take pictures and process a number through a mobile app – the tool can identify specific words or details from a document to provide a level of validation for

a process. The team is working on extending its use for scanning documents in processes such as housing and checking for student exemption certificates in revenues and benefits.

"There's not an off-the-shelf service that checks for the certificate. It's quite a specific use case, but it's a document recognition capability, where we can train it to recognise a certain type of document," Blundell says. "There are two levels of checks. One is whether it is a valid exemption certificate, the other to match a specific piece of data."

It has taken a similar approach with identity management, with a choice of two solutions that can be dropped into different services - both of which have been chosen because they come with good support for ensuring interoperability with other systems. They also facilitate the migration of data simply through using the system rather than having to carry out a time-consuming operation to do so.

"As long as it integrates well, and has good import and export functionality so you can move data easily, that reduces the work we have to do," he says.

LGSS has also used the Amazon Connect cloud-based telephony system [to build virtual contact centres for its clients](#). With no setup fee and the need only to pay for calls received, it offers a fast and low-cost way to roll out flexible working – no need to install PBX and rows of desks. In the first instance Connect was set up in four weeks from project initiation, enabling staff to work from any location through their web browser rather than travelling on-site. This provides a significant element of resilience planning for an organisation, helping to keep the



contact centre active if the physical office is knocked out of action, and provides the scope for automated transactions.

The service was initially developed for Horsham District Council over a period of four weeks, and has now been replicated for Milton Keynes and within the library service at Cambridgeshire.

Again, it has been a case of using the capabilities of the system as parts of a service, with the potential to use only the elements required by one of the customer organisations.

The original build for Horsham – which is in West Sussex rather than the East Midlands region – was all done remotely.

“It was the whole thing of not having to send a field engineer team, but just taking a technology, tweaking it, using a standard protocol, and reusing it,” Blundell says. “You can effectively copy and paste all you’ve done or build more authorities into the same set-up if you want.”

The organisation has classified a series of digital capabilities that are all reusable, taking in user management, an identity service, location service, notifications, then case, file and business services. These can be built into processes such as managing waste permits, internal expenses and Blue Badge applications.

LGSS has developed its own Blue Badge management solution which the three partners are using. It includes an identity assurance module that has been used across other applications, carrying out a soft credit check to save people who choose to use it from uploading any documentation as proof of identity or address. It runs under a shared contract that uses

volume pricing, which saves the authorities from procuring or paying separately, and gives them a significantly reduced cost.

Similarly, it has used the off-the-shelf, plug-in Amazon Simple Notification Service and AWS cloud storage within some of its applications.

Blundell adds that a big advantage of the LGSS approach

is that it can fill the gap when the market does not quite meet the customer’s need.

“For places where market does not meet need or there is not enough competition for good products, we are able to build examples of services which we need,” he says.

Blundell adds that a big advantage to this approach is that it helps to reduce the cost of a change in a migration to a new system – a factor that is sometimes underestimated.

“A big part of the Local Digital Declaration is about reducing the cost of change. One of the big inhibitors for local authorities to enact any kind of change is the cost of migration and interoperability, which can both be mitigated with this approach.”

## Hear more

Blundell outlines how LGSS improved its ability to make rapid changes across its digital services and increased its operational efficiency by moving from an on-premises infrastructure to the AWS Cloud. He flags the on-demand scalability that enables LGSS to tackle urgent and fluctuating demands of its customers, such as road closures and the school admissions season.



## 6. Useful things with data in London

**Third principle:** *'We will design safe, secure and useful ways of sharing information to build trust among our partners and citizens, to better support the most vulnerable members of our communities, and to target our resources more effectively.'*

**Secure information sharing has long been on the agenda of most local authorities, but initiatives in London are among those providing a lead for a more ambitious approach that extends the scope of agencies involved and takes it into new areas.**

The Greater London Authority (GLA) is working with the Open Data Institute on the next iteration of the [London Datastore](#)<sup>1</sup>, looking beyond open data towards an environment in which more sensitive data can be shared securely for analysis and value creation. During 2019 the GLA expanded its data to include work on air quality with the Turing Institute, tree canopy cover and cultural infrastructure. Data collaborations using open and secure data for a growing suite of 'digital twins' include the Infrastructure Map, London's underground assets, economic growth simulation and a reform of planning data.

