



The changing role of digital leadership

Among the shifting sands of local government reorganisation, Rosalind Lambert feels there is undoubtedly a huge opportunity for digital change if the sector is ready to embrace it

We watched with interest the recent presentation on the State of Government Digital Review to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, which was followed up by a *Blueprint for Modern Digital Government*.

The Blueprint's vision for systemic change introduces a digital-first operating model where senior leaders are expected to have strong digital leadership skills, where services are 'reimagined', and digital and data infrastructure across ALL public services is shared to address common needs. We will now see the creation of a new digital centre of government (Government Digital Service) to work right across the public sector including local government.

Other priorities set out in the blueprint include:

- Harness the power of AI for the public good
- Strengthen and extend the digital and data public infrastructure
- Elevate leadership, invest in talent and innovation
- Fund for outcomes and procure for growth
- Commit to transparency, drive accountability

It is clear that major change and transformation will be needed to deliver this blueprint and the Local Government

Association (LGA) has been working closely with government regarding the roll-out of the blueprint and supporting on the State of Government Digital Review.

The LGA believes that, to fully unlock the potential of a digitally enabled public sector, Government must invest in a decentralised yet coordinated national strategy that empowers local councils to drive digital transformation. A key component of this effort would be the creation of a dedicated, sector-led Local Government Centre for Digital Technology (LGCDT) within the LGA.

We expect to see higher demand for candidates with strong digital leadership capabilities and expertise in integrating and managing technology across public services

The LGCDT would act as a national hub, working alongside regional hubs located within existing authorities to fuel digital transformation across the sector, ensuring that all councils and residents benefit, regardless of their location or current digital maturity. With so much diversity in capability across the 317

councils in England, it seems entirely sensible to create a local government-focused centre for digital transformation.

There is undoubtedly huge opportunity for digital change if it can be embraced in the shifting sands of local government reorganisation. The review found services are under-digitised with nearly half of all central government services (more in local government) lacking a digital pathway. To ensure a more digital offering, organisations will need to address the underlying infrastructure where cloud adoption is poor, is still mainly focused within central government and remove duplication or reduce silos across technology services to minimise waste and take advantage of scale.

Both the review and blueprint acknowledge that the current paradigm for digital transformation in the public sector is not working, that digital needs to be redefined as a value driver not just a cost centre, and that digital leadership needs to be elevated to deliver the services expected by citizens. The review is clear that public sector leaders need to ensure digital is not just an add-on, but a core skillset.

The blueprint sets out the requirement that: 'All public sector organisations have a digital leader on their executive committee and a digital non-executive director on their board

by 2026 at the latest and must publish this information publicly.'

As you would expect, this has created some excitement across the digital community and an expectation that new leadership opportunities will open up.

We expect to see higher demand for candidates with strong digital leadership capabilities and expertise in integrating and managing technology across public services. Organisations will be competing for professionals skilled in digital strategy, data management, cybersecurity, and change management.

Of course, the digital transformation agenda in local government requires leaders who are not only technically adept but also skilled in managing change, collaborating across departments, and engaging with communities.

The blueprint suggests a date of 2026 for board representation of digital leaders across the public sector. This is a significant ask for organisations during a time of financial stress and reorganisation.

As always, the question will be whether additional resource will be available to create a new leadership role in every local authority. ■

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