



COVID-19 digital & ICT impact survey report

**Digital readiness, challenges and opportunities
for local authorities in response to Covid-19**

August 2020



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Introduction

The impact of Covid-19 on organisations and the local, national and regional economies has been substantial, especially in the way that it has forced local authorities to change the way they work to address the needs of their communities.

Many offices have closed and moved to a remote way of working. While some businesses are well equipped to deal with this, many have been forced to rapidly adopt, at scale, new digital and ICT tools to enable them to continue to work.

The challenges of this include adopting new ways of working in such a short time frame, whether due to a lack of readiness, insufficient skills within their organisations and little time to train, and in some cases the pressures of furloughed staff reducing capacity.

However, it is not only the impact on businesses that is a concern during the Covid-19 lockdown; the impact on employees' work-life balance, mental wellbeing, job security and workloads are also major concerns for organisations.

The Covid-19 Digital & ICT Impact Survey, produced in collaboration between Socitm and Socitm Advisory, and supported by LOLA and MCE, focuses on the impact of the lockdown on local authorities with three key objectives:

- To establish what digital and ICT tools are in place to enable local services to continue to be delivered;
- To identify what is required to sustain the changes that have proven beneficial; and
- To understand the long-term help and support local government bodies need to 'reset' their business models and services as they transition to a new normal.
- To create an evidence base to underpin our Planting the Flag prospectus for post Covid-19 renewal.

Our survey, which was open to all local authorities from 9th May to 19th June 2020, collected more than 2,500 individual responses from approximately 70 organisations across the UK. We received responses from various departments, roles and seniority levels to produce a comprehensive insight into the impact on local authorities.

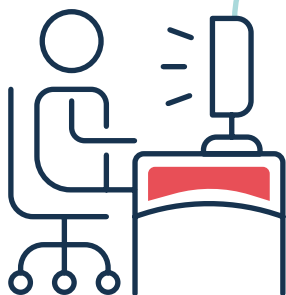
We also gained approximately 100 responses from governmental organisations outside the UK, including from New Zealand, Australia, Germany and Ireland, to compare the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown from an international perspective.



Socitm and Socitm Advisory are sister organisations with one common ambition; to drive innovation, technology and modernisation across the public sector.

Socitm is a dynamic membership organisation that operates through sharing best practice within organisations delivering public services. Members are engaged in research, training and events, creating a preferred and leading professional network.

Socitm Advisory develops best practice by offering a full suite of independent consultancy advice across the UK public sector. With more than 100 local authority clients, it is a trusted, independent, respected advisor to this sector, delivering lasting transformation.



Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic is responsible for a dramatic shift in the way local authorities deliver their services. Whether to residents and businesses, or in the way that employees are collaborating and working, everything is changing at pace.

The most significant is dramatically increased remote working. Along with this, we have also seen an increased need for office collaboration tools, which are now essential for most employees. Video conferencing, file sharing, and collaborative team communication tools are now mainstream for workers to do their jobs efficiently and effectively.

However, our survey's key results highlight that many staff have little experience in using these tools and a majority (78%) have received no training at all. More than 80% of respondents said they had experienced issues with the IT; whether that was in the efficiency to deliver their work, in the simplicity of collaboration, or in the ease of synchronisation between technologies.

Respondents within local authorities feel positive impacts due to technology changes in their work-life balance and in their productivity. 43% of respondents said this has improved; 46% reported they had felt the technology used due to lockdown had made them more productive in their roles.

As we now transition out of lockdown and more and more employees are returning to work from furlough, or can work in an office setting, our survey highlights several clear opportunities for improvement.

The benefits on employees' productivity and work-life balance highlights an office base five days a week is not necessary.

However, the lack of training given to make this the new norm is concerning. The number of respondents who stated they had services that were forced to pause during lockdown (54%) due to a lack of technology is also worrying, and poses the question of what more can be done to ensure delivery in these areas of service in the future?



Survey results

One of the major changes to ensure essential business continues is an increased use of technology and collaborative digital tools to enable employees to do their jobs.

