

# Ready for the revolution?

With the rise of technology in the workplace, Nesta and *The MJ* asked local government frontline workers and staff about their councils' approach to innovation. **Heather Jameson** reports on the results

**L**ove it or loathe it – and it is usually both – technology is an ever-increasing part of the workplace. While we haven't quite reached the levels of automation and robotics predicted in the sci-fi novels of the past, increasing numbers of jobs are being assisted by – or even replaced by – technology. Local government is no exception.

In a survey of local government by innovation foundation Nesta and *The MJ*, one in 10 frontline workers said they believed their roles will be automated in the next decade – but less than 5% of council managers agree.

But they are sceptical about the prospects. Less than half of our respondents believed parts of their job would benefit from being automated. Moreover, a whopping 94% of frontline staff said there were parts of their job that could never be well done by automation – with 88% of managers agreeing with them.

There is an acceptance that technology supports the modern workplace well, with 63% of frontline workers and 74% of managers agreeing it helps them do their jobs more effectively. But just 35% of respondents felt they were given adequate training to work with new technology.

Nesta's executive director of programmes, Vicki Sellick, says: 'I see this as a real opportunity for local government – automating some tasks to free up officer time for things which only a human can do – face to face interactions with citizens, kindness and empathy.'

## **74%** – managers confident in knowing how to prototype new ideas

She says Nesta is working with six councils around the country on data analytics which will help local government target resources. But she warns: 'Technology is not a silver bullet to solve complex social challenges but it can help us all do more.'

'That will only happen when officers feel confident about using technology – whether that be new forms of digital participation, data analytics or deploying household technologies, like Alexa of Google Home, for social good.'

Around half the survey respondents think they are making good use of data to do their job, but eight out of 10 are confident when it comes to privacy issues that come from data use.

When asked if their employer was ready to innovate and handle the challenges of the coming decade, 30% of frontline staff agreed, while 38% of their managers were also positive – although that leaves two-thirds of respondents who don't think they are ready.



Ms Sellick says: 'These results back up our experience working with local government colleagues up and down the country. Officers and leaders want to embrace innovation, but aren't always sure where to start or if they have the right tools.'

As a result of this experience, Nesta has published a digest of 20 tools for innovating in government.

Just under three quarters of our respondents said they were supported to try new ideas, while 42% said their leaders were innovative, and 48% said their employer listened to ideas from the front line.

## **63%** – frontline workers feel technology supports them to do their jobs more effectively

But there is a massive gap between the views of frontline council staff and their managers when it comes to knowing how to take ideas forward. When asked if they were confident in knowing how to prototype new ideas, 74% of managers said yes, compared with 45% of workers – while 62% of managers said they could scale up new ideas, compared with 26% of the frontline.

Ms Sellick says leading councils embrace ideas from

the frontline, and have clear paths to try them out. But she adds: 'We should also not forget the elephant in the room – failure. Not all new ideas or innovations work which is challenging when the stakes of public scrutiny are high.'

## **4%** – respondents who said they didn't feel supported by their managers to innovate

'Councillors have a role to play in creating safe space for officers to prototype new ideas and that experiments are quick and cheap – so money follows success.'

However, lack of support was not a huge feature in our survey. Just 4% of respondents said they didn't feel supported by their managers – and 0.6% said they feared something would go wrong.

By far the biggest barrier, according to 45% of our survey respondents, was a lack of staff and funding – and a further quarter claimed they lacked the time.

'Years of austerity has left many public services creaking under the burden of responsibility with fewer staff and resources,' says Ms Sellick. 'That's why it's vital every council in the country embraces innovation and new ways of working.' ■

# Digitising democracy

From rebel hacker to digital minister for Taiwan, Audrey Tang has brought the openness and transparency she found on the internet to the government and created a system to crowdsource answers to policy problems. **Heather Jameson** reports

‘Like many people today working on advancing democracy, I am an optimist,’ says Audrey Tang at the start of her impressive Tedx talk.

Ms Tang is the digital minister of Taiwan, with an impressive back-story. With a reported IQ of 180, she began computer programming at the age of 12, dropping out of school two years later to self-educate.

Learning on the internet, she found an ‘open stakeholder political system’ that powered the web.

By the age of 19, she worked as an entrepreneur in California’s Silicon Valley, having already held senior positions in several software firms.

She was at the forefront of open source software, and was part of hacker group g0v (pronounced gov dot zero) which aimed to ‘fork’ the government. In open source terms, to fork is to create an alternative version of the software.

She took part in Taiwan’s ‘Sunflower Movement’ in 2014, when activists occupied the legislature for 23 days, setting up Wi-Fi for the protestors. Afterwards, she and her g0v colleagues were invited to build a platform to discuss public matters and virtual Taiwan – or vTaiwan – was created.

