Jisc executive briefing programme (EBP)

Briefing number 1

Digital response to coronavirus (COVID-19)

The main digital topic? COVID-19

With the new steering group established for the recently relaunched EBP it was not surprising that the main discussion centred on Covid-19 and the impact it is having on ways of working.

Indeed, our Steering Group was a virtual meeting of 17 senior leaders: CEOs, political leaders, CIOs and other professionals, which worked almost as well as a face-to-face workshop (though we all missed the lunch!). Almost overnight everyone has had to become a home worker.

New pressure on IT to deliver

A good deal of the COVID-19 impact on public services was at least initially seen to be about the technology:

- How robust is our public service technology infrastructure in being able to handle the massive growth in remote working?
- Can our IT teams and their technology partners have the capacity and capability to scale up their operations?
- Do staff have adequate internet connections at home, especially in more rural areas where broadband and mobile coverage is still sometimes limited?
- How familiar are staff with these new collaboration tools, given formal training and roll-out programmes have had to be accelerated?

In practice, none of these challenges appear to have stopped most local public services forging ahead with remote working for all. The IT teams and IT suppliers should take much credit for this, as well as those who backed investments over the last few years in digital services.

But there are other associated obstacles to face, especially for organisations that are behind in using new digital methods, over and above the technology itself. Some that the steering group considered in particular included:

- Decision-making protocols, audit trails and due diligence in remote working
- Business continuity and join up around services now physically distanced
- How will information risks be understood and managed?

For many public services, existing practices, policies, regulation and expectations will need to be reviewed and modernised to support true digital working. Whilst we can muddle through in the current crisis, it is also an opportunity to review for the future.
Never the same again

It is highly unlikely that when the COVID-19 crisis has passed, things will migrate back to how they were before.

For example, the steering group noted that where there might in the past have been hesitancy or reluctance to spend on technology to support digital operation, including from local politicians, this will be replaced with an urgency to modernise. Councillors in particular are likely to be leading the charge to change practice and process, as well as updating technology infrastructure:

- A faster move away from paper
- Devolved decision-making
- Greater prioritisation of local community broadband and wifi
- Increased automation and self-service for staff, partners and citizens
- Review of civic contingency and public service business continuity arrangements.

As one steering group member put it “digital will be seen as the way to take the friction out of government services that previously depended on face to face or telephone access”.

The leaders set the example

Many councils are already ahead of the game, with citizen accounts, web apps, and ‘low code’ development on smartphones that remove the need for any public service intervention.

For example, the public can communicate directly with refuse collection teams in their cabs with questions about their bin emptying, rather than contacting the council.

Leaders, the steering group agreed, put citizens at the centre of digital design, rather than the service provider. This forces a rethink in how services are delivered and even whether some of them are required.

It was also agreed that digital leadership from the top of the organisation was essential in order to unblock the typical ‘corporate’ obstacles. Some of these barriers lie in rules and procedures, but much is to do with cultures and behaviours. Delegating digital to ‘IT’ or a single service entity can hamper the pace of change in public services where traditional methods and habits are engrained.

This cultural change is a problem for some public services organisations, especially those not in the vanguard of technology deployment. For example:

- Fears of depersonalizing services or disenfranchising minorities by delivering digitally
- Worries about trusting decision-making to the front line without usual ‘checks and balances’
- Concerns over political and democratic decision-making without face-to-face interactions
- New risks for digitising health and social care delivery in particular
- Vulnerability of supply chains, many of which must by definition still be physical.

But, on the positive side, the steering group noted that the industry response to the crisis had in general been amazing. Staff are working hard to help the public and suppliers are offering free support and access to tools or services for a period, to help front line services deal with the pressure of COVID-19, often for free.

The role of IT, HR and comms teams

The importance of IT teams in health services and local government has been shown by the current crisis, and the steering group felt they need to have a coordinating role in response to COVID-19.
This includes balancing the need for new tools and methods, against some of the inevitable risks of adopting technology without the usual time allowed for effective change management, support and training – such as videoconferencing and new collaboration tools such as Teams, WhatsApp and Zoom.

Part of this coordination lies with HR and comms teams the steering group advised, helping staff through what is a very unsettling and frightening time, especially on the front line of care. Regular communications and support designed to be delivered electronically, yet personalised and specific, is essential. The same is true of communications with the public and partners.

This depends on skilful use of social media, video conferencing and other electronic media, minimising the impact of social isolation, loneliness or a loss of structure to the day. The steering group noted that some public services are still in ‘broadcast mode’ in their citizen interactions, whilst true digital methods require real interactive engagement.

Traditional training and support were unlikely to be possible in the current crisis – time and distance making it impossible. The steering group said this was an opportunity to modernise, with an expectation of self-reliance and self-training when using common collaboration tools, instead of a traditional ‘training before deployment’ ethos.

