

Passing the tipping point for digital: the nudge effect of the pandemic

A Northern Ireland Perspective

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Introduction

During this time our public and private sector leaders have been busy. As part of our [Changing Landscapes series](#) in this report, we look at how Northern Ireland has been transforming services, supporting employees, and figuring out how to thrive in this strange new world.

Our social and workplace interactions are now more digital than ever, changing how we all connect to each other and our communities. This has left the public sector with no choice but to adapt and rethink how to support the changing landscape.

With no end in sight to the pandemic and a recession already upon us, **where does this leave public services today?**

We brought together leaders from across Northern Ireland to discuss the changing behaviour of its citizens, combining results from two new pieces of citizen research taken before and during the pandemic.

Compared against our findings from our last report, **we look at the impact the global pandemic has had on the digital landscape** in the region, and ask what lessons can be learnt, what steps can be taken, and how our nation can prosper in this challenging environment.



Executive summary

Executive summary

When we wrote our first report, in February 2019, we talked about turbulent times ahead. For most of us, the biggest change in the last two years – and for many in living memory – was the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Forever remembered as the year we ‘stayed at home’.

The response to the pandemic so far has shown across all our sectors our ability to work together, better and faster than ever. Even when kept apart.

If we were unsure before, it’s now clear that our nation continues to be an innovative tech hub, able to collaborate, tackle challenges and above all else champion change for the public.

Led by a national impetus for better digital technologies and reliable online services, our need to connect is now embedded. We are past a turning point, and there’s no going back. **Public appetite for use of technology and online services has undergone a distinct shift**, with people now recognising digital as a driver for better outcomes. In 2020, almost half (46%) of Northern Irish citizens we surveyed believe digital technologies can connect the community or improve the lives of citizens – this has increased by nearly 10% in two years.

Public sector organisations need to recognise and work with this change.

In the last two years, Civica has surveyed Northern Irish citizens three times, to gauge how they rate and use our public sector digital services. Each time the results show more demand for online access – but we don’t seem to match that demand with actual digital solutions.

The public sector can and does deliver well-constructed digital services and can do it with speed when it needs to. COVID-19 has proven that. We need to learn the lesson of this crisis and collaborate to deliver more of what the public is asking for.

Mark Owens, Managing Director,
Northern Ireland, Civica

However there are still many barriers to public sector digital transformation. How can we unblock traditional mind-sets when building modern collaborative workplaces? How can digital help us to keep pace with the private sector and meet the changing and multi-diverse citizen expectations?

Can NI build and retain the next generation of skilled digital workers? What strategies will enable digital programmes to be more effective for citizens and easier for us to deliver? In this report we put forward the views of public service leaders against these key questions.

Public sector leaders agree that more strategic digital programmes are crucial at this time when digital communications have become central to our lives. But to successfully lead these, we need collaboration, closer partnerships with digital suppliers and a procurement framework that puts the citizens' needs above all else.