In 2016, she was appointed minister without portfolio and, at the age of 35, was both the youngest and the only transgender minister.

So what has all this got to do with local government in the UK? Well, inspired by the lessons she learned from the internet, of ‘radical transparency, civic participation and rough consensus’, she is pioneering online participatory governance. In effect, Audrey Tang is crowdsourcing policy.

She describes the current democratic system as a

rope, being pulled between opposing views. Instead of asking what is the best arbitration, Ms Tang asks two new questions: Are there some common values that everyone can live with? And given the common values, can we come up with innovations that everyone can live with?

Under the basic principles of the vTaiwan system, an AI moderated conversation is used to hear the views and reactions of citizens. It uses existing open-source tools including Pol.is – a system created in Seattle after Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring.

Anyone can create an account and post comments, and you can up-vote or down-vote other people’s views but crucially there is no reply button. Unlike social media, this is not a forum for criticism or shouting down those with opposing views. It creates a map of opinions, and points of consensus start to emerge.

In its first instance, the system was brought in to moderate debate over plans to legalise online alcohol sales. Four years into discussions, talks were at an impasse between merchants and those concerned it would give children access to alcohol.

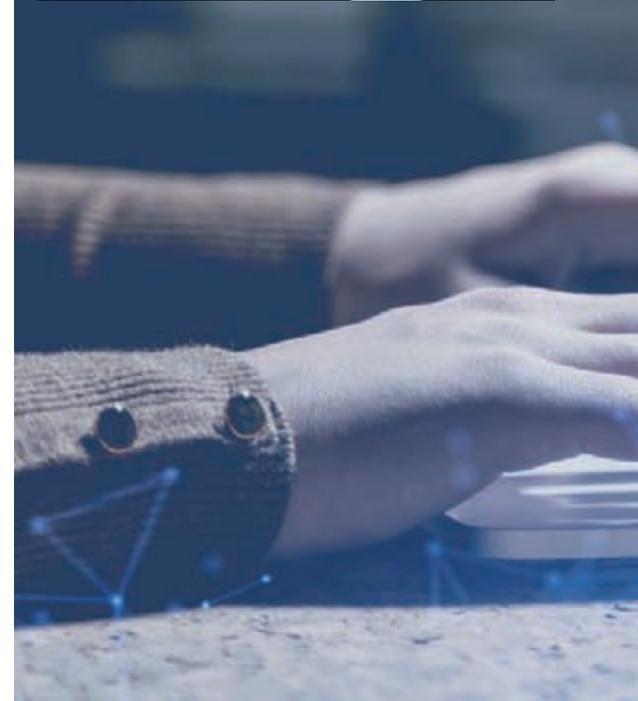
Within weeks the deadlock was broken. There were a set of recommendations; limiting the purchase of online booze to a few platforms, done through credit card transactions and collected at convenience stores.

Thus far, vTaiwan has been used on just a few bills and the government is not required to follow the recommendations. It has been used to come up with plans for regulating Uber. It has been gaining traction and some examples have begun in local government too.

According to Theo Bass, a researcher at Nesta who has studied digital democracy, Ms Tang is a ‘global pioneer for



Audrey Tang at the Tedx Talk



culture change in government’. But he warns that she is unusual – crowdsourcing efforts rarely get support from the existing political establishment.

‘If you want to do something like this, you want a pioneer that can support it at the top of government,’ he tells *The MJ*. ‘I don’t think there has been anyone in national government committed to a participatory system.’

Taiwan is not the only example where digital democracy is starting. In Finland, there have been experiments with Open Ministry, in Estonia a Citizens Assembly. In France, an online platform – Parlement & Citoyens – discusses

## Croydon consultation goes digital

When Neil Williams launched Croydon LBC’s digital strategy, he opened up the consultation online. He explains to **Heather Jameson** how it works

When Neil Williams arrived at Croydon LBC in the new role of chief digital officer nearly a year ago, he inherited an IT department and an ambition to make Croydon the ‘Silicon Valley of south London’. His remit covers everything from working on channel shift and transactional services, to smart cities and supporting the tech firms in the borough.

But when it came to launching the council’s digital strategy, it has been done with an open consultation online, giving local people the chance to debate what they want in an open forum.

His consultation experience goes back to the early 2000s, working at the Department of Trade and Industry on credit cards and digital approaches alongside Dave Briggs and Steph Gray, who was pioneering new approaches to consultation.

Now the three are collaborating again, with Dave joining the council as head of digital operations, and Steph working at Helpful Digital.

