

The Local Government
Digital Fund from O₂



Do different

What we learned about the
future of Local Government

O₂ Local Government Digital Fund

The Local Government Digital Fund was launched by O₂ to enable councils to reap the benefits of digital technology and foster innovation and creativity in finding ways to better serve their communities.

The Local Government Digital Fund aims to help councils develop services in three categories:

- Mobile working – helping employees to serve local communities. E.g. connectivity and devices that allow a healthcare worker to access patient information on the move.
- Connecting and communicating with citizens – making life easier for citizens, such as an app that allows people to pay their council tax via mobile or tablet.
- Collaborating in the workplace – improving service delivery for communities by developing online information sharing systems that allow teams to liaise with different departments to resolve queries or problems faster.

Overview

In an era of austerity measures and significant reorganisation, local councils are taking on the challenges by designing customer-focused solutions that also save money or create long-term value.

The overwhelming majority of entries were focused on connecting and communicating with citizens and communities. Local councils showed a customer focus that would be the envy of many private enterprises in submitting ambitious but practical ideas for improving community engagement or serving their customers better.

They showed there is a hunger for the right technology to help deliver much-needed services to communities in a way that is manageable and scalable. What's more, the best solutions were simple, showing that sometimes the barrier to innovation in Local Government is not cost but opportunity.



"I was delighted by the response to the Local Government Digital Fund (LGDF), but I was not at all surprised. Over the course of the launch events it was clear that there is a real appetite for change among councils. The interest they showed in the Digital Fund, and the ideas that were already being discussed at the launch events, proved to me that there is a huge amount of innovative thinking just waiting to be unleashed at councils all over the UK."

Ben Dowd, Business Director, Telefónica UK

Sector trends

Three predominant themes emerged from the bids submitted to the LGDF:

1

Collaboration

While collaboration between councils is not new, a significant number of applications involved multiple agency collaboration and showed an ambition to create long-term value to citizens:

Over 50 bids were submitted to the LGDF, involving more than 250 organisations. 36% of bids were submitted by Local Authorities in partnership with other Public Sector bodies such as other councils, police forces and NHS Trusts or hospitals.

Local Authorities are getting together in the earliest stages of an idea to explore lasting solutions to their collective challenges. For example, the winning bid by Buckinghamshire County Council began 18 months before the bid was made with involvement from the start from nine agencies – other councils, social landlords, and revenue and benefits staff.

These bids show what could be achieved with a commitment to deliver a joint solution. This is welcomed by customers and offers huge costs savings.

Three finalists brought together more than five other agencies in their area. They harnessed the power of collaboration through technology to create an organised, simple structure to help more people access the services available to them.

Collaboration is an effective way to mitigate the effects of budget cuts. Many of the issues facing councils require multi-agency solutions that are made much easier through collaborative technology. It's logical for these services to work together so that customers get a consistent message, regardless of the point of service, and the agencies themselves eliminate duplicated effort.

Some councils submitted bids for community portals – often run jointly with the local police force and NHS Trust – designed to help people locate services they require regardless of who delivers that service. Many councils agreed that collaboration is the best way to tackle digital social inclusion, working across sectors to bring resources to residents of social housing or those less accessible areas.

Sometimes the collaboration was more issues-based. One submission proposed providing help to troubled families by working with seven other agencies including the police, JobCentrePlus, housing providers, education workers and the Youth Offending Service.

2

Personalisation

Most Local Authorities already offer simple web self-service for matters such as parking, bin collection, or reporting problems. Now they are building on its success by designing personalised services available either online or via bespoke applications.

Over 20% of the bids were for personalised apps. Proposed bids focused on:

- Supporting troubled families using a tablet and bespoke app.
- Helping local children find local services and access specialist support.
- Responding to growing demand for health information with an app which provides tailored information and advice, as well as links to sources of further help.
- Digital inclusion: bringing services to the 'hard to reach'.

3

Digital inclusion

The principle of citizen involvement is already strong in most councils and Local Authorities are now exploring ways to use it, with 79% of bids aiming to connect and communicate with citizens and communities.

Ten bids entered into the LGDF were for online self-service interactive portals. Often this was part of an existing programme of community involvement but getting people online – either through a simple website or by bringing the council to them with O₂ connectivity and devices – was seen as critically important to social cohesion and economic success.

Many councils are aiming to address the problem of reaching people who do not have access to a computer, either for geographical or financial reasons. They submitted ideas such as pop-up digital hubs and apps available on devices brought to community hubs or to people's homes. One major city envisaged recruiting "neighbourhood digital buddies" to enhance its capacity to digitally include harder-to-reach people. The buddies would be available in a pilot learning centre with fixed wifi and would be equipped with tablets and wireless/mobile connectivity to visit people in local settings, such as care homes and housing association groups.

