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Local Government and Municipalities

Local Government Executive Sessions

Achieving Whole-Of-Council
Digital Transformation
in a Post-COVID World

April – June 2021

**Melbourne / Sydney
Brisbane / Perth
Adelaide**

In a post-COVID world, most councils are working on a recovery strategy to survive, revive and thrive, with digital transformation at its core. Achieving whole-of-council digital transformation is a key challenge, as it is more than just technology implementation. With a focus on collaboration, these events were about giving public sector leaders the opportunity to share their strategies for digital transformation to become more efficient and transparent, and to contribute effectively to their councils and their citizens.

Highlights of Keynote Sessions

The path towards digital transformation

Working digitally and with all the technologies that are currently available, is what most industries strive for. Most public sector institutions however are far from achieving that, and this is particularly true in the local government sector.

There are over 500 local government councils all over the country, from small ones with only a few dozen employees, to large ones with multi-million dollar budgets and hundreds or even thousands of employees. More than half of the councils are in rural, regional or remote areas of the country, and some cover vast expanses of land. Most councils have been in existence in one way or another for many years, sometimes for many decades, with the first local government in Australia having been established in 1840. As a result of all this, local governments are generally resistant to change and are slow to embrace transformations, especially ones that include digital or technological transformations. Yet, sometimes external circumstances dictate a requirement to change and adapt. This is true whenever there are dreaded amalgamations, but equally true when there are external crises like a global pandemic.

This paper brings together five keynote presentations from senior local government executives as part of a Local Government Executive Roadshow. Though they all come from different jurisdictions and from councils of differing sizes and with divergent budgets, they are all on digital transformation journeys that were effected at least in part by COVID-19. In some cases the pandemic was a blessing in disguise because it pushed them towards action that they were otherwise unable or unwilling to take, but in all cases it caused them to pause their processes and re-examine their priorities. As a result, lessons were learned that are applicable to other councils and even to other industries.

¹<https://alga.asn.au/facts-and-figures/>

Context and background

The process towards digital transformation is often long and complicated. At Hunter's Hill Council in northern metro Sydney, Lisa Miscamble, the General Manager, says that a few years ago, the council was fending off "a merger proposal, which took a lot of energy and focus." Once that saga was completed, Lisa was appointed in 2018 and the council decided to "reset the organisation to start focussing on delivering outcomes." It has been two and a half years since then and "we are still on that journey with a long way to go."

Part of the reason for the merger proposal was because Hunter's Hill is "the smallest council in metro Sydney." They have "around 60 staff," a population of around 10,000 but with "high education, great stability, low growth" and as such, "we are a lean organisation but an ideal place for innovation." Despite that, the previous refrain was that because they are small, they are too small and with not enough money to change. The repositioning was about "changing the narrative and changing the culture – turning our perceived weakness into a strategic strength."

In the south-eastern corridor of Melbourne, Kellie Vise, the Chief Transformation Officer at the City of Glen Eira, also says that they are "well placed for innovation and digital transformation." Although in their case it is partly because they are large and diverse. They have "about 160,000 residents and about 1,500 staff." They are one of the only councils in Australia "that still runs a residential age care facility." They also have "the great privilege of having the largest Jewish population in Australia," and a "prosperous community with strong employment levels and high education attainment levels." The transformation agenda began in 2017 under "the Great @ Glen Eira program, which was aimed at building a highly skilled and engaged contemporary workforce." This in itself "was a big shift," and led to the journey that the council is still undertaking.

Like many other councils, the City of Holdfast Bay – 20 minutes from the Adelaide CBD on the coast – decided to embark on digital transformation journey. Roberto Bria, the Chief Executive Officer, says that the "technology blueprint is designed to support the needs of the city for the next 3 – 5 years." This is particularly important because their council has a "rich history" and is one of the most



significant places in Adelaide. Within the area of the current council is where white settlers first landed in what is now known as South Australia in 1836. As such, the council hosts many historic events and is a “hub for major tourism and great entertainment.” There are about “175 staff and an active, educated, highly urbanised and demanding community.” The technology blueprint was developed to assist both the staff and the residents.

In Western Australia, Malcolm Osborne, the Chief Executive Officer of the City of Bunbury, says that although there wasn’t a specific catalyst for transformation, “we want to evolve and deliver improved and innovative services and value to our community. We want to make a difference today and into the future.” This is particularly important to them because of where they are located, which is on the coast, about 160km south of Perth, on the southwestern tip of the state. “Regional WA offers an enviable lifestyle and a unique platform to attract and retain a future workforce.” Though the City of Bunbury has a population “estimated at 32,000,” it is the main population centre in the region and “supports the Bunbury-Geographe region, made up of 7 LGAs with a total population of 104,300.”

Bunbury is WA’s “second city with substantial population growth and a major hub for services, arts, culture and employment.” All these factors mean that it is a region ripe for innovation.

Unlike the other councils featured in this paper, South Burnett Regional Council in Queensland is landlocked and not near the coast or a major population centre. Mark Pitt, the Chief Executive Officer, who has been at the council for many years but is relatively new to his current role, says that it is “about a three hour drive northwest of Brisbane,” due west of the Sunshine Coast. They cover an area of “20,000 square kilometres, with a road network of 3,000 kilometres.” The largest population centre is the town of Kingaroy, which “has about 12,000 people, whilst we look after a total of close to 30,000 people.” They have “about 300 staff,” though more than half of those are outside workers, tending to maintenance and agricultural duties. Though they are regional and quite a distance from the major cities of the state, they still use technology “in a big way” and want to modernise. They first began their pathway towards digital transformation in 2013, though it has “been quite a journey.” The goal now is to become “a paperless office.”