The GLA was also instrumental in the recent creation of the [London Office of Technology and Innovation \(LOTI\)](#)<sup>2</sup>, operating within the London Councils, which has made information sharing one of the focus areas for its early work.

LOTI incorporates the [GLA's Borough Data Partnership](#)<sup>3</sup>, which brings together London's local authorities in the city to collaborate in organising, structuring and sharing data and the [City Data Analytics Programme](#)<sup>4</sup>, a virtual hub for data collaborations between public service organisations.

The GLA has adopted the [Information Sharing Gateway](#)<sup>5</sup> to share data in a safe, ethical and secure

manner to use it in tackling big social and public services challenges. This moves London towards a more standardised approach to information governance across London's boroughs, assisted by standard templates for agreements for specific purposes.



**Theo Blackwell, Chief Digital Officer, GLA**

Theo Blackwell, chief digital officer for the GLA, says that this represents real progress in information sharing, with 15 of London's boroughs involved in LOTI's core founding group informing work with all 32 boroughs.

He adds that a benefit from the Local Digital Declaration could be in shaping a more consistent and confident approach to information sharing. People have different understandings of existing legislation, including the Digital Economy Act and General Data Protection Regulation, which sometimes leads to failures in information governance. The declaration could provide the stronger understanding more widely, and the confidence at senior level in organisations to ensure there is political backing for wider sharing.

Camden Council has provided an example of their approach stemming from the declaration and their own data enabled organisation vision of being open and bringing data together to improve lives and deliver better services.

1. <https://data.london.gov.uk/>

2. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/who-we-are/london-office-technology-and-innovation-loti>

3. <https://data.london.gov.uk/borough-partnership/>

4. <https://data.london.gov.uk/city-data-analytics-programme/>

5. <https://www.informationsharinggateway.org.uk/about>



**Sudip Trivedi, Head of Data & Analytics, Camden Council**

Sudip Trivedi, the council's head of data and analytics, says their approach was designed for collaboration and that they currently bring together data for various purposes in order to improve services or outcomes - for example, they are joining together social care data for reporting

SALT (short and long term) statutory returns in a way that can be reused to improve performance and apply an early intervention approach to services. They are also using data as part of the council's new approach to housing and the Camden Landlord Service, which aims to apply whole system approach to housing service.

Camden has a number of building blocks around its use of data that it intends to build upon, including its work with AWS implementing a data lake and building on their previous work around a local data store, [Camden Open Data](#)<sup>6</sup>.

Camden is also borough lead for the information sharing framework workstream of LOTI and is working alongside the GLA. The London Fire Service is currently seeking buy-in from all 15 boroughs in the workstream to agree to an information sharing framework approach.

Trivedi says that a crucial element of this is working towards an approach that can be shared to avoid duplication of effort. Elements of this are likely to be in how organisations anonymise data (if necessary) and ensuring the shared data is used for specific purposes in a secure and ethical manner.

Blackwell says the next step will be working with the [Open Data Institute](#)<sup>7</sup> on how the architecture of the London Datastore needs to evolve and what services it should provide over the next decade. It will require a strengthened remit as it supports the authority's work in strategic analysis, providing valuable input into policy on issues such as

reducing violent crime, improving air quality and reducing congestion.

He also points to the long-term success in data sharing being likely to arise from meaningful individual use case projects which show demonstrable worth to citizens. Information sharing will be judged by its outcomes for the public rather than the structures and strategy on which it is based.

Another significant initiative emerging towards the end of 2019 is LOTI's launch of the [City Tools: London](#)<sup>8</sup> interactive dashboard, mapping the digital technologies, contracts and skills in place across the majority of the city's boroughs.

Collectively, boroughs and the city spend over £14 billion a year delivering their services. The tool includes a procurement analysis from 22 boroughs and open data from all 32 and the City of London, giving details of frontline and corporate systems, manufacturers and unique suppliers. The aim is to help users see which boroughs are using a particular system, all the systems in use by a specific borough and in which service areas, and to see opportunities for collaboration and shared procurement.

