

# RESEARCH PAPER

**Five key challenges for  
IT leaders supporting  
remote workers in the  
post-pandemic world**

**September 2020**

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## Five key challenges for IT leaders supporting remote workers in the post-pandemic world

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## Introduction

Local authorities provide essential services to our citizens and local taxpayers, from health, social, and care functions to education, housing, and keeping our communities safe and clean. That demands a lot from those organisations' IT teams.

Between them, the UK's 382 councils account for over two million employees, making them among the biggest employers and IT users in the country.

However, the coronavirus pandemic has made normal office-based workflows impossible, so council IT leaders have had no choice but to expand remote working on an unprecedented scale. In some cases, this expansion has been in line with existing strategic goals, but in others it has demanded urgent upgrades, hardware rollouts, and fixes to internal systems.

There are many upsides to remote working, among them: increased productivity; a better work/life balance for many; a reduction in non-essential travel and fuel consumption; and a more sustainable approach to business – albeit in unpredictable circumstances for public health.

But to fully embrace new technologies as opportunities for reinvention, IT leaders need to be able to manage them effectively – at a time when council employees have been forced to use home networks and internal support teams have been unable to meet in the real world.

Failure is not an option if essential services are to be maintained, so the absence of central office premises demands that something else takes their place: unified control and oversight of technology and communications.

So how to turn social isolation and distancing into digital collaboration and connection when up to 90 percent of council staff have been working remotely – including IT support teams themselves? This *Computing* research paper examines the challenges that public sector IT leaders have faced – and continue to face – and the key lessons they have learned along the way.

## Five key challenges for IT leaders supporting remote workers in the post-pandemic world

### CHALLENGE

## The hardware dimension

To support home working at organisation-wide scale demands that all staff have the right equipment to do it – both in terms of the computers they use for everyday admin work, and those needed for any tasks that are normally carried out face to face with citizens.

When he stepped into the role in April 2020, Harrow Council's Director of ICT Ben Goward<sup>1</sup> found that employee laptops were unable to support remote, collaborative working in the way that they urgently needed to do.

With 2,100 council staff to support directly, the task was Herculean for the IT team to get basic hardware up to scratch. "The council was not well placed for the pandemic, as users had previously been using thin-client terminals on desks," explains Goward. "So they would normally come in to the office, sit down, and run a VDI [Virtual Desktop Infrastructure] Windows session."

The immediate priority was clear: to enable the VDI system to be accessible from home. "We had to put that in place in a matter of very few weeks. I've only got a small IT team, because it's been largely outsourced, and I had to redirect that entire team onto supporting our users who were struggling to connect from their own PCs."

Only some staff had access to council laptops and this hardware itself was out of date.



"Around half of the users did have a laptop, but it was a Windows 7 machine with quite an old build," he says. "It didn't have any of the **collaborative working capabilities** that were so critical to allowing staff to work in a more flexible, agile way."



At the time of writing, Goward is one-third of the way through an essential hardware upgrade and rollout, with 700 new laptops out there and 1,400 still to go.

Old technology also affected official business, such as planning meetings and court hearings, he explains. "We had to do virtual committee meetings, so there was the whole elected member dimension too. None of this technology was in place."

The good news is that the initiative has been a success – despite the mountains that the IT team had to scale early in the pandemic. "With the exception of 150 staff, who are tied to the building to provide face-to-face cover – or because they work in our contact centre, which still had an on-premise telephony switch – everybody has been working from home successfully," says Goward.

<sup>1</sup>Read Computing's full interview with him here: <https://www.computing.co.uk/interview/4018137/harrow-furnace-london-leader-delivered-change-lockdown>

<sup>2</sup>Computing's interview with Hedges is available here: <https://www.computing.co.uk/interview/4018234/worcester-council-connected-crisis>

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Other local authorities found that hardware choices needed to be looked at again in light of the crisis. Geoff Hedges is Digital Transformation Manager at Worcestershire County Council<sup>2</sup>.

He says, “One challenge that has come to light is the device choice that people made for their previous working style. With workers that were out in the field more, particularly with social care teams visiting people’s homes, they very much favoured tablet devices. But now that a lot of that contact is paused, those devices are less than fit for purpose when you are sitting at your dining table.

“So one of the challenges is making sure that people have the appropriate kit. Another is getting kit to people generally, who have been sat at home just working with a laptop screen, so we’ve been issuing additional screens, keyboards, and mice.”

### CHALLENGE

## The software dimension

Several councils reported that the software they had been using for collaborative work was no longer fit for purpose, partly due to the massive increase in scale which had not been planned for in the original specification and licence. IT leaders reported systems running slowly due to the increased workload.

For example, existing Skype for Business accounts were unable to scale up to the loads put on them by all council business now being conducted remotely. More scalable situations were and are needed – often quickly.