Transforming the business of council

Hunter's Hill Council (NSW)

Lisa Miscamble says that before 2018, Hunter's Hill "didn't have clear, documented workflows or clear processes." Almost everything was paper-based and manual, and "there was a cultural problem." Anything related to technology was "owned by IT," though of their 60 staff, "only two people were responsible for networks, software, hardware and any other IT issues." They worked hard but it wasn't ideal. Even without a directive from the council, it was clear that things needed to change. The first thing "we did was a bit of a stocktake. We looked at what we had and we looked at how we could best achieve value." Some things were clearly necessary whilst others were seen as add-ons or extra. The council provided \$1 million for the transformation, "but that needed to cover everything so we needed to squeeze the most out of it." As such, they "flipped the approach. Rather than it being IT-driven, it became a customer or citizen-driven process," with staff considered as internal customers. For the first time, technology was seen as a tool to support or enable the work of council rather than the sole domain of the IT office. "It became a question of how could we use our technology transformation to improve our business processes and address all our issues."

From the outset, the process was "not about a particular product. It was about the outcome we wanted to achieve." As such, it was about working with "a range of vendors and partnering with them." Previously, they had implemented a system change to a new CRM. The current process was more than just a system change: it was about "implementing multiple systems and integrating them with different workflows and different processes." To really initiate that, a connector, "or the funnel as we called her," was appointed. She had oversight of the whole transformation process and was able to communicate with the council executive and the vendors. This was key because it wasn't just about finding a vendor and "taking a product out of the box."



The transformation was a process of co-creation with our vendor partners to actually drive the improvements we were after. It was about cultural change because since we're small, we needed to make sure everyone was on deck so that we could chart our own course and do things differently.

Lisa Miscamble, General Manager, Hunter's Hill Council (NSW)

Charting their own course also meant expanding their capacity. "We only have one IT person now but we have partnered with an external provider to give us 24/7 assistance and to help us implement changes." One of these changes was to use a system called 'OpenOffice'. It was something "we had previously but never used it to its capacity." Now it has been upgraded and has become "our core system." Essentially it is a community engagement platform that has been re-configured to provide the council the digital transformation they were after. "It covers licensing & compliance, service management including property and infringements, financial management, payroll & HR, and mobility." It integrates with all other systems including the asset management settings, and has become the customised experience that the council was seeking.

On top of that, OpenOffice is integrated with the NSW planning portals that the council uses, and through these portals, the council now has access to "a digital asset management plan (a DAMP) which is a dashboard for each asset class." This means that complex spreadsheets are now integrated with footage of things like drains, pipes, roads and footpaths so that the council has complete oversight of every asset, including "the state of them and the priority order for works." Moreover, each council vehicle is now equipped with a tablet device that can take photos and can be integrated in real-time into the system. "It's streamlined, it's trackable and lets us know where things are at."



City of Glen Eira (Vic)

Kellie Vise says that the transformation at their council was instigated by the CEO in 2017, who wanted to ensure that council kept moving forward. This included the creation of the Chief Transformation Officer role, and a team that now has 16 members. “This shows the importance that the organisation placed on transformation.” As part of that, in 2017 they also launched their ‘Digital by Default’ strategy, “designed to look at the capabilities of the platforms and services, and to systematically digitise our organisation.” Initially this resulted in a refresh of the digital tools, “a new suite of integrated web platforms,” and the delivery of “48 fully digitised customer facing transactions for the community.” For instance, transactions regarding the collection of hard rubbish were moved online and this resulted in “a reduction in calls by about 500 a week, which is pretty profound.”

Having a strategy and a number of digitised transactions was not enough. “We needed our back office integrations to be right,” so “we developed 9 core competencies.” Having the right technology was just one of those competencies. The others were around leadership, culture, creativity, agility, accountability and other similar skills. Before progressing any further, it was important that these became embedded into the work practices of “every staff member in our organisation,” and this process took the best part of a couple of years. By late 2019 / early 2020, the council was ready for a refreshed digital strategy, but then of course the world changed.

City of Holdfast Bay (SA)

Roberto Bria says that in many ways they were lucky because they developed their technology blueprint “in February 2020, just before the pandemic hit.” As such, it was developed before the world changed and therefore it was driven by “customer needs and expectations in order to create service delivery excellence.” It was also motivated by a desire to create “deeper collaborative ties to business and community groups,” and a need to better leverage data and break down silos.

A need to operationalise and better use data was a key component of the blueprint. Traditionally, there was “months of wait time” between ingesting data and having it provide any useful information. If this process could be digitised then it could result in better data searches and identifications, an ability for “all manner of data to coexist,” and an ability for data to be better used for geospatial or other kinds of specific research. Moreover, having a master data hub would provide “a reliable and trusted source of truth,” and opportunities for greater security, analysis, integration and visualisation. Whereas previously the customer was considered in every council process and interaction, the true purpose of the blueprint was to genuinely put the customer at the centre of all the processes. It was decided that upgrading the technology and systems, including the way data is processed, would enable that in the greatest possible way. But then, as in all jurisdictions, the pandemic intervened and changed all their plans.

City of Bunbury (WA)

Malcolm Osborne says that their cultural change journey began in 2018, though between then and the start of 2021, much of the focus was on processes directly related to staff, including new on-boarding procedures and greater staff engagement. On top of that, since 2018 the council has been working on a number of “key strategic priorities.” A program board has been set up from the council executive, and they identified “nine key areas and benefits of the transformation program.” Though some are niche and very particular to their region, others are about the creation of “a digital city and other technological additions.”