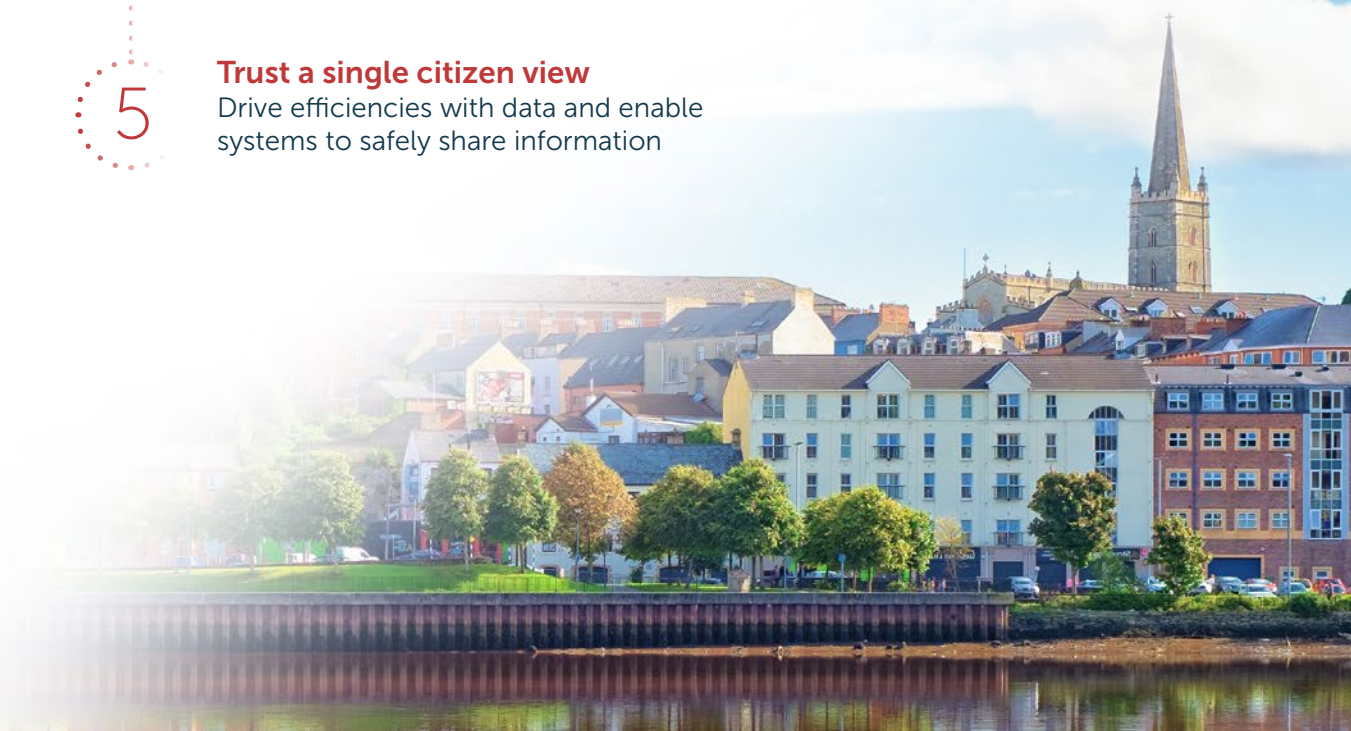
Now the challenge is for public and private sector leaders in Northern Ireland to continue to invest in initiatives designed to meet rapidly growing demands in all areas of life. To support communities, people and employees on the difficult road ahead.

Mark Owens, Managing Director,
Northern Ireland, Civica

Unblocking Northern Ireland's digital future

Supporting a need for continued digital transformation, this report explores what Northern Ireland needs to do within five key areas:

- 1 **Work together to overcome obstacles**
Foster better collaboration internally and externally drive digital change
- 2 **Encourage and include everyone**
Support each and every one of our citizens to access the services they want and need
- 3 **Address the skills shortage**
Prepare our future leaders to drive Northern Ireland's digital legacy
- 4 **Embrace a digitally rich future**
Unlock new technologies and ways of working to make citizens lives easier
- 5 **Trust a single citizen view**
Drive efficiencies with data and enable systems to safely share information



A changing landscape for Northern Ireland in a complex COVID-19 world

Nearly
1 in 2

surveyed adults now believe digital will connect the community

34%

of surveyed adults are more receptive to digital since COVID-19

Almost
half

of Northern Irish surveyed adults say they want to use digital tech more frequently for public services

81%

of adults surveyed are now aware that most public services are available online

Every leader in the public or private sector has to constantly consider the needs and demands of citizens. So, how have our needs changed? And what do we demand from the services we now receive?

Looking at companies that thrived throughout the pandemic, their success was due to speed, efficiency and making our lives as easy as possible. An obvious example, Amazon. They delivered against our needs – easy online access to millions of goods, quickly (and safely). As consumers, this is the standard we all now expect. **Amazon deliver within hours, so why does it take 14 days for the local council to respond to an email?**

Whilst we stayed at home – many with children to support and educate, as well as doing our day jobs – the demand for swift, easy digital communications and services blossomed. Turning previous online “nice-to-have” experiences into vital and sometimes life-critical services.

Citizens now expect online services everywhere as the demand has increased dramatically. Civica research showed that **almost half of surveyed citizens (49%) say they want to use digital tech more frequently in the future.**

Only 6% of surveyed citizens believe online public services will be less suited to the public needs after the pandemic. Citizens are calling out for digital, and now expect greater personalisation, intuitive experiences and reliable outcomes from all of their service needs. At a time when we are relying on digital technology more than ever, this clearly needs to be addressed. **Nearly a third (30%) of surveyed citizens state that public services do not currently make good use of digital technology to enhance their lives – a rise of almost 5% in two years.**

Public and private sector organisations – if they haven’t already – need to think about the outcomes for citizens using a digital approach. To achieve this, public sector leaders agreed that this comes down to addressing five key challenges.