A key concern that was highlighted at the start of the lockdown, given the need for more people to work remotely, was the way in which data would be shared and whether GDPR compliance would be achieved. However, the situation has not been as problematic as feared; there has been innovation and improvement due to the uptake of collaborative office tools by local authorities to ensure safe data sharing.

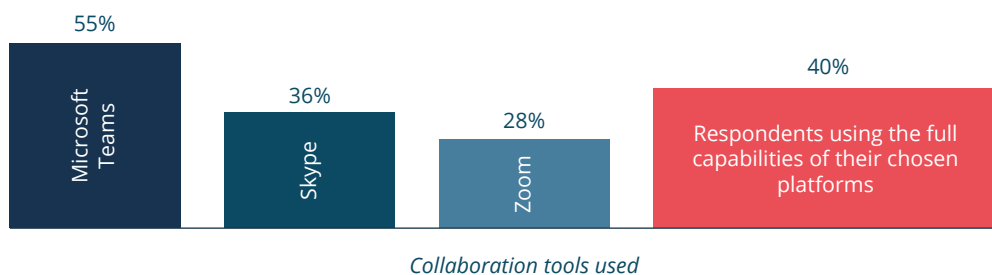


As expected, prior to lockdown, only 5% of local authority staff worked from home; that's now 82%

Remote working capabilities

83% are now regularly using office collaboration and/or video conferencing tools.

We have also seen a massive increase in the number of local authority employees who are using collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom. 83% of respondents reported they now regularly use office collaboration tools and/or video conferencing to connect and work with colleagues.



“ Microsoft Teams has allowed us to organise remote team meetings and share file easily ”

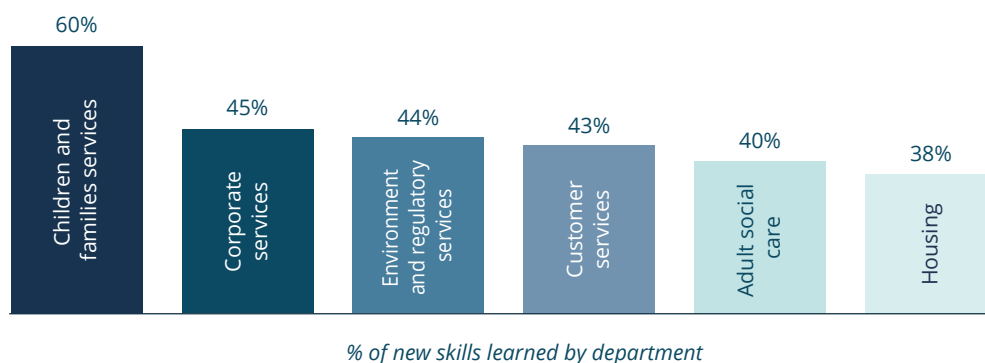
Just 30% were using collaboration tools prior to lockdown.

The most common method of communication was email (Outlook or Gmail). Our survey showed that use of collaboration tools prior to lockdown differed between council departments. For example: 43% in corporate services; 31% in customer services; 30% in adult social care; 29% in children and families services; and 27% in environment and regulatory services; versus just 4% in housing.



47% of local authority respondents have learned a new digital or ICT skill since the start of lockdown

While most responding departments saw approximately two-fifths of their team learning a new skills, children and families services saw a spike



80% of respondents feel they have all the ICT tools they require to do their job well.

The majority of these included only basic tools though, such as a computer, monitor, keyboard and telephone. A number of respondents highlighted that any equipment they were missing, such as headsets, were quickly being ordered by their employers. More specialist technology such as specific software and programmes were causing issues to some respondents.

“As I use a personal laptop, I cannot use specialised programmes such as AutoCAD due to the license. I have raised this with IT and a corporate laptop will be ordered, however it will take time”

Remote delivery has still been possible despite data-sharing challenge concerns.

One major concern highlighted at the start of the lockdown was how data could be shared between colleagues with the shift to remote working. This has not had as big an impact as expected, with many council respondents stating their ability to safely, securely and easily share data both within and outside their organisations has been positive and changes have been minimal.