Partly due to delays around the pandemic, the “playbook about building a better Bunbury” was only released in January 2021. This is a whole-of-city transformation program with the objectives of having better “clarity, capability, culture and commitment.” Some of these will require technology upgrades, though that is not the sole focus.

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The focus of our transformation program is to enable us to make fundamental changes to people, processes, as well as technology, in addition to implementing new and improved business capabilities into the organisation. This will enhance our ability to impact the community, build our reputation and allow us to operate sustainably, now and into the future.”

Malcolm Osborne, Chief Executive Officer,
City of Bunbury (WA)

Given that the scope is so broad, it “represents a large and ambitious body of work.” However, the approach is also “designed to be consistent, lightweight and empowered by project leadership.” There are essentially three drivers for the transformation:

- Community Expectations: “The community expects the City of Bunbury to deliver contemporary and customer-focused services.” This includes leveraging technology to provide the most efficient and convenient services, and it includes having leaders who are informed and enabled to represent the community and make good decisions on behalf of the community.

- Sustainability: “We need to demonstrate that we are operating as effectively and efficiently as possible and continually building capacity to deliver on future needs.” This also means adapting to new practices and being able to develop long-term goals and a sustainable and strategic approach.
- Technology Opportunities: Since building clarity and capability are some of the objectives, technology offers significant opportunities. “Technological advances, digitisation, automation and other opportunities allow us to focus our staff and resources to work with greater impact on behalf of the community. Taking full advantage of the available technology, particularly in a digital and data space, has the potential to generate not only efficiencies and better service delivery, but will also create reputational advantages and greater staff satisfaction too.”



South Burnett Regional Council (Qld)

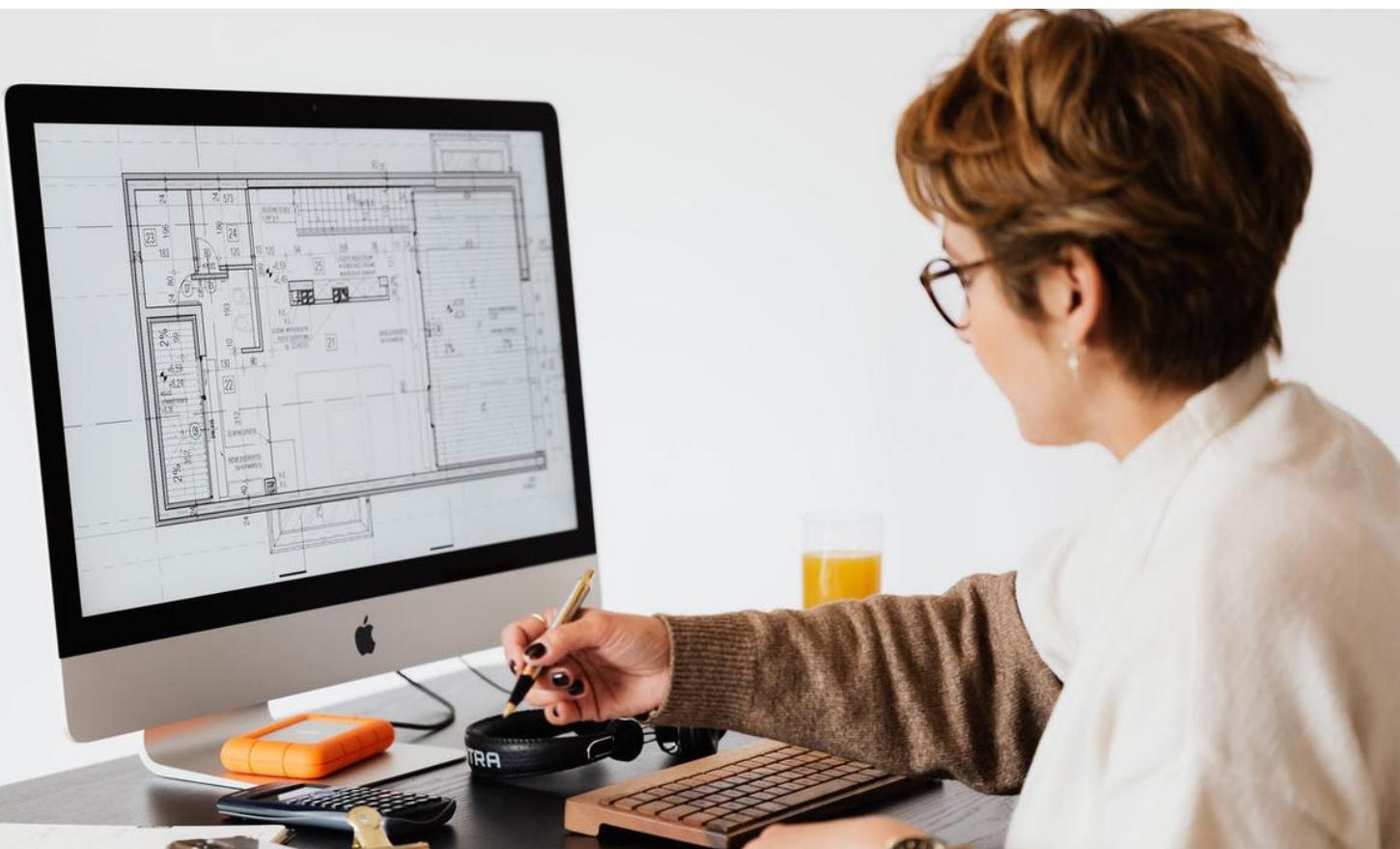
Mark Pitt says that as a result of amalgamations in 2008, their council became “a much more complicated business.” It took some time, but eventually they settled on a new finance and HR system that was implemented in 2013. However, the finance department – not the IT department – were in charge of delivering and setting it up, and from the outset “we were unable to achieve trial balance. In fact, after six years and \$6 million it still could not produce an automated acknowledgement.” The truth is that it actually did function, but it was never “integrated so it functioned in isolation without any of the modules talking to the others.” Moreover, it often broke down or didn’t operate appropriately and every time “new consultants turned up and re-wrote the system.” Not only was it not fit-for-purpose from the outset, “but we customised it to such a point that it was unusable. We had no control of our own processes.”