Working together to overcome obstacles

Foster better collaboration internally and externally drive digital change.

**“Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.”**

Henry Ford

The private and public sectors have their own strengths, and have proven over time that they can work well together to deliver essential public services. During our leadership forum, the attendees discussed how many of the successes in the public sector couldn't have been done without some form of involvement from the private sector.

At our leadership forum, when we asked how future programmes can be even better, **75%** of surveyed public sector leaders agree that building closer relationships is essential. Helping create programmes designed around citizen needs, providing services that they actually use.

Everyone unanimously agreed that working in isolation is not the answer. So to create impactful and effective digital programmes, we must first tackle two areas:

- 1. Procurement challenges:** The current procurement system in Northern Ireland is a contentious issue. The Construction

and Procurement Delivery division on the one hand provides guidance, framework and project support, but can sometimes inhibit better and earlier cooperation between the private and public sector. Public sector executives are calling for a system that encourages collaboration and the introduction of a ministerial position for digital to create more flexibility, fluidity and collaboration.

- 2. Mindsets:** Collaboration isn't just procurement or system-led. People have to want and be open to working together otherwise projects will likely fail. Too often, insight is held isolated. We need a style of leadership that realises and understands that working together is better than operating alone - encouraging an attitude of information sharing within and outside of our organisations.

“Public sector organisations need to work together to deliver smarter end-to-end business service. It's the only way we can get anything done; we can't get it done on our own.”

Gerry Thompson, Director DTS at Digital Transformation Service

Key attributes to successful collaboration include:

Empowered employees

By giving employees the tools to work faster together and by implementing a collaborative culture, organisations will have a much more effective workforce.

Sharing for the greater good

Sharing relevant systems, data and information improves services. Talking to one another means initiatives and pilots may work across organisations and that can be acted upon.

Launching COVID-19 critical apps at speed

Back in May, the Northern Ireland Department of Health and Civic launched a new COVID-19 symptom checker mobile app - helping citizens access immediate advice and links to vital information as the pandemic evolved.

From initial kick-off meetings to launch, the entire process took only two weeks and is an example of how a focused approach on user outcomes from the outset, can help streamline delivery in record time.

- Developed and deployed in just two weeks
- Over 100,000 downloads
- Helping divert calls away from 111, from 6,000 per day to less than 1,000.

“We recognised that people needed access to up to date information, and at this worrying time, it was vital for us to act fast.”

The app has been hugely helpful to deliver a solution at scale - ensuring people could check symptoms and up to date information whilst ensuring less pressure on critical resources.

Dan West, Chief Digital Officer, Department of Health NI



Encourage and include everyone

Digital technology is here to stay. Our job now is to ensure nobody is left behind.

We're now at the point where public and private sector executives all agree that digital technologies are vital to support our lives, and keep every citizen connected.

Our citizens agree, as almost half of those surveyed (49%) say they want to use digital tech more frequently. Our recent Word from the Wise campaign highlighted over 70s who feel tech is improving public services in NI – more than any other age group (88%, which is ahead of the rest of the UK and NI overall at 78%) – and shows they are engaging and willing.

However, you can't ignore those that prefer more traditional ways of accessing public services online. As we continue to move towards technology-led ways of operating, how do we ensure digital public services are not just available, but beneficial to everyone?

The public sector in Northern Ireland has been leading the way through several digital initiatives. One is NI DIRECT, which provides a single point of access to government information and services. Another example is the Northern Ireland Department of Health's swift development of a **COVID-19 symptom tracker mobile app**. Rapidly developed by Civica, this app provided the public with immediate advice and links to vital and trusted information as the pandemic evolved.

Awareness often isn't the issue, adoption is.

Public awareness of online services is increasing with 81% of surveyed citizens now aware that most public services are now available online. However, in many cases, this awareness doesn't always lead to adoption.

Before 2020, citizens seemed wary, preferring traditional and personal interactions.

Without the luxury of many interactions we once expected, there is the opportunity and a requirement to educate the nation. Teaching the often more vulnerable parts of our society why it's better and more convenient to use digital services. This education is not only critical in supporting citizens' current demands but also their future ones.

NI First Minister, Arlene Foster, has said that **the region is entering a "new normal" post-COVID-19 and has challenged organisations to look at technological solutions to support future ways of working and living.** This starts by ensuring adequate access in the first place.