Technology trends

1

Bespoke applications

Over 50% of the entries included a request for bespoke (made-to-measure) applications. Local Authorities are already enrolled in the idea of engaging with citizens digitally and are keen to develop apps or web portals either for use by council officers or by citizens directly. As well as supporting the principle of citizen engagement, many entrants noted the benefit this would bring in terms of staff time and cost savings.

Bid entries envisaged a made-to-measure application to enable better interactive processes for:

- School meals
- Parking services
- Council information
- Local activities
- Cycling routes

2

Smart Steps (Big data)

Although cautious of the pitfalls around security and privacy, Local Authorities are interested in the possibilities of open data. They are eager to integrate it with their own and other institutions' systems to improve planning and deliver better service to their citizens.

One bid envisaged a way to reduce the number and severity of accidents in the city by analysing pre-collision data. Several bids described data held by multiple agencies as an untapped resource which could enable better allocation of resources and allow citizens to receive a consistent process across the council. They saw analysis of data as the key to reinvigorating city and town centres through better understanding of local requirements.

3

Connectivity

Councils are finding ways to use mobile working to work more efficiently: one planned to eliminate paper waste through reduction of hard copy documentation in meetings; many saw opportunities to move away from expensive paper-based solutions when visiting customers; and one envisaged "a very different way of working more akin to modern retail or consulting businesses."

Many towns and cities across the UK are seeing the possibilities offered by simple connectivity to bring services to the people rather than expecting people to come to council offices or multiple other agencies.

Submissions envisaged local hubs, permanent or temporary, where people can come and access council services, or seek advice and help, using a tablet device provided for the purpose. Councils are seeing how communities can benefit from information such as upcoming events, warnings or requests for assistance shared at a local level via a hub infrastructure.

4

Wifi

Many councils saw wifi as an essential tool to bring communities together and engage people who might otherwise be left out. They saw that it would enable citizens to easily interact with them. To tackle digital exclusion, one council suggested a wifi-enabled housing estate to help jobseekers. Another proposed installing wifi in areas with poor broadband coverage or in more deprived areas, as well as in buildings with public access alongside desktop devices for public use.

Others planned to take advantage of wifi to generate business and reinvigorate town centres. One proposal planned to provide wifi and use “the power of customer data” to profile visitors in the region and provide marketing information and analysis to local traders.

A London borough proposed enhancing its festivals and events programme by offering free wifi in its parks which, combined with other O₂ services, would help local businesses attract customers.

5

Smarter working

Particularly in the current economic times, councils are looking to technology to help them make more of their resources by working smarter. Some simply sought direction for their IT aspirations, while others had already defined their strategy and planned to build better systems to enable efficiencies in Trading Standards, housing and back offices.

For instance, by furnishing councillors with tools such as instant messaging, webcasting and video- and voice-conferencing, a partnership of rural and town councils wanted to interact better with its citizens and encourage accountability.

A large City Council sought to transform its service and the way it operates through mobile working. They wanted to give frontline police officers access to station-based information and intelligence systems to improve community safety and offender management.

Finalists and winners

6

Six finalists were chosen to take part in a 'Dragon's Den'-style pitch:

Birmingham City Council

Buckinghamshire County Council

Durham County Council

City of Edinburgh Council

Newcastle City Council

Scarborough Borough Council

They presented their ideas and answered questions from a panel of six judges:

Ben Dowd, Business Director, Telefónica UK

Mark Adams-Wright, Local Government Managing Partner, Telefónica UK

Julian Bowrey, Deputy Director, Strategy & Communications,
Department of Communities & Local Government

Adrian Hancock, Chief Executive, SOCITM

Amanda Derrick, OBE, Smart Cities Consultant, DCLG

Simon Parker, CEO, NGLN

Finalists

Birmingham City Council

Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) continue to be a top priority for Local Government, who are aiming to prevent a 'lost generation' resulting from youth unemployment. Recent changes to Local Authorities' statutory duties in this area make this topic even more pressing.

Last year's Local Government Futures Fund funded the development of a website and mobile app to support and guide young people through the journey to work: Reading City Council's ElevateMe portal.

Birmingham proposes extending this site's functionality and its application to other council areas by the development of a 'plug and play' approach to tailoring local information. Birmingham also envisages capture of customer insight intelligence from the system to enable better feedback, targeting and redesign.

Durham County Council

Durham County Council aims to help regenerate business and activity in town centres by using big data. It wants to develop an outline digital regeneration plan for the principal towns in the county.