The leaders of the council at the time decided that they should “buy every new module every time one came on the market in the hope that they would fix the problem.” This happened so much that “4 years ago we bought a gold plated asset module system. The software was absolutely brilliant, but in 4 years we never even turned it on or entered any data into it because our own systems weren’t sophisticated enough to integrate with it.” It was obvious to anyone

who looked that the systems in place were not appropriate, but “there was a denial mentality.” The culture within the organisation didn’t allow anyone to criticize or even question the system, and anyone who did was re-assigned or moved on.

After a while there were so many workarounds that it was clear to all that something needed to change. The last straw related to water meters. The council is responsible for registering and reading the 18,000 meters in their region biannually. Contractors are hired to do the readings and enter the data into their books. The council then employed four people twice a year to enter all the data into the system. “Inevitably you cannot do that without making a mistake, and we wonder why we have trouble with rate payers when we get the readings wrong.” The irony is that the system was set up for automation, but no one knew how it worked and it too was not integrated.

Eventually, even the council leaders saw that the way the systems were working (or weren’t) “resulted in poor customer service and a poor corporate culture. Undoing that is extremely difficult.” Nonetheless, by late 2018 or early 2019, the culture and the processes needed to change, so the council “embarked on a 12-month process mapping exercise to try to understand our business and how all the parts of it interconnected.” Just when that process was nearing completion, the pandemic hit.



The impact of COVID-19

For some councils, though the pandemic had a major effect on their populations and the way they conducted themselves, it had little effect on their transformation journeys. In Hunter's Hill for instance, Lisa Miscamble says they were well into their upgrades when COVID-19 came to NSW. In fact, they finalised the arrangements with their external IT provider just before the pandemic arrived and "that was probably one of the factors that saved us. We did two years' worth of work in about three weeks in order to move people into a remote environment. It was a massive effort but we were able to achieve that through increased capacity." Aside from that, little else of their transformation processes were affected in any serious way.

This was equally true in the City of Bunbury. Malcolm Osborne says that their transformation program was only ever supposed to come into effect in 2021. The pandemic may have "slightly delayed the release of our playbook, but little else." On top of that, unlike some of the other councils, they didn't have a pressing need to make changes so the delay would have hardly been noticed by the residents.

At the City of Glen Eira however, Kellie Vise says that it was a very different story. "All of a sudden normal operations were thrown into turmoil, and we had to transition to digital almost overnight." In early 2020 their digital strategy was finalised, but obviously a global pandemic was never imagined and thus "we very quickly learned that our technology wasn't actually ready." Rolling out of mobile devices and Office 365 to allow remote working had begun, but it was planned to take 6-12 months. By March 2020 therefore "few people had laptops, let alone webcams or microphones, or any capacity to operate remotely." Casual staff didn't even have desktops or their own email addresses. They may have been on the path to digitisation, but "technology proved to be a massive barrier for us in the early days of lockdown."

Despite that the IT people worked "around the clock" and did everything they could to accelerate the process, whilst the rest of the staff also adapted. "The willingness of our people to be patient and have empathy with each other outweighed any challenges." Some people were initially cynical of the digitisation pathway before the pandemic, but once they were forced to work from home, "some actually found it easier to do their work from their lounge rooms."

Not only did the staff adapt, but "our residents became rapid digital adopters too." Everyone started using apps and programs they never used before in order to keep connected. Some were initiated by the staff, but others by the residents "to continue their support and connections." A number of livestream channels were added to the council's website and staff continued to provide their services virtually, from story time for youth and immigrants, to mothers' groups, fitness, cultural and literary events. Website views increased by 200,000 across the year, and "in some cases, engagement increased by 400%. People who had never visited our libraries were suddenly logging on and tuning in." It was feared that the popular seniors' festival would have to be cancelled, but "that too went digital. It allowed people to get out of the drama of COVID and to engage and connect."

Internally, all this activity meant that projects were "stood up, tested, iterated and improved in real-time." Normally there would be long design and testing phases, but that was not possible and people appreciated it. When restrictions meant that residents couldn't be more than 5 kilometres away from home, "we had more people than ever in our local area, so we opened up our assets virtually." This included the gallery and the performance space. People began to log in at all hours, including people from "over 20 countries." Guest speakers were arranged from abroad too, and some of the normally least popular attractions suddenly became the most popular. Overall, COVID-19 showed that the council was on the right path, but that there is now "a huge opportunity for us in terms of how we expand our digital data capabilities moving forward."

At the City of Holdfast Bay, Roberto Bria says that the restrictions in SA were not as lengthy or restrictive as they were in Victoria, but the council was nonetheless greatly affected by the pandemic. Tourism is a major industry for their region and many hospitality venues closed or "operated at less than 10% occupancy." This was true of civic offices and libraries as well. For any facilities that did operate, "additional resources had to be put into cleaning, whilst up to 80% of the workforce was working from home," including at the council. Staff phoned 2,000 elderly residents on a regular basis "due to their social isolation," and all council meetings and affairs were conducted digitally or through Zoom. Amongst other things, there was also a large reduction in "non-rate revenue, and council provided financial support to businesses and



lease holders.”

The technology blueprint was designed so that the technology at the council would be gradually upgraded to better enable work processes, but the pandemic meant that many of these upgrades had to be accelerated. For one thing, “elected members were provided with laptops to support virtual meetings.” Moreover, though replacing desktops with laptops for all staff was in the pipeline, only 30% of this work had been completed before the pandemic hit. So this process was also accelerated, along with the installation of “the PABX so that calls could be answered at home.” The pandemic also initiated the “review of our cybersecurity vulnerabilities and our disaster recovery and business continuity plans.” A pandemic response was added to both, giving the council greater leeway and adaptability.

At South Burnett Regional Council, Mark Pitt says that in many ways, their council needed a shock or a catalyst to change, and therefore “COVID-19 couldn’t have happened at a better time.” It gave “immediacy” to a problem that so many people had already identified, and provided “a practical need for innovation to occur.” One of the first cases of COVID-19 in Queensland was in Kingaroy, but “no one told the council. It broke in the media before we knew about it.” Luckily the person recovered, but that brought the issue to them and spurred them to action. Their region has regular floods so they have

well established disaster management plans and video conferencing facilities. As much as other parts of the system didn’t work, they were better prepared for remote work than many other places, and enacted their plans immediately.

Without losing stride, their council meetings started being livestreamed, and so did some of their other activities. Previously, it was sometimes difficult to sell the idea of broadcasting events or running things virtually. “In many ways COVID complemented what we were already doing and helped drive the political agenda.” Having the ability to work remotely however didn’t address their other issues, though it highlighted some of them. The outside workers generally didn’t have email accounts or access to the system, whilst so many of their office tasks were done manually. So they began to automate their processes “to actually better deliver our services and free up some of our staff from manual chores.” The output though needed to remain effective and in some cases, “you sacrifice efficiency for effectiveness.” In this case, the automation of manual processes is both effective and efficient. The pandemic did for the council what no other person or crisis could do before: “it changed the narrative and opened up processes that were long closed.”



Future plans and next steps

The pandemic was not something any council prepared for or anticipated. Whilst it affected councils in different ways, it was the catalyst that many needed to accelerate their transformation processes, and highlighted cracks that were lurking just below the surface. For instance, Kellie Vise says that “we found that our hunger for information data was immense,” but also that not everyone had the same opportunities.

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Our technology gaps showed us how much harder things were for people who weren't connected. It became really apparent to us the difference between those who had access to technology and those who didn't. We discovered that some vulnerable residents didn't have email addresses, didn't have devices.”

Kellie Vise, Chief Executive Officer, City of Glen Eira (Vic)

For a council that shifted so much of their focus to the online world during the height of the pandemic, this was quite a revelation. In many ways, “our community's eyes have been well and truly opened up to the benefits of the digital world. This means at Glen Eira there's no going back,” but it does mean that looking after the vulnerable is more important than ever. Many of their staff members, who knew close to nothing about IT two years ago have “actually became minor tech support for their vulnerable and elderly residents in their own homes.” This is a trend that will likely continue.

Lisa Miscamble says that at Hunter's Hill, one of the benefits of their transformation program has been “an improved customer experience.” Previously works around the council would just be scheduled and residents would have to put up with them. “Now we have a way of engaging with the community.” Not only can they alert the community when works are scheduled, but they can also seek “real-time feedback about the nature of the works. Have we missed a pinch point? It encourages dialogue and comments.” Their OpenOffice system shows useful analytics and data, and allows them to see that if part of their website was visited 500 times for instance, “was it one person visiting 500 times, or was it 500 individual people. This is very useful analysis.”

Though some of the processes are already in place, “we are still on this journey.” By mid-year they should have a well-functioning “community engagement platform, which will assist us in engaging with individual citizens and looking after their unique requests.” Much of this has only been possible because “we partnered and co-created. This has given us better outcomes, better ownership and greater buy-in.” They have also worked as a team and thought about the integration of processes at every step.



To be successful, we really thought about the outcomes we were after and how systems, IT processes, people and strategies could improve those outcomes and make them better for our customers, our citizens and all of our services.”

Lisa Miscamble, General Manager, Hunter’s Hill Council (NSW)

Malcolm Osborne says that at the City of Bunbury, they are hoping to get to the point where they can “maximise our impact for our community.” They are beginning with 19 project areas covering things like people, finance, communications, digital services, organisational matters and community engagement. As part of their 2021 – 2023 transformation plan, it is intended that each of these will become “cohesive and interlinked with service delivery components of the organisation. We want to embed these so they become part of our DNA.” They have mapped their future state and aim to get there using an agile approach. At the end of the process, they hope to have extensive business automation, better analysis capabilities, reduced ecosystem complexity, greater alignment of activity and outcomes, and a much richer dialogue between customers and the organisation.

As part of the future state, they are also looking at making Bunbury “the first regional digital city in WA.” They are working with universities and with Australian Innovation and Science Australia to create opportunities that are unlikely to be experienced elsewhere.



Through our plan, we want to empower our staff, exploit technology, and build capability to meet the financial, environmental and community challenges of the future in the best possible way. The digital innovation

district, part of our future plans, will connect researchers, policy makers and professional service providers, and will be a unique model for population, industry and economic diversification in regional Australia. With these opportunities, Bunbury is well position to be one of Australia’s fastest growing regions.”

Malcolm Osborne, Chief Executive Officer, City of Bunbury (WA)

While it is intended that the benefits will flow “iteratively over time,” they also intend to learn from the impact of each activity and will “adjust, adapt and prioritise to deliver the best possible outcomes within the scope of the program.” Over the duration of the plan, they will also work with the staff and elected members of the council, and will “define and refine the priorities” as they go. Importantly, none of this is about the reduction of jobs within the council. “We want to make that very clear. Every amount of productivity and efficiency that we can glean, we want to put back into servicing our community.” The focus of some tasks may change, but that is in line with “improved service delivery, more effective use of resources, enhanced decision making and better community engagement. It is also very much about improved staff engagement and satisfaction.”

Mark Pitt says that their website was rebuilt just before the pandemic, though it “still doesn’t take electronic payments. It’s somewhere we want to go, but there’s no point having the front end working perfectly when the back end systems still need work.” That work is progressing, and as a result of the pandemic, faster than before, but it is still slow going. In the meantime, they are in the process of refurbishing “every water pipe, sewerage pipe and pavement” in the Kingaroy CBD. This is a regular process, though because technology has become so important for businesses and residents, this time, “with the streets ripped up,” they are adding the infrastructure for the fibre communications network. It might take a little longer but will ensure that the town is ready for a digital rollout sooner than expected.

Digitising and integrating systems has been on the cards for some time, but the pandemic expedited much of the process. The workarounds that were in place before didn’t work so well when the pandemic hit and exposed cavities that needed to be filled.

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When systems don't work, people shouldn't be made to feel scared to report it. It is amazing that when the shackles come off, staff are able to develop great ideas because they previously had complicated workarounds and know the systems better than anyone, as long as management are open to hear their suggestions and are committed to making the necessary changes. We need to take control of our own destiny, create an executive sponsor who is willing to listen, and build a system that works not just for us, but for those that come after us as well.”

Mark Pitt, Chief Executive Officer, South Burnett Regional Council (Qld)

Roberto Bria says that a company called Equinix “surveyed 2,600 IT decision makers from diverse enterprises across the Americas and the Asia Pacific” in light of the pandemic. The survey found that nearly half of all respondents have accelerated their digital transformation plans as a result of COVID-19, and 60% have at the very least revised their IT strategies or processes. On the question of flexibility, 58% want to make sure that their tech is more agile in the post-COVID world, and 64% are planning long-term changes to how and where people work.

The point of all this is to say that at Holdfast Bay, like in much of the rest of the world, the pandemic “accelerated the mobility of our workforce, and accelerated the renewal of our IT infrastructure.” Plans we in place before, but the pandemic focussed the investment and emphasised the need to make data available remotely. Many of the changes that were implemented to support remote working were cultural and normally “would have been far more difficult to implement.” They worked because the community is more tech savvy than ever before and are more demanding of the online services that the council produces.

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Whilst COVID-19 has had many negative impacts, it has had an overall positive impact on our digital journey. It reprioritised our technology roadmap, and with a greater demand for competing resources, it showed that there is greater business value in our digital journey than ever before.”

Roberto Bria, Chief Executive Officer, City of Holdfast Bay (SA)

Kellie Vise says that the pandemic also exposed the need to be connected. “Digital has really gone from something that IT do, to a core competency that every staff member in the organisation needs to master.” And working digitally also means that working from an office is much less important than it was before. “The dichotomy of the pandemic is that city businesses need the economic activity, but people don't have the same need to leave their homes.” In many ways, because the digital acceleration is unlikely to subside, for councils as much as for other organisations or businesses, there will have to be a “fine balancing between digital and in-person processes.” The pandemic showed businesses that projects and digital rollouts can be developed and delivered quickly, but is that sustainable or was it only because of necessity? Either way, “traditional project cycles are no longer going to cut it.”

It seems like “the hybrid workplace is here to stay and we need to refocus our workforce to enshrine the things that really worked well when they worked remotely.” The hybrid model needs to work not just for the staff, but for the residents they serve as well. “Training and capability building will be critical, and we need to not lose sight of the fact that not everyone is going to want to operate in the digital world.” This is an opportunity to not only think about the lessons from the pandemic, but “to re-evaluate our thoughts on smart city models to incorporate some of the new digital thinking.”

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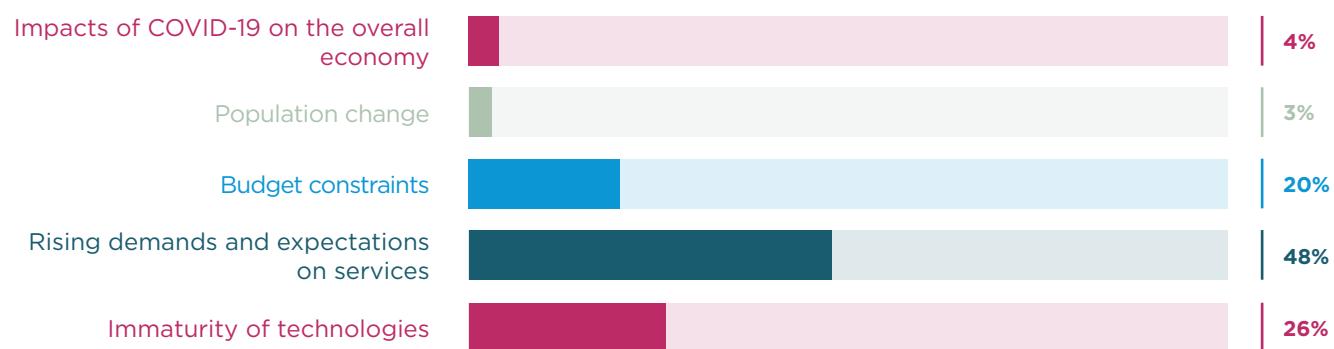
The world has shifted and we now have a once-in-a-generational opportunity to change our work practices. In some ways COVID-19 has sped up everything in terms of the rapid development and adoption of digital technologies. But in other ways it's forced us to slow down, focus locally and reprioritise what's really important. Whatever comes next, the past year has shown us that our people and our communities are absolutely up for the challenge.”

Kellie Vise, Chief Executive Officer, City of Glen Eira (Vic)

Polling Report and Comments

As part of the roadshow, participants in each jurisdiction were asked a series of questions, and the keynote speakers were asked to comment on those same questions. There were only 14 to 17 respondents per jurisdiction, based on the number of in-person participants at each event, but the sample size is still a good indication of community sentiment, especially since most participants were employees of various councils from across their states.

What is the biggest challenge your council currently faces?



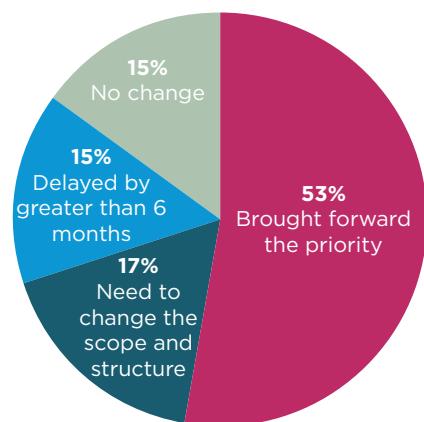
While rising demands and community expectations were top of mind for most people, Lisa Miscamble says it is not just about rising demands but “competing demands.” Kellie Vise says it is also about “supporting our community as they come out of the crisis,” whilst Malcolm Osborne says that in the new digital world, “living up to the expectations of the community” is something that most local governments are likely to struggle with.

Roberto Bria says that while engaging with the community is critical, this is particularly difficult to do “in a budget constrained environment.” Mark Pitt also says that “budget constraints to deliver a range of services for the community,” is their biggest challenge. Obviously budget constraints are linked to community expectations, but it is interesting to note that though the presenters from SA and Queensland mentioned budget constraints in their responses, that issue was much less important to respondents in both of those jurisdictions.

Across all jurisdictions, COVID-19 brought forward priorities and plans for transformation. Though the national average is at 53%, in some states that figure was well over 60%, and the presenters agreed that the pandemic has been a catalyst for re-prioritisation and the acceleration of plans. Roberto Bria says that it re-prioritised all of their plans, but specifically “our digitalisation plans, and made them more focussed back on the customer.” Lisa Miscamble says that COVID-19 “fast-tracked many of our IT projects and reduced the need for face-to-face interactions.” This is something that now needs to be incorporated into future plans.

Kellie Vise says it “accelerated our progress,”

What impact has COVID-19 had on your priorities and plans for transformation?



whilst Mark Pitt says that the pandemic was in many ways good for their council and “enhanced what we were doing. It’s given us a sense of purpose, and accelerated the pace of our progress.” For Malcolm Osborne, though the pandemic brought their priorities forward, that happened because when the pandemic first hit, “we realised that we didn’t have the data that we need to make good decisions quickly. So we started making decisions on the run, or there was quite a bit of lag time between getting the data and making the decisions. We need to be able to provide data to our customers, staff and elected members to operate better.”

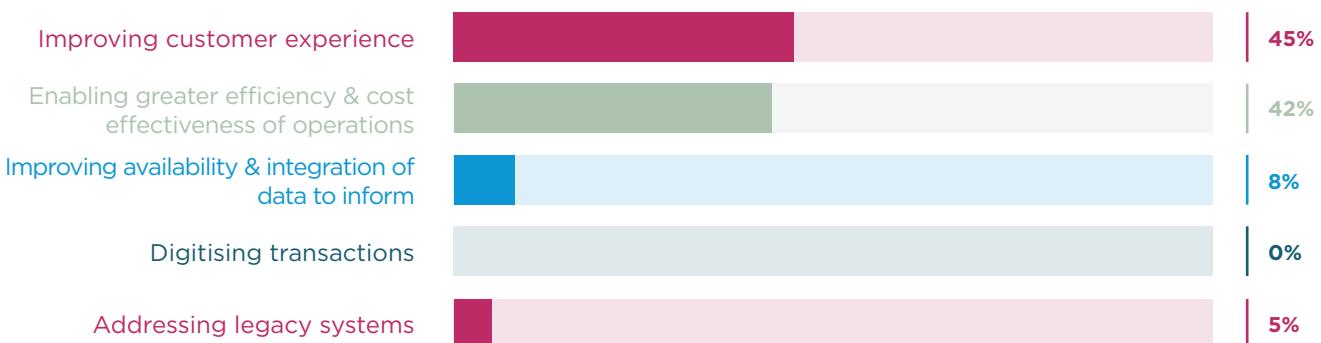
Unsurprising, especially given the previous question, most councils are currently planning or changing their implementation plans. In fact, though the national average for changing plans sits at 33%, responses from Victoria, NSW and Queensland got close to 50% or higher. Malcolm Osborne says that the pandemic has given them the “momentum” they needed, whilst Kellie Vise says that they are constantly thinking about “what’s next and what the new frontier might be.” Mark Pitt says “we’re not quite there yet, but we have certainly started and well on the way.”

At what stage of your digital transformation journey are you National average currently on?

33%

said **Changing: Implementation is underway**

In a post COVID world, what is your key focus area for your ongoing digital transformation journey?



Across the board, improving the customer experience was seen as being most important in a post COVID world, though enabling greater efficiency was a clear second, and in some cases of almost equal value because the two are inter-related. For instance, Malcolm Osborne says “we certainly want to make sure that our core systems work and that we can access them remotely.” This will lead to greater efficiency and thus a better experience for customers. Lisa Miscamble also says that “we want to continue to embed our systems which will allow us to continue to focus on our citizens and customers in an optimised way.” Kellie Vise calls this “digitising our systems in order to move more to that real human focus.”

Roberto Bria says that for them, “data and the way we manage it is one of the most important ways we can improve our customer service journey.” Malcolm Osborne says that they are continuing to focus on their staff and customers. “We are moving to digitised self-services HR systems rather than using paper-based systems, and are trying to be more efficient so that we can move into the next phase of our transformation program and ultimately make the City of Bunbury better for all.”

Though the option of ‘people’ as one of the responses didn’t define how staff are a barrier to reaching digital transformation goals, it was clear across the jurisdictions that this was one of the biggest barriers. Malcolm Osborne defined it as “trying to keep good people. In the current market, we’re already seeing that some of our people are looking further afield at other projects.” Keeping those people or enticing other good people to come along on the journey is clearly going to be an ongoing challenge.

Yet, for the other presenters, different barriers were of higher priority. For Lisa Miscamble it is simply about finding the time to do all that is necessary, whilst for others it is mostly about funding. Kellie Vise says that “with competing priorities, getting funding and focus from the organisation is our key barrier.” Mark Pitt says that for things like remote access, funding was almost immediately available, but for other things like system improvements “having adequate financial support is difficult to maintain.” Roberto Bria says that though funding is always a challenge, dealing with COVID-19 “provided an injection of cash to do things in an accelerated manner. We now need to balance our budget constraints with what we want to achieve.”

Final comments

Over the short-term, the focus for every council and probably every organisation will continue to be how they recover from the pandemic. COVID-19 showed everyone the importance of being digitally connected, and thus Malcolm Osborne says “transitioning to the digital age is something that I’m sure everyone is doing. For us, it’s about capturing the value of what we’ve learned and re-investing it into our community to give them more than what they are currently getting.”

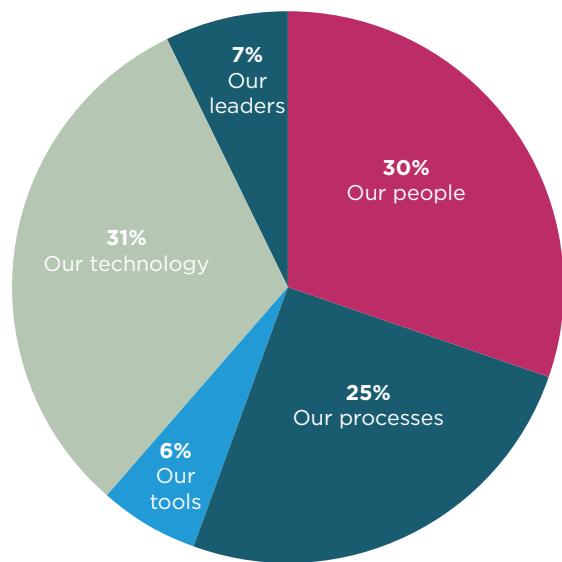
Lisa Miscamble says that their focus is on “embedding our new systems and optimising our capabilities. We need to achieve a balance between delivery of services and learning how those new systems work to ensure that the full benefits are realised.”

For Roberto Bria it is about “providing access to services online, but also giving the customer a choice. Some may want to deal with us face-to-face, whilst others may want to engage online any day of the week at any time of the day. Our offices are only open 9 to 5, but expanding our customer reach so that they can engage with us when it is convenient for them, is very important to us.”

Mark Pitt says that as much as they have tried to transform some of their systems, they still have a large amount of staff, mostly outside workers, “who don’t have a high degree of computer literacy and are very used to doing their timesheets manually on paper.” At the same time, they like everyone else have phones, “so trying to transition from paper-based to phone-based timesheets is a priority for us.” On top of that, integration is their key challenge. “We want our core systems to integrate with our public face, our website and our social media, and for all those to work together.”

Kellie Vise says that as much as they are doing in terms of their digital strategy, “the biggest challenge we’re facing is trying to figure out what to do next. There is so much going on, so what should we focus on and where should we direct our energies?” This is a question many councils are struggling with, and will continue to struggle with for some time because it shows that they are keen to transition and keen to improve their communities. After all that is largely the purpose for their existence in the first place.

What is your biggest barrier to reaching your digital transformation goals?



Featured Speakers

**LISA MISCAMBLE**

General Manager
Hunter's Hill Council (NSW)

**KELLIE VISE**

Chief Transformation Officer
City of Glen Eira (Vic)

**MARK PIT**

Chief Executive Officer
South Burnett Regional Council
(Qld)

**MALCOLM OSBORNE**

Chief Executive Officer
City of Bunbury (WA)

**ROBERTO BRIA**

Chief Executive Officer
City of Holdfast Bay (SA)

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