Connectivity across the region is already being improved, for example through Virgin Media's Project Lightning programme and commitments from Openreach and Fibrus to continue to invest in full- fibre broadband services, which will support the region as many continue to work from home. However, according to Ofcom, 6% of properties in Northern Ireland are still unable to get decent access to broadband, which is three times the level of the UK overall (2%).



So, what can public and private sector leaders do to support digital inclusion across the region?



Encourage access to technology:

although local libraries and other places provide online access for citizens, public service leaders should consider offering pop-up centres. Run by the local council to provide advice and guidance on how to self-serve online, let users see the benefits first-hand.



Build confidence in using technology:

part of many people's reticence to going online is a lack of confidence. Through initiatives such as public service-led training sessions, we can build the confidence with those who need it.



Promote the benefits of self-service and accessing services online:

building a comprehensive online service can be a significant programme of work. But communicating details of any service will also be key to its success. Public service development is in all our collective interest. So keeping relationships with media and the private sector can naturally promote the benefits in publications that citizens read and trust.



Stop the skills shortage

Northern Ireland is still a UK tech leader. Despite its relatively small size, Northern Ireland has over 1,500 different technology businesses.

According to [TechNation](#), over 60,000 people are employed by tech firms across Belfast alone. However, that doesn't make the region immune from the chronic technology skills shortage we're facing globally - and citizens agree.

Northern Irish citizens recognise this growing skills shortage. A quarter of those surveyed believe the lack of IT and digital skills is holding back the delivery of more online digital services – increasing by 8% in the last 2 years.

Fortunately our research also shows a growing confidence in Northern Ireland's ability to be recognised worldwide for offering superior digital services, with 26% of citizens claiming so (up 7% from 2018).

So how can we work together to reduce this skills gap?

Initiatives such as '[Coding for Kids](#)' are already inspiring the next generation. More needs to be done earlier within the education system to encourage more people into STEM and digital careers. As we discussed in our 2018 report, the private sector is struggling to attract and retain this talent, and the public sector is even further behind. This is causing significant harm to the amount and breadth of digital transformation throughout the region.

Schools and colleges have a responsibility to equip young people with the necessary skills to thrive in the digital workplace. However, organisations must also play their part in training and retaining talent to continue driving innovation.

What can leaders do to build the skills needed?



Join forces with schools, universities and apprenticeship schemes to develop skills



Actively encourage up and cross-skilling within organisations



Kathy Peacock, CIS (PARIS) Project Management at Belfast Health & Social Care Trust highlighted how public sector talent is being lost to the private sector, explaining:

In healthcare, we are taking on younger employees and helping them to build on their education, but as soon as they develop more skills then they're leaving us to work in the private sector. That's often because they can earn more money in the private sector but also because the technology is more advanced at private organisations so they can develop new skills more quickly. The public sector needs to be able to attract talent and keep them. It's not all about money, but we do have to make the public sector an attractive, modern place to work.



Embrace a digitally rich future

Delivering essential services in a constantly changing environment has pushed resource capacity to its limit.

A third of surveyed Northern Irish citizens believe that a key driver for the use of online public services in the country is due to public service organisations being forced to reduce costs and save money. Digital programmes are becoming easier to embed and adopt, and so raises the question whether traditional is cheaper in the long run.

As we move more services online, organisations across Northern Ireland are using technology to streamline work processes, automate timely tasks, eliminate inefficiencies, and completely reimagine the way we work.

This is the time to accelerate, embrace and celebrate change. To test and build on technology-led programmes that don't just work in the short-term, but have potential to grow across a longer time frame.

We see news reports on an almost daily basis on the power of technology. However, for many in the public sector, words such as AI and machine learning can feel daunting and overwhelming. This can lead to many feeling unsure and wary of the next steps on their digital journey.

The use of new technologies does not need to be all or nothing. Taking small steps can ease the transition. Try breaking innovation down into achievable chunks to deliver better outcomes for citizens.

Three tips to driving a successful long-term transformation strategy:

Don't lose sight of the end-goal:

When embarking on any transformation strategy, the first question to be asked is "what's the problem we're trying to solve?" Then work out how big the problem is and concentrate on solving that. Often during transformation programmes, we lose sight of the bigger picture.

Anticipate potential employee

apprehension: Organisations must be transparent in their plans to adopt new technologies and continuously communicate with employees about the benefits it will bring. Once people realise they can move one step at a time, engagement generally improves. Communicate regularly about the project's progress so employees feel they are a part of the digital journey.

Better collaboration delivers better

results: An organisation's digital transformation strategy is not just another task for the IT department. You need a digital culture and mindset