### Tearing up the rule book

‘Red tape’ and regulation are often seen to be hampering agile operations in public service: “layers of rules are a problem if we are to deliver fast, be more adaptable and take decisions. Old methods are just too slow”, as one steering group member observed. This has never been truer than in the COVID-19 crisis which has forced many rules and policies in the public sector into at least temporary retirement.

In the current crisis, the steering group felt that not only do regulations and policies need to be reviewed, to strike a new balance between responsiveness and public protection, but they must also prioritise a multi-agency response. Today, it was felt, there is just too much diversity in methods and policies on risk across the public sector, even in similar organisations.

There is a cultural challenge for the public sector, where fear of mistakes can lead to overengineered governance, decision making or a limited authority to act for those closest to service delivery. COVID-19 has forced a ‘just do it’ culture; but how to sustain the culture after the crisis is over and ensure risks are still understood and managed? This will take time and care to resolve.

The steering group also discussed the opportunity for greater integration across local public services, for example, in being able to pinpoint vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities may be people needing support, systems and data being shared in new ways or civic infrastructure needing greater robustness.

But deeper integration of services demanded by the COVID-19 response was seen to be positive, including shared supply chains and infrastructure planning. More resources should be pooled, shared and jointly managed as a result of COVID-19, it was said.

### Business continuity must change

In a crisis it is “all hands to the pump”. Not only are rule books set aside temporarily, but crisis management requires common sense on business continuity and disaster recover planning. The steering group felt that this was the moment to consider where change was needed for the future:

- Often business continuity planning is not joined up effectively across services, or is based on past business models pre-dating digital delivery models
- Acceptance of more risk, but a better understanding of a changing risk landscape for communities and services
- The dependency on public infrastructure and services technology is sometimes underplayed or misunderstood and vulnerability of digital infrastructure in some areas is a ‘blind spot’
- IT disaster recovery planning and business continuity planning are not always well-aligned, resulting in potential gaps or duplication
• Emergency planning tends to focus on natural disasters (e.g. flooding or disease), or on critical utilities (e.g. water, food supplies and electricity). In future, wider digital dependencies in communities will prove as important in civic emergency planning.

One steering group member suggested it would be an idea for public bodies to emulate a two-week lockdown each year, just to test processes and risk tolerance.

What to do today?

The steering group considered what advice could be given to local public services today in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. To some extent it would be presumptuous to assume where help is needed in the crisis, but there are some common themes of reassurance and planning for the future recovery:

• Accept there will be new, often unseen risks as a consequence of mass remote working
• Monitor information and data risks, and brief staff on handling personal data in particular
• Upgrade core infrastructure on which remote working depends where necessary – this investment will pay dividends later
• Avoid multiple types of collaboration tools and try to focus on one main method rather than a ‘free for all’ using such as Skype, Zoom, Hangouts, Teams, WhatsApp etc
• Look for the free tools from suppliers in the crisis (see TechUK website) but avoid long-term commitments at present
• Consider migration to cloud based services where this can increase flexibility or resilience in key areas of operation – this might also help with recovery after COVID-19
• There are many scams out there – take great care in doing a level of due diligence before entering new contracts and use standard and proven tools where possible
• Review wider business continuity and IT disaster recovery – just in case another incident occurs at the same time as COVID-19 to complicate matters
• Begin to prepare for the future, by identifying rules, regulations, policies and processes that have proved to be hinderances or even irrelevant in the current crisis
• Consider how future support, training and coaching could be modernised
• Ensure that public facing websites are maintained with current information and help – for staff as well as the public – and keep the electronic communications regular for all those that need them
• Keep all politicians (for councils) well-briefed and support them in video conferencing for public and internal meetings
• Support multi-agency collaboration, especially for health and social care and other key areas impacting essential services for the vulnerable and isolated.

….And on a positive note

The response of UK public services, especially at the frontline of COVID-19, has been little short of amazing.

The speed and effectiveness of what has been achieved already is a seismic shift in public service delivery, and yet it has been achieved in an incredibly short space of time – as one steering group member said, “What has been achieved in 6 days would previously have taken us over 6 months to do, if not more”.

Much of this is the result of solid investment in digital transformation over the last decade, especially in local government – the whole sector was better able to respond to COVID-19 than would have been conceived possible just five years ago.
We have also seen whole communities come together and provide support and digital interfaces to essential public services, which in the longer term offers huge benefits to local authorities in their coordinating roles. It could also lead to reduced pressure on health services where support could be better provided by others.

Although compromises have had to be made and risks taken, the steering group believes that the shift to digital from COVID-19 has already been positive in propelling many public services in a positive direction very quickly. “We have created digital momentum and at scale – it’s a game changer”, said one Steering Group member.

There will, no doubt, be a need to ‘paint the fence posts’ later – processes and policies will need to be redesigned and controls re-established. But if this is done carefully, without reverting back to a pre-COVID-19 era, many of the positive aspects of enforced change implemented at breakneck speed will be sustainable.

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