[At the time of the launch](#) LOTI director Eddie Copeland commented: "Boroughs will now have much richer information about how their technology compares to their peers', making it easier to share their knowledge and expertise with each other, and look for areas where they can work together."



6. <https://opendata.camden.gov.uk/>

7. <https://theodi.org/article/discovering-the-future-of-the-london-datastore/>

8. <http://loti.london/citytools/>

# 7. Leadership drives transformation in Aylesbury Vale

**Fourth principle:** *'We will demonstrate digital leadership, creating the conditions for genuine organisational transformation to happen, and challenging all those we work with to embrace this Local Digital Declaration.'*

**A**ylesbury Vale District Council pushed up its profile in recent years as one of local government's digital pioneers, not just with the adoption of new technology but with a widespread restructuring and change of mindset in the workforce.

Although the authority merged with others into a unitary for Buckinghamshire in April 2020, it left a legacy as an exemplar in how to harness the Local Digital Declaration.



**Andrew Grant, former Chief Executive, Aylesbury Vale District Council**

The council made headlines in 2017 when it became the first to develop a skill for the Amazon Alexa voice activated personal assistant – [in this case for information on various services](#)<sup>1</sup> – and digital technology was central to its adoption of a more [commercial business](#)

[model](#)<sup>2</sup>. Former chief executive Andrew Grant explained at the time that new digital offerings can open up new business options for councils, and brighten their long term financial prospects.

This transformation was underpinned by a Connected Knowledge strategy in which AWS technology has played a significant role. As the council moved away from in-house systems to the cloud, also migrating to a virtual desktop environment, it used AWS servers under its virtual tenancy. It also drew on AWS expertise for testing the tone and accents of non-native English speakers

in developing its voice activated processes.

Maryvonne Hassall, the council's IT strategy manager, says that former chief executive Grant's appreciation of what could be done with digital services made a big difference. He provided a style of leadership that continually questioned how processes were working and whether they matched the expectations of digitally savvy customers.



**Maryvonne Hassall, IT Strategy Manager, Aylesbury Vale District Council**

He was ready to engage in discussions, both inside and outside the council, specifically focused on digital, and this helped to shift the thinking throughout its management teams and contributed to winning political support for the change.

The experience involved a handful of factors that helped to create the conditions for the organisational transformation.

One was in emphasising the financial pressures that are threatening the long-term sustainability of many local authorities. This is creating a situation whereby, despite 'salami slicing' of services and the efforts to find efficiency gains, they will not be in a position to serve their communities in the long term unless they adopt a radically different approach to their business.

Making this case clearly can provide the trigger for transformation, extending from the use of digital

1. <https://www.ukauthority.com/articles/aylesbury-vale-council-launches-amazon-alexa-skill>

2. <https://www.ukauthority.com/articles/aylesbury-vale-gets-entrepreneurial-with-digital>

tech to how a council utilises its people, property and assets, how it interacts with the public, and how it structures its financial model. Leaders can argue that the need for sustainability creates the imperative for wholesale organisational change.

Aylesbury also placed a strong emphasis on changing the mindset within its workforce with a six-month programme of behavioural assessments. This involved all 450 staff and aimed to assess their ability – through face-to-face interviews, role playing and some online activities – to align their thinking with factors such as customer centricity, commercial priorities and team building.

The programme had the support of the unions, with the council preparing the framework and giving people time to prepare and make practice runs for their assessments.

Those showing positive results for eight out of 10 behaviours were rated as having the right mindset, and it led to changes among the staff. Some people moved on and others adopted different roles within the council.

It provided a learning process for both sides. Employees were encouraged to think about their capabilities and assess what sort of role they thought would be the best fit for them and how they wanted their careers to progress. It also encouraged them to think about how this related to what the council was aiming to do more widely, and helped to strengthen their belief in the aim. Understanding how their function relates to the bigger picture is an important element of getting the best from people.

The council learned a lot about capabilities, how people could work together, and how its operations could be restructured within the new business model. It created new job designs and confirmed the potential of millennial, digitally savvy staff members.