Only 11% of respondents said they had needed to change the way they share data with colleagues; 17% in the way they share externally to people outside their organisation; and only 8% experienced problems in data-sharing in relation to delivering services.

Remote working has been well received by local authority respondents.

46% of respondents stated they had felt they had been more productive since working remotely and using collaborative office tools; 43% said the remote working environment had made them feel they had a better (and easier to sustain) work-life balance.

“I have been able to spend more time with my partner and my son, and can spread my hours out over the week. I’ve also reduced travelling time and costs”

However, there are still improvements to be made, particularly in cases where more specialist tools, software or equipment are needed for employees to work to effectively complete their tasks.



Sandra Taylor

Socitm Immediate Past President; Former Head of Digital and ICT Services at Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

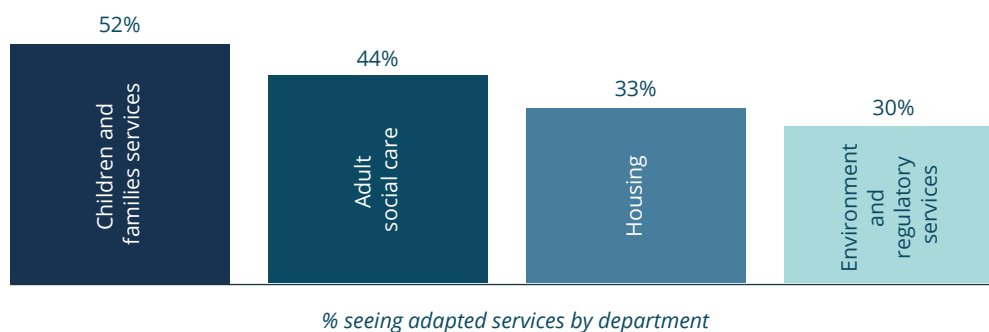
“I genuinely think that at the end of this, our councils will be different - and I think that’s a good thing. We have catapulted staff into the digital age over the last few weeks. Overall, staff are working productively and efficiently from home, with the various digital tools enabling workshops, collaboration, training and even the successful induction of staff who have joined us during the crisis.

What is happening is probably the most seismic change in modernising the public sector any of us have experienced, and after months staff will not want to go back to how they worked before. When we emerge from this, from an IT, modernisation and transformation perspective things will be better.”

Service innovation



42% of local authority respondents said the service they provided had adopted new ways of working that brought benefits to users



Over two-fifths of council services provided by responding authorities have adapted their delivery to provide essential services and benefits to citizens, communities, vulnerable groups and businesses that rely on them.

This has particularly been the case for services for vulnerable citizens, including in children and families, especially in adult social care services.

Benefits of remote working

Almost half of all respondents said they had experienced increased productivity since moving to remote working; whether that was due to the lack of distractions compared to the office environment, being more motivated to get on with work without having a commute, or meetings being more productive over the telephone or via video call, compared to face-to-face.

There are correlations between employees who reported increased productivity, having all the ICT tools they require and providing services that have adopted new ways of delivery to citizens, communities, at risk groups and businesses.



46% of respondents said they had been more productive since moving to remote working tools

At one council that completed the survey, 72% of respondents reported they felt more productive in a remote working setting; 94% had all the ICT tools they required to do their job remotely; and 83% had seen their services adopting innovation to benefit citizens and communities

“ I can get up and get on with the day straight away without having to commute to work. I also get distracted less as I don’t have people coming up to my desk and asking me questions throughout the day - I can answer questions when I have finished my tasks ”



On the other hand, a Midlands-based council in the UK, which reported only 38% of respondents felt more productive working remotely, also stated that only 38% of its services had been adapted to remote ways of working and delivery. While 75% of their respondents had all the ICT tools they required, only half had been given any kind of training on how to use the new tools provided.



43% of council respondents said they had found it easier to balance their personal and work lives as a result of technology in lockdown

Almost half of all respondents said they felt they had a better work-life balance since the Covid-19 lockdown. However, of the 54% that had not experienced better work-life balance, the majority reported having additional workloads due to employees being on furlough, or having to adapt to working on new projects they may not be familiar with.