The difference in scale between the lockdown and pre-virus days has been extreme. Worcestershire County Council’s Hedges explains,



“We saw an average of **30 videoconferences a week** on our Skype platform before COVID-19, but we’ve been seeing about **1,000 a week** since we started working remotely. We hammered our Skype system, and it would have been a very complex and lengthy project to add capacity to that.”



All interviewees report informal use of popular video platform Zoom. Some have found it essential if partner organisations in the voluntary and community sectors are using it. However, much of that usage will be phased out in the medium to long term – according to comments from the IT leaders interviewed by *Computing* – because they said it is not an officially sanctioned collaboration tool in their organisations.

With the UK’s creaking broadband infrastructure under such massive pressure from spiking video traffic – and its 5G plans delayed and increasing in cost thanks to political pressures – it’s no surprise that some council workers have also had to be issued with 4G dongles just so they can carry out basic tasks and keep talking to their colleagues.

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### CHALLENGE

## The question of scale

This question of scaling up to mass home working has been at the centre of the local authority challenge.

For example, Cambridgeshire is the hub of a shared services centre for the East of England, the LGSS, a function that supports 5,000 users across multiple locations. Alan Shields is its IT Chief Architect, based out of Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC)<sup>3</sup>.

For CCC, the massive, overnight shift to remote/home working was a challenge, but also part of a broad strategic plan that predates the pandemic. In this sense, only the scale and timeframe have changed.

Shields explains:



“Whereas our current HQ in Cambridge can accommodate about **1,000 staff**, we’re moving to new premises that could cater for **up to 700**, but we’ll only have desk space for **half of that number.**”



Once the crisis is over, up to two-thirds of HQ staff will be working remotely on any given day. The remaining third – up to 350 people – will use hot desks whenever they need or want to be on site.

In the long term, this raises important questions for all local authorities, such as: will there be any long-term need for large town halls, civic centres, or head office premises, beyond essential face-to-face work? In turn, that has implications for local communities and supporting businesses.

Meanwhile, telephony has been an issue for many councils, with calls generally routed through employees’ mobiles or via soft phones, demonstrating the need for a unified communications system.

How has Worcestershire, for example, been dealing with its telephony demands remotely, given the particular importance of contact centres and help lines to a rural authority?

“Our telephone system is VoIP-based, so some of our contact centre agents are quite comfortably working from home,” says Hedges. “We just issued them with a soft phone on their device, so we were quite well placed.”

<sup>3</sup>Computing’s full interview with him is available here: <https://www.computing.co.uk/analysis/4018203/cambridge-graduates-council-leader-moving-workers-collaborative-future>

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The need for better, more scalable communications is clear in a dispersed and remote workforce. But the best-laid plans don't always have the desired outcomes when it comes to managing a council's overall IT estate in a crisis, he explains. Unlike many authorities, Worcestershire had already built into its infrastructure the capacity for 100 percent of staff working remotely – but only in theory.

“Initially, we thought the system that we already had could scale up sufficiently to cope with the demand,” says Hedges. “We had two VPN servers, which had been load balanced up to 3,000 connections each.

“But we discovered when we took one of those servers offline for routine maintenance that the remaining server was not coping with the level of demand that was being put through it at all. So we've added additional capacity to the system so that we can continue to maintain quality of service.”

Despite its theoretical capacity for large-scale remote working, Worcestershire has never actively pursued it as a strategy. Rather, it seems to have made a good bet on a possible future, then waited to see if people wanted it. Since then, of course, the coronavirus has dragged the future into all of our towns and cities – whether we like it or not.



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### CHALLENGE

## Dealing with citizens in new ways

The crisis and the widespread shift to home or remote working has at least created opportunities for authorities to engage with citizens in new ways.

Ed Garcez is Director of Transformation at Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC)<sup>4</sup>, a post he took up in June 2020, after having been at central London authority, Camden.

“Now we are emerging, hopefully, from the pandemic, it’s interesting how we could repurpose our buildings,” he says. “Many residents previously commuted into London every day, but now they’re all working at home in their towns and villages, which presents a different kind of opportunity for us.

“It reflects a need among some sectors of the community, so perhaps we can use some of the accommodation that we hold to address that.”



In Central Bedfordshire, citizens’ use of the Council’s online services and self-service digital channels has **increased by about 30 percent during the pandemic**, which has had other impacts too, he says.



“The relationship between the Council and the voluntary and community sectors has always been strong in CBC. And so initiatives like the good neighbourhood scheme, which operates in towns and villages, have been really strong and gaining insight from communities and residents, cascading and sharing information out.”

“There are a multitude of different channels that have kept the dialogue open, and nothing suggests that [face-to-face services aside] things are operating worse than before. There are some positive experiences, things that might actually have improved.”

“Anecdotally, we think that engagement with the formal machinery of democracy may have increased. People are watching the streams of council meetings.”

The crisis is transforming how other councils reach out to citizens. “We’ve created a digital solution that enables people to register to help, or say that they need help, with a matching exercise to bring both groups together,” says Worcestershire’s Hedges.