Indeed, the council anticipated a significant increase in the role millennials would play in the workforce, with the demographic expected to account for the majority of council staff within a few years. The strong message was that millennials wanted – or expected - to work within organisations that use technology in the same way in which they themselves do as consumers. This mindset can be aligned with that of a business or public authority that sees digital at the centre of what it does, and

has the ability to change as the demands on the organisation change.

Another was a restructuring that broke down traditional departmental silos and brought customer contact within one digital system, with a single view of the customer - with all teams directed at supporting the customer service operation. It promoted a more joined up view towards providing services for individuals, especially those needing special support, and encouraged a more ambitious approach to development new services.

This has been reflected in the use of Amazon Alexa, for example, for a clutch of information and transactional services, including council tax, recycling and waste collections.

Hassall says the approach is to ensure that people are thinking about how their jobs relate to the customer and the ways in which they can deliver real benefits.

Grant summed this up as a willingness to try things that may fail - but to fail fast while minimising any risk and making sure the political backing is in place. It emphasises one of the major requirements of leadership in local government: ensuring the key elected members understand the ambition and are ready to support it – to the point of expecting and forgiving some short-term setbacks on the way.

Aylesbury Vale's digital journey reflects the key points of the fourth principle of the Local Digital Declaration: creating the conditions and challenging people inside the organisation to embrace the change.



## 8. Working in a culture of openness

**Fifth principle:** *'We will embed an open culture that values, incentivises and expects digital ways of working from every member of our workforce. This means working in the open wherever we can, sharing our plans and experience, working collaboratively with other organisations, and reusing good practice.'*

**O**penness has two aspects - facing inwards to promote openness inside an authority, and outwards to share developments and knowledge with others.

Chorley Council has made a virtue of the former through a programme of 'tech talks' for its staff to ensure they understand its digital plans – and how they fit into the picture.

ICT and programme manager Emma Marshall says the initiative was launched in the autumn of 2018 to make people aware of what new technology is coming, how it will affect the way they work and why it is needed. The purpose is to make sure they understand and to take them along with the change rather than stirring up an idea it is being forced on them.

It is mandatory for staff affected by the introduction of a new system, bringing together everybody in the relevant teams for a session that usually lasts around an hour. It involves a digital inclusion officer to respond to any training issues that arise, and people from teams such as customer services and communications to raise any points relevant to them.

"We have an ambitious ICT strategy and have been making some ambitious changes in terms of how we operate and encourage

people to take up digital services," Marshall says. "It's necessary to explain to people why we want to make the changes and the benefits for them.

"It means the right people are there, if they have concerns they can raise them and if necessary we can address things. For example, one of the biggest concerns people had was around the use of headsets with health issues. It gave them the opportunity to air those and helped them feel they had been listened to."

In this case the ICT team was able to provide reassurance, but in others it can influence details of the implementation. The programme also involves gathering feedback as part of the roll out.

"We have 'super users' in each department," Marshall says. "Any technology we roll out goes through trailblazers as well as to ICT. They will use it for two



weeks, report any issues before we push it out to the whole organisation.

“They will be the people who are trained first and within each department will support other employees in adopting the technology.”

Marshall makes clear there are some cases in which it is not considered necessary to share the plans so widely – such as with the council’s use of AWS for its data back-up and disaster recovery planning – as there is no need to demand people’s time with something not related to their day-to-day jobs. But it remains an important element of Chorley’s approach to how it uses digital.

Hackney Council provides one of the leading examples of responding to the other element of the fifth principle, sharing its plans and experience through digital channels as it works on projects.

Its digital team regularly posts updates on projects on its [HackIT blog](#)<sup>1</sup>, providing ‘weeknotes’ on their progress to highlight specific issues and share its thinking on how to deal with them. During November 2019 it was focused on improvements in the council’s repairs hub for contact centre agents, getting into details such as how to flag up when a dwelling is a newbuild or any cautionary information.

It outlines how the team is approaching the issues, acknowledges any problems that arise and makes clear when it has made significant progress. This can keep Hackney’s own workforce up-to-date on developments, and shares the experience with other councils looking at similar projects of their own.