25% felt that virtual tools have made their job easier.

At a London borough that completed the survey, 63% of respondents reported feeling that virtual tools had made their job easier. The same council respondents commented that 69% had all the ICT tools they required and 44% had received good training of new tools. Whereas, a north-west based council which saw just 13% of respondents feeling that virtual tools had made their job easier also saw 63% having to pause or stop services, and just 17% receiving any kind of training.



**Liverpool
City Council**

Alison Hughes

Socitm Vice president; Assistant
Director for ICT, Digital and
Customer at Liverpool City Council

"Our 90+ contact centre staff are now delivering a service from home, using a range of technology. The service is as good as it ever has been in terms of performance. We have also enabled 60+ face-to-face customer staff to work from home, receiving and making calls to residents who have requested food deliveries and other support.

They are able to support the contact centre team and also back office functions - such as processing documents related to Revenues and Benefits and business support grants. It's been challenging but all the efforts have been worth it and the team has received wonderful feedback from residents"

Opportunities and improvements

Our survey highlighted a number of areas of improvement for local authorities in their use of remote working tools, and their capabilities and benefits of remote working.

There are clear challenges due to the number of services curtailed during lockdown; a lack of remote technology being available, and the lack of training that has been given to employees on these remote digital tools are key areas for improvement in ICT.

The majority of responses received stated their internet connection was the main issue they had experienced when remote working, particularly from home. A recent [BBC report](#) said that a majority of the UK had experienced slower broadband speeds during lockdown, with more users using localised connection spots than ever at one time, making it difficult to reach appropriate upload and download speeds to be able to work efficiently, especially in rural or dense urban areas.

Other issues experienced by respondents include: firewall capacity for VPN, outdated software on personal or company-provided laptops, and issues connecting to organisational online tools due to the high number of users.



Half of local authority respondents experienced an issue with remote working tools during lockdown

Only 22% of respondents have received training on new remote working tools.

While a number of the issues experienced by local authority respondents has been out of the control of these organisations, there are also a variety of issues that have been experienced by employees which can be attributed to a lack of training or digital skills. Only 22% of respondents said they had been given additional training when asked to use new remote working tools since the start of lockdown.

This does differ quite drastically between local authorities however, with one council in the East of England reporting that 61% of its employees had been given adequate training for the new tools they had been given to use whilst working remotely; compared to a north-west based council which had trained just 11% of its staff. Figures on average, however, are disappointing and highlight a vital need for consultancies such as Socitm Advisory's services to ensure that local authorities are working as effectively and efficiently as possible to deliver the services their citizens and businesses need.

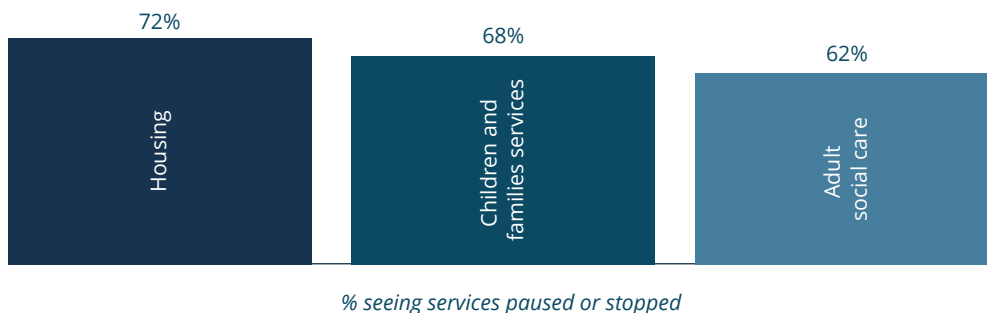
“ My internet connection keeps dropping, it cuts out all the time, so I end up using my own phone to make calls. There are daily ICT issues where you will get thrown out of online calls or can't gain access due to slow internet connection speeds ”

Stopping or pausing of services

Two-thirds have seen elements of services paused or stopped during lockdown.

62% of local authority respondents stated they had experienced parts of or whole services that had had to be paused or stopped due to the lockdown conditions, with housing and social care being hit the hardest.