By understanding the flows of people around the town – for example what times are busiest, or where people spend the most time, or the different age groups – the council believes it could plan services better and make them more available, thereby encouraging usage.

Working with the commercial, public and community sectors to bring this information together, Durham would use O₂'s expertise to capture, analyse and interpret data around people's movements to create more lively, useful town centres. For example they could make sure that offices were open at the times people needed them most; shops could ensure that they were appropriately staffed for the busiest times, or even closed earlier or later according to demand.

City of Edinburgh Council

City of Edinburgh Council wants to understand how its citizens experience their services and how those services can better match their needs. The council observed that, increasingly, views are not directed to service providers but shared over social networks. The council wanted to be able to hear, analyse and use these views to influence service responses.

The council believes social media and mobile technologies can enhance and improve community insight. The city plans to use social media to understand what people want so that they can provide better outcomes for local communities. The plan is to widen online engagement opportunities through the design of consultation and e-participation toolkits.

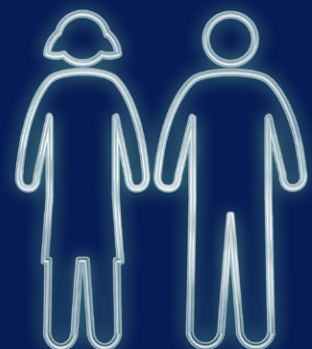
Scarborough Borough Council

The council's existing strategy is to exploit digital architecture to make life simpler for residents and tackle the digital divide.

Scarborough believes significant numbers of local people are disadvantaged because they lack the skills or confidence to go online. The Young Digital Champions Initiative will recruit hundreds of young volunteers from secondary schools and youth organisations to provide one-to-one support and mentoring to enable others to become digitally proficient. The council would support these young people with devices, connectivity, training and a user-friendly e-learning package. The personalised approach would focus on identifying the benefits that would motivate individuals to go, and stay, online.

This would not only give residents life-enhancing online skills, but in practical terms they would be able to access local services and information, online banking and retailing, social media and other sites that would improve their quality of life.

In the wider context it would build social capital and make more inclusive, sustainable communities by creating relationships with hundreds of students and young people and helping them to become socially responsible adults of the future.



Winners

Two winners emerged: Newcastle City Council, for its plans to help children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements and adults with learning disabilities travel independently; and Buckinghamshire County Council, for its project to develop the 'Universal benefit calculator' and 'Action' apps to help frontline workers assist citizens understand the impact of welfare reforms.

Newcastle City Council

Legislation around the assessment process for children and young people with SEN is changing. The focus is on preparing for adulthood and person-centred planning. Newcastle City Council wanted to help those children and young people with SEN statements and adults with learning disabilities to travel independently so that they could gain access to the services they need to live their lives.

Like other councils, Newcastle spends a significant – and increasing – amount on transport for these clients: £2.6m per year for home-to-school transport and c. £300k for adults with learning disabilities.

Newcastle City Council is facing significant financial cuts so needs to work closely with partners and think creatively to make the best use of remaining resources. Savings can be redirected into other services for their most vulnerable clients. The solution would deliver cost savings as well as life-changing benefits to the children and young people with SEN statements and adults with learning disabilities.

Recent government legislation* has introduced the concept of personal budgets for those in need of help from the council. Instead of councils providing services, people have a personal budget which they can allocate as they choose. Adults who have issues with travel are spending a significant proportion of their personal budgets on taxis, leaving less to spend on other things they might like to do. If they could use public transport independently they would be able to spend their personal budget on other activities that make a much greater impact on the quality of their lives.

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/special-educational-needs-support-families-to-be-given-personal-budgets>



The council requested O₂'s support to build the SelfTrav app which will provide a 'safety net' and confidence to use public transport. Clients – and their parents or carers – will be issued with smartphones. The SelfTrav app will use real-time location technology and easy-to-use graphic route planning and navigation. The simple interface will also show the traveller's support network (with names or faces) and identify who is available so the traveller can contact someone instantly if they have a problem.

Julia Woollard, Team Manager, Architecture & Programme Management (ICT) at Newcastle City Council, said: "We know that children and young people with SEN statements who start travelling independently enjoy being with their peers and their increased confidence translates into teachers reporting improved educational attainment. Being able to travel independently is a real boost to these young people entering adulthood and the world of further education, training or work."

While the SelfTrav app will not be suitable for every child or young person with a SEN statement or every adult with learning disabilities, Newcastle City Council believes that SelfTrav can significantly reduce the council's spending on transport.