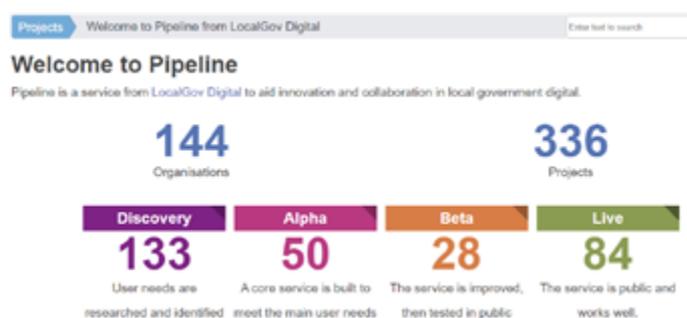
HackIT goes beyond the blogs with a collection of case studies, details of its teams and [guidance on how it works](#)<sup>2</sup>. This is designed to encourage collaboration with other parties, leading them into processes such as writing an API, securing the council’s systems and

data, and meeting data standards for systems that link to property and asset management data.

It gets into the management of contracts and finances, with guides on buying from the Digital Marketplace, deciding when to re-use, buy or build software, organising a software demo and evaluating a project.

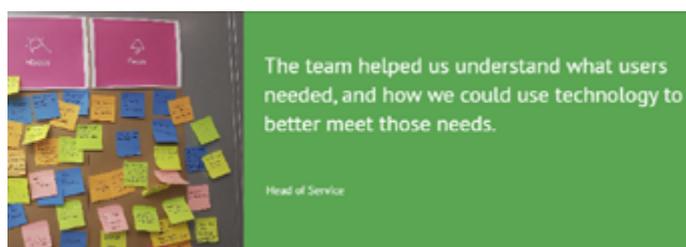
This includes a series of principles including ‘more doing, less planning’, ‘think big, act small’, ‘fail in a fortnight’, ‘share, don’t send’, ‘act ethically, always’ and, in line with the fifth principle of the Local Digital Declaration, ‘open up’.

This amounts to a resource that could be widely used in local government, and Hackney has taken its commitment to openness further with a lead role in the reactivation of the [Pipeline](#)<sup>3</sup> platform, hosted by the LocalGov Digital group, as a public repository for details of ongoing digital projects.



Pipeline has emerged as a significant resource: in February 2020 it contained details of 337 projects from 148 organisations, spread across those in discovery, alpha, beta and live stages. They include initiatives such as Hackney’s effort to build an ‘API factory’, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority’s common data model for children’s services and Maidstone’s council tax reminder texts.

An increasing number of local authorities are making use of such resources, indicating that there is a rising sentiment in favour of open working on digital projects. Councils such as Chorley and Hackney are helping to turn the fifth principle into a regular part of how they work.



1. <https://hackit.org.uk/>  
2. <https://hackit.org.uk/how-we-work/hackit-manifesto>  
3. <https://pipeline.localgov.digital/>