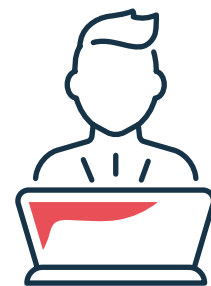
This raises an interesting question for the future of how organisations and local authorities can work together to further leverage ICT and digital to enable services to continue as normal.



“ We have been unable to run family therapy sessions and counselling sessions as we mainly work with children in schools ”

Lack of employee involvement

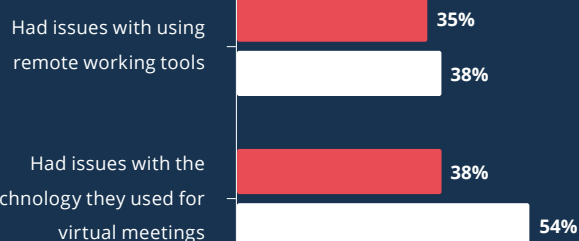
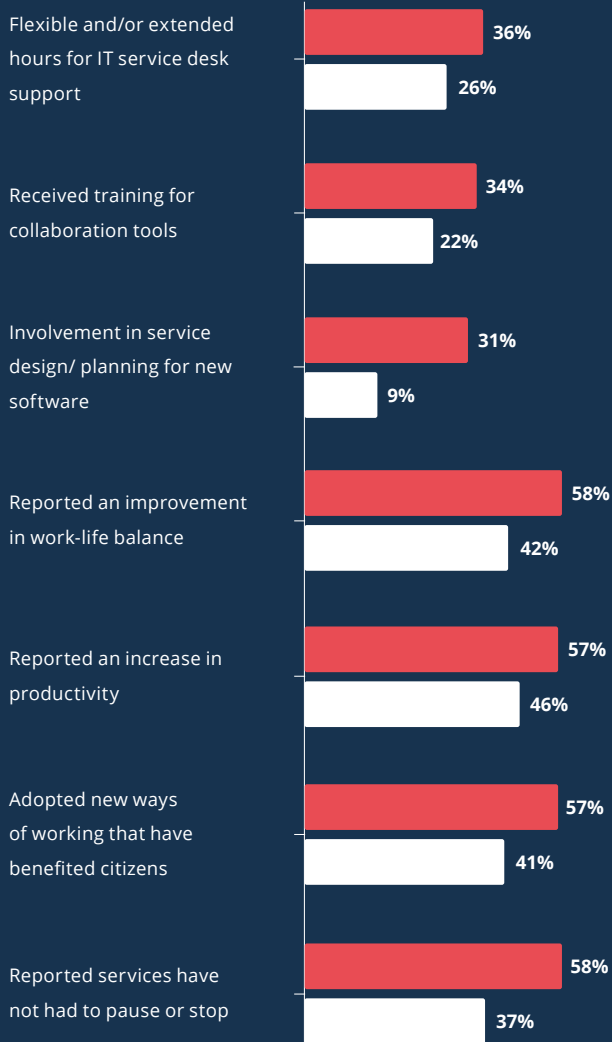
Local authority respondents also stated they felt they had not been involved as much as they feel would be beneficial to the services they provide. Authorities have had to rapidly deploy technology at the start of the crisis, leaving little time for co-design; but as we enter a new phase of lockdown, it brings forward opportunity to open conversations of how more members of local authority teams can collaborate towards future service design and planning.



Only 9% of respondents have been involved in service design or planning of new software since lockdown

An international perspective

■ International
■ UK



Internationally...

83%

now work remotely

80%

have all the digital tools they require to do their job well

In the UK...

82%

now work remotely

81%

have all the digital tools they require to do their job well



Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality

Creative problem-solving

"The Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, a member of the Global Resilient Cities Network (GRCN), held its first international virtual hackathon in early April. The event, with around 300 participants, was dedicated to tackling challenges brought about by Covid-19, including how to support local companies, assist vulnerable people, prevent crowds from gathering and ensure businesses comply with Covid-19 restrictions.