Julia Woollard added: "We're really excited to be working with O₂, and looking forward to seeing how our project progresses with the team. We hope that this will become a flagship idea for the North East and beyond. We have already tested out the idea with some young people whose lives will be transformed by the app, and they will be so pleased that we are able to make this happen for them."

O₂ will now work with the team at Newcastle City Council to develop and test the app, providing consultancy, devices and connectivity.

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Buckinghamshire County Council

Partners in Buckinghamshire wanted to understand the impact of welfare benefit reforms and help frontline staff have better conversations with residents about the reforms. They saw that their current ways of working would not be enough to bring together all the sources of help and information available and, crucially, that a large number of people who were most in need of support would not be reached by their existing mechanisms.

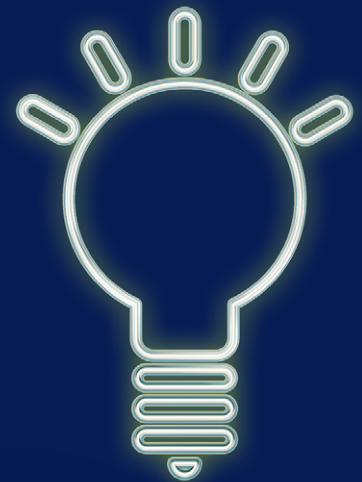
Traditionally, people with issues around benefits tend to go to the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) or to the district council office and see a housing officer. BCC saw the possibility of delivering a much more effective service by bringing together all the agencies involved – three district councils, the revenues and benefits team and the CAB – to offer a consistent service wherever the people needing assistance might be.

Buckinghamshire County Council devised two apps that would enable frontline staff to show people the whole picture of what help is available and how the customer might use all the services available to plan their future better. Equipped with connected devices, frontline staff can go out to see people rather than waiting for them to visit an office.

Danielle Henry, Policy Officer, Policy Performance & Communications at Buckinghamshire County Council says: "We felt strongly we didn't want to just say "here's your problem". We want to go to them and help them help themselves. What's really important about this is that O₂ will enable us to take our services out into the community. We'll have a different kind of conversation and break down the barriers for people who don't have the means to come to us."

Developing the existing 'Universal Benefit Calculator' (UBC) tool into an app would enable advisors to reach more residents and give them a clear picture of their benefits both now and after the introduction of Universal Credit and help them understand whether they would be better off in work. Once Universal Credit is embedded the app will remain a simple way to show people how work affects their benefits.

The 'Action' app would then enable advisors to identify and immediately start the actions a client needs to take to get back to work or increase their income. After brief assessment questions, key areas for action would be identified such as training, financial literacy, digital skills support or childcare. The advisor could book the client directly onto the support or make a 'warm' transfer to another organisation.



Buckinghamshire believes these apps will:

- Empower employees and improve workforce efficiency.
- Widen engagement with customers, particularly those who do not currently access services.
- Bring digital working to more customers, starting their journey to digital literacy and an ability to use technology to find information themselves.
- Ensure consistent information is provided across organisations – improving the quality of service.

Matilda Moss, Policy and Partnerships Officer at Buckinghamshire County Council said: "The whole process of the Local Government Digital Fund has really helped us crystallise our thoughts on what this project could look like in reality. We're really pleased that we are now in a position to help residents in our local area through these apps."

The council believes this has the potential to be best practice and could be rolled out nationally. There is wider development potential; both apps could be offered directly to the public for those confident enough to self-serve.

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Conclusions

"Economic pressures, societal changes and technological advances are combining to put huge pressure on local public service ICT managers to reconfigure what they offer to their organisations and to do so at lower cost." says the 2014 SOCTIM report.

Budget cuts are undoubtedly high on the agenda of every local authority, but they are finding ways to save money and still deliver a better service.

The enthusiastic response shows that many councils are rising to budget challenges with creative, intelligent solutions that are relatively low cost compared to the enormous benefits and savings they will deliver.

The entries were characterised by a high degree of collaboration between Local Authorities and external stakeholders. Local Authorities are thinking creatively about how to improve services through engaging others.

As in the business world, most people are aware of the possibilities of digital, but many are uncertain how to deliver them without enormous expense or risky experimentation. The councils entering the LGDF demonstrate that good ideas can create lasting – cost-effective – benefit in local communities.

"The judges were impressed with the range of creative and innovative solutions submitted this year. We look forward to helping authorities across the UK tackle the challenges in their local area by engaging staff, citizens and communities through technology, and hope that all those involved will continue to connect with us through the Local Government Digital Forum over the coming year."

Mark Adams-Wright,
Local Government Managing Partner, Telefónica UK



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