## 9. Conclusion: A framework for the future

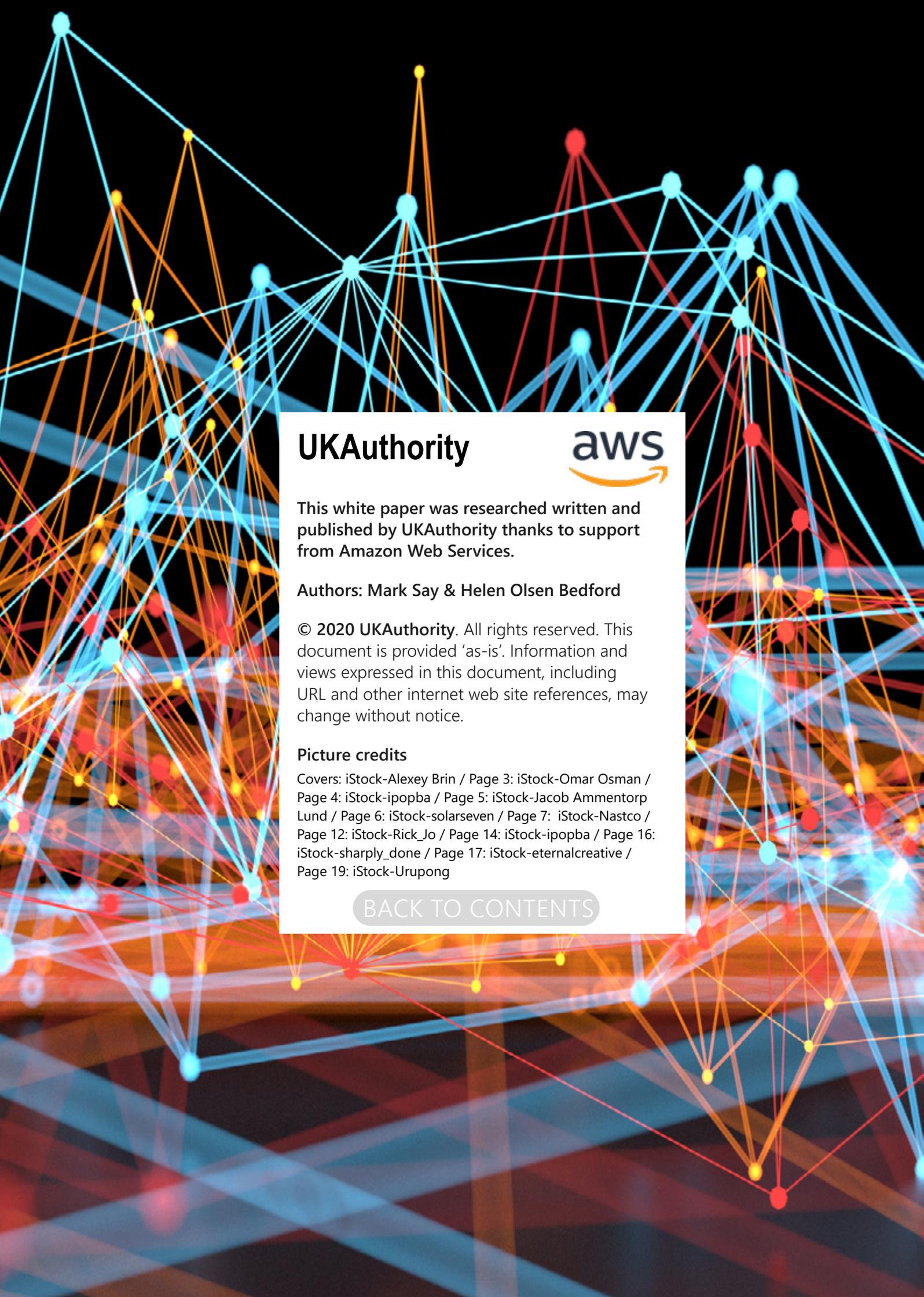
**T**he Local Digital Declaration is more than a statement of intent: it provides a framework within which local authorities can work to transform their services for more efficiencies, a better user experience and to contribute to their long-term sustainability.

While it has not yet been signed by a majority of councils, several have placed its principles to the front of thinking around new digital services. As the examples above show, they are beginning to produce tangible benefits, supporting the case for its adoption, and the momentum is growing for it to be used more widely. It is not just a case of signing up to the principles, but of taking them onboard as a foundation for the approach to service development from its earliest stages. People have to think about user needs, modular design, secure information sharing, working in the open and providing the leadership from the beginning. It has to be more than an expression of intent; it has to be ingrained into the mindset of local authorities.

This has to go beyond digital teams. The declaration will prove its full value when awareness spreads into the top ranks of local authorities, among the leaders of different service departments, and touches on the middle ranking officials who have scope to feed their ideas into service design. Its advocates need to talk to these people about the declaration, outline its five principles, relate them to the challenges that they face and encourage them to think about how these could be used to make their jobs easier – and to deliver better outcomes for the public.

It is about more than digital services; it is about the future of local public services. Digital is already a crucial element of almost every service delivered by local authorities, and making the digital part better is something that should be on the mind of everybody involved. The declaration provides a starting point to help them understand how to make this possible.





**UKAuthority**



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