Winners included a business resilience-scoring tool; a platform that rewards citizens behaviour with digital currency and a geo-altering tool to send tailored alters to citizens. Tel Aviv is now looking at how to quickly implement these tools to support the ongoing Covid-19 effort.

Resources from Socitm

Planting the flag - a new local normal

Emerging from the crisis is a new sense of purpose, a revived community spirit, a digital culture amongst both organisations and citizens, an increased cadence of decision-making and rapid realisation of outcomes that hitherto had proved elusive. 'Reset, Reform, Renew' are starting to enter the conversation, as opposed to backtracking to how things were. How can local government sustain the benefits from new ways of working and support its communities in the many diverse places up and down the country? And, how can they avoid the very real risk of being forced into serving Section 114 notices en masse?

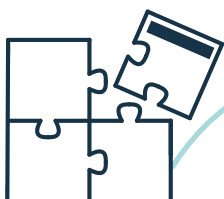
Socitm's 'Planting the flag - a new local normal' brings together the ideas and experience from members and partner associations (LOLA and MCE) around the world. It is work in progress but provides a good snapshot of our current thinking.

Planting the flag document: socitm.net/download/planting-the-flag-a-new-local-normal

Online leadership training

Coming soon... the Socitm Leadership Academy: Online will answer important questions facing local authorities as they transition from a state of lockdown to a new normal way of working:

- › What are the tools and techniques that a manager needs now that staff are working this way?
- › How can a manager ensure that staff feel that they are connected to their team and are supported when working remotely?
- › How do managers energise their people and create a community spirit?
- › How do managers have difficult conversations with staff now that they are no longer working face-to-face with colleagues?
- › How do managers ensure that staff are outputs-focussed and meeting their objective? How to remotely manage those who are now working from home? How do managers adapt to not physically having their staff present?



Socitm collections

A series of resources to support the sector's response to the pandemic, and case studies of success stories from across the UK and abroad which can be found in our Socitm Coronavirus webpage and Place-shaping Success Stories collection.

Coronavirus webpage: socitm.net/coronavirus

Place-shaping success stories: socitm.net/inform/place-shaping-success-stories-of-digital

Remote council meetings: socitm.net/collections/remote-council-meetings-a-socitm-guide

Support, help and guidance

Socitm Advisory was created to provide a trusted source of expert advice and guidance. It has evolved to become the chosen consultancy/ resourcing partner for public service organisations. We work with the public sector to analyse, improve and transform public services, from ICT, digital strategy consultancy and programme delivery, to interim and flexible resourcing solutions.

Socitm Advisory's consultants have undertaken and delivered projects and programmes ranging from:


- Assessment & Discovery Services – across a range of services & functions (this includes ICT reviews, organisational Digital Maturity Assessments, capability assessments, options appraisals, procurement support and contract reviews)
- Definition & Alignment work – ICT & Digital Strategy support, alignment of business and ICT strategies, Customer Access Strategy definition, programme definition
- Design Services – Future business models, technical architecture design (including Cloud, Data and insight, application architecture, and all other aspect of technical architecture)
- Mobilisation & Enablement – Programme structure design and support, methodology and approach, training, coaching and skills transfer
- Implementation & Deployment – Implementation of new working practice, change management and delivery of ICT & Digital Solutions

Our consultancy teams operate at the cutting edge and are recognised experts in their field. This creates unrivalled opportunities to utilise the very best intelligence and access the most relevant innovation. The Socitm methodology has been built up and developed through multiple successfully delivered projects. We are agile in our approach and tailor our solutions to the needs of our customers, constantly evolving our offer in the market. To help achieve the best possible outcomes for you and your organisation. We have a wide range of customer case studies available which showcase our capabilities and skills. These can be found at <https://www.advisory.socitm.net/publications>



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Acknowledgements

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For any queries or feedback regarding this report, please contact us on covidsurvey@socitm.net.



LOLA: www.lola-ict.org

Linked Organisation of Local Authority ICT Societies
- a non-profit organisation of international ICT professional associations in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, UK and USA.



MCE: www.majorcities.eu

Major Cities of Europe – ICT Users Group is composed of over 500 leading experts of innovation from municipalities across Europe.