“That could be using the voluntary sector, such as Age UK, but it could be individuals from across the county who pick up prescriptions or drop off food parcels. So we’ve almost stumbled across new ways of providing key services to our residents.”

<sup>4</sup>Computing’s full interview with him is available here: <https://www.computing.co.uk/interview/4018346/changing-beds-leader-left-london-country-life>

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Gauging feedback from citizens is often the remit of communications or specialist outreach teams (who have themselves been working from home). Does Worcestershire have a central way of measuring sentiment?

“We do have sentiment analysis software for our social media content, but it’s not robust for a long-term issue, such as COVID,” says Hedges. “However, we are planning a Residents Viewpoint Survey, which will go out in September. As far as I know, that’ll be the first significant piece of work that we’ve done on resident feedback.”

The ability for it and other authorities to review communications with citizens across all social platforms would be a benefit. Like other councils, Worcestershire is also carrying out an internal review to gauge workers’ feelings about long-term home working. This brings us to the wider cultural dimension.



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### CHALLENGE

## Changing organisational cultures

As we have seen, the shift towards mass home working is partly a technology challenge, and partly a workflow management one. But there is another dimension: the creation of a very different culture to the traditional office-based model.

It's a transformation that suits some people more than others. In its internal staff survey, Central Bedfordshire reports 98 percent employee satisfaction with the IT team. That's great news for Garcez, but he accepts it is partly due to employees' positive response to remote working.

"There is definitely a majority of staff who are finding that they are able to work efficiently and effectively – remotely – in a way that they never thought they would be able to before."

"Myths have been busted in terms of people's perception of what's possible. Elements of technology that had been planned for a more traditional project launch were rolled out almost overnight in response to the pandemic."

In this sense, IT departments have become change managers as much as IT enablers, rolling out functionality at a time when the virus has made some employees more receptive to new ways of working.

But not everyone can cope. Among the technology management and cultural challenges, there are problems that demand sensitive solutions.

While lockdown may have caused comparatively little disruption to self-reliant people, the crisis has been disastrous for more extrovert individuals who need the energy of colleagues and teams around them. Others may have home or family environments that are ill-suited to remote working.

In Worcestershire, Hedges explains that the Council may consider using public spaces – such as cafes and bars – so that teams can still meet and collaborate in the real world, driven by the need to maintain the kinds of social interaction that originally took place in large offices.

In Central Bedfordshire, Garcez acknowledges the same challenges.



"I'm very conscious that a number of our workforce need an office, whether that's because of the logistics of their accommodation at home, or it's a mental health-related issue. We resource and support that; our research suggests it is **eight to ten percent of the workforce**.



"But the lion's share of people are very happy with a hybrid working model, where they may do solo working remotely and co-working and collaborative working in an office. We need to transform our office spaces to address these different work styles."

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At Cambridgeshire and the LGSS, Shields says that councils should accentuate the positives. “I can say from my own experience that myself and my colleagues are working just as effectively from home as we were before. To a certain extent, we’re working more effectively, because we’re making the effort to communicate.

“Working from home is not for everybody, so the authority is looking at ways of slowly bringing some people back. But ultimately, it will be about reinforcing the route that we were going down anyway.

“I think people will be more accepting of that. They’ll have the tools to work flexibly, and we will be more successful and work better because of everything we’ve been through in this crisis.”

In Harrow, Goward is clear that it could signal a new way forward. “We’ve seen that we can continue to deliver excellent services as a council with this completely different way of working.

“Fundamentally, the council has seen that this has benefits for work/life balance and staff well-being. And it obviously has a significant impact on our operation in terms of the accommodation that we want to occupy going forward.”

Does he believe this is a view shared across the public sector? “I do. It costs a lot of money to maintain an office in the current crisis, particularly with the need for more intense sanitisation, cleaning, and energy consumption.

“I think every local authority sees agile and flexible working as a positive for the well-being of their staff.”



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### Conclusions

Every IT professional knows that the gaps between theory, specification, and practice can be significant. What systems are designed to do, and what they are actually capable of delivering, can be very different things.

Months of lockdown have brought this home to many organisations; but when they are in the public sector, delivering essential services to millions of local taxpayers, any gaps risk having consequences for citizens and for councils' many skilled, knowledge workers.

Central control is the key challenge for public sector IT leaders. Collaborative tools, device management capabilities, and a unified communications solution that brings together voice, video, and data channels are essential. The coronavirus crisis has revealed this in no uncertain terms, and demonstrated that councils need to take bigger, bolder steps into a collaborative future.

The big picture is important too. The change in workflow is neither solely an internal IT management issue, nor just a cultural one for these organisations. It also has profound implications for communities – and for those workers or citizens who are less able than others to engage with remote working or digital services.

Establishing the infrastructure for more flexible, remote, demand-led workflows is essential, because collaboration and reliable, secure communications may be the keys to survival.

### About the sponsor, RingCentral

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