‘My career has felt like it has a rebellious streak. We are far more mainstream than we used to be,’ he says. But even

now, as we all become more digital by the day, he says: ‘It is coming as a surprise to the council that everything we do is digital.’

**‘We know we are not going to reach everyone through a website and if we are trying to make everything digital we need to reach the people who don’t’**

All councils do consultation, but the Croydon digital strategy goes further. He tells *The MJ*: ‘We wanted to be more conversational. What we have done in terms of tech is very simple. It is just a word press system with plug ins.’

The consultation started with three broad questions on the themes of the strategy and the public can comment on what they think. Comments are moderated, so they can’t be



policy and drafts legislation, while Paris has an online participatory budget programme.

However, there may be a long way to go on political culture before there are radical shifts to online participation in the UK – not least, the very open nature of the system.

As a minister, Ms Tang teleworks from anywhere in the world, and speaks to anyone who wants to talk to her – on the condition that they agree to the conversation going online. She says: ‘In Taiwan, when we talk about open data, we don’t just mean open government data, we mean open citizen data too.’

abusive, but the moderation happens as quickly as possible, so respondents can see their comments go live.

There are rules to the comments and as long as respondents stick to them, the comments get through moderation – even if they are critical of the council.

‘There were a couple of examples where people contradicted each other. It was so much better for us for that to be out in the open,’ Neil says. As a result, the public can see the views the council have to balance and better understand the reasoning behind some decisions.

It’s not all online either. ‘We know we are not going to reach everyone through a website and if we are trying to make everything digital we need to reach the people who don’t.’ Comments gathered face to face – at events in the local shopping centre and in community settings – are put on the website anonymously as well.

The first draft of the strategy went on the same site for consultation – before full council had the chance to discuss it. Despite this, councillors have been supportive. ‘Any displeasure they had was outweighed by the novelty and

**vTaiwan**

**The process goes through four stages, all as transparent as possible:**

**Proposal:** Online and offline discussion, with the government publishing raw data

**Opinion:** Collecting and visualising views. Participants can agree, disagree or pass on each other’s statements. An algorithm sorts participants into opinion groups and presents a visualised ‘opinion landscape’

**Reflection:** two in-person stakeholder meetings take place, live streamed and with a chatroom

**Decision:** recommendations are put forward to government which in turn decides what it will do.

For more examples of digital democracy visit the Nesta website <https://www.nesta.org.uk/>

seeing we are doing things differently. As a council there is a real appetite for engaging the community.’

He says of the process: ‘It’s not rocket science, it is very simple. But what is brave is having the consultation in public.

‘The key thing with all the consultation is that you only ask when you actually want an answer. Be clear and honest about what has been decided already.’

‘It’s all about the effort you put in. If you don’t really want to know, you won’t do it,’ he says. ‘Don’t do it if you don’t mean it.’

- You can find the Croydon digital strategy consultation at <https://strategy.croydon.digital/>
- And more about the project at <https://helpfuldigital.com/helping-croydon-council-build-a-digital-strategy-in-a-digital-way/>
- You can see more examples of crowdsourced policy at <https://crowd.law/a-hundred-places-where-governments-are-using-tech-to-crowdsource-policy-469165c19e15>

## Nine myths about your council’s digital transformation

**Michael Taylor** drives customer expansion in the UK for novoville, the citizen engagement and digital transformation expert with over 50 clients in 3 European countries. In this article he analyses some of the common digital fears that councils harbour.

At Novoville, we support many local authorities in becoming more efficient, and we’ve come across some persistent misconceptions about what it means for a council to make the most out of digital.

We thought we’d share what we think are some of the sector’s biggest myths.

### (1) Digital transformation is something you can plan

No matter how many reviews and strategic plans get commissioned, user behaviour keeps shifting. The only way to ‘future-proof’ your council is to start with present customer behaviour and be ready to get your hands dirty.

### (2) Digital transformation is a mission for a team

Digital impacts everyone. Every officer should be asking themselves ‘where am I losing time?’, ‘where are customers wasting time?’, and then get the team involved.

### (3) Digital transformation is just about tech

No. Any new technology involves changes in internal processes and requires training to fulfill its transformative potential. In fact, ‘technology’ is as much a way of thinking about things as it is a tool or solution.

### (4) Digital transformation is expensive

Chances are that it doesn’t cost nearly as much as you’re paying now. With Novoville solutions starting at £5,000, we have proven experience that we can help you save a substantial amount of money and man-hours in just a few weeks.

### (5) Digital transformation is about implementing one big solution

There’s no need to apply a cast when all you need is a band aid. Don’t overdo it, and start small. Every council has different specificities. An all-encompassing solution will charge you for features you won’t use and users who won’t log in.

### (6) Digital transformation is about apps, mobile and social

Yes. And better business processes, more operational efficiency, automation, training, transfer of skills...

### (7) Transformation is all about apps, mobile and social

Of course not, it’s about providing the best possible access to and delivery of services. Sometimes, this can mean no digital at all.

### (8) Small companies don’t have shoulders broad enough to support our large-scale project

Big players have been making big promises for years, missing their own development timelines, and, while you’re paying the annual licence, leaving satisfaction with Local Government the lowest of any UK industrial sector. We think a fresh approach is needed.

### (9) Digital transformation is complex

That’s what they want you to think. We deploy new processes and solutions in weeks that can be tweaked in minutes. And we make great coffee.

Made it this far? Got a tenth one? Get in touch.

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# Getting digital right

Working on digital partnerships is fraught with pitfalls. **Kirsty Cole** and **Melvyn Ingleson** offer top tips for making sure you get the best out of your digital transformation deals

The failure rate of technology partnerships remains high. In our view, failure of such arrangements is often because both sides have focused on their internal stakeholders to the detriment of understanding what really matters to those on the other side of the table.

Effective governance arrangements are critical. Another key factor which has led to failure is the lack of capacity, skills and experience on the client side to manage the partner or supplier. This needs to be recognised and addressed.

Bearing this in mind, here are our top tips for securing successful partnership arrangements.

## 1. Be clear about what you are looking for and understand your options

Contractual arrangements may be more appropriate to achieve short term objectives whereas a formal and bespoke delivery vehicle may be required to deliver long term arrangements.

Before you go to the market, consult with service users so there is clarity as to aspirations and expectations. Then maintain regular dialogue with them to test whether the partnership is operating successfully. Decide at the outset who is going to manage the relationship.

The council needs to understand the wider supplier landscape. The characteristics of the global technology companies and their behaviours are often very different from the UK-focused, corporate providers, and different again from local SME providers.

The margins of the global providers are enormous, so there is always room to negotiate. Growing adoption of any technology purchased is the key performance indicator for your commercial partners, so expect to negotiate hard on installation support, user training and citizen-focused digital skills provision

## 2. Market test

The council should be willing to support the implementation of pilots through appropriate selection of user groups. This approach greatly reduces the risk of failure at a later stage.

## 3. Make sure there are effective governance arrangements in place

A contractual arrangement with a clear specification is likely to be appropriate where there is a short-term objective to deliver a clearly defined service or product. Care should be taken to draft the specification with sufficient flexibility to allow scope for change. This is one key reason why the IT community is increasingly recommending cloud-based solutions.

If the objective is to develop a long-term relationship then it may be appropriate to consider joint venture (JV) arrangements. A careful evaluation of risk and reward needs to be undertaken at the outset and a plan prepared to mitigate identified risks. Funding arrangements will need to be clear. What equity stake will the council take and what mechanisms will be put in place to draw down further funding?

Should elected members participate as directors in any JV company? A protocol to manage any potential conflicts should be drawn up at the outset. Governance



arrangements should include arrangements for effective scrutiny of the company's performance.

## 4. Clearly define roles and responsibilities

The larger the private organisation, the greater the hierarchy of decision-making for the bigger, more visible partnerships. Similarly, the private sector partner will need to understand that the council is operating within a political environment and that members will need to be kept informed.

It will be for individual councils to determine the precise role to be played by elected members but it is clearly essential that there is provision for regular dialogue and quick decision making on day to day operational issues.

## 5. Beware of 'over-promise' and 'under delivery'

During any procurement process or when creating a shared risk venture, it's important to ensure that your suppliers are doing all they can to assess the validity of your expectations and their realistic capacity to achieve them.

For example, there are always capacity issues which impact delivery. The council needs written confirmation of how these issues are being addressed and how any failure of provision will be offset.

## 6. Ask difficult questions

The council's nominated lead officer needs to be clear as to the broad strategic outcomes sought, including the financial and operational deliverables.

Likewise, if we assume that the principle buyer is the chief information officer, chief digital officer or equivalent, it is their duty to articulate the capacity and capability of the preferred providers; to conduct the market evaluation and to have asked all the difficult questions.

## 7. The Emperor's new clothes – final reflections

It is important to think strategically about what you want rather than being led by the technology provider. It's attractive to be leading edge - but tailor-made solutions are often untested, costly and risky to implement.

Technology is a vital enabler but your workforce, your citizens and local businesses, your local charities and volunteer groups all need to be supported to acquire the digital skills essential for effective adoption.

*Kirsty Cole recently retired from local government, having been deputy chief executive and monitoring officer at Newark & Sherwood DC and acting for a period as its interim chief executive. Melvyn Ingleson is an independent adviser leading MJI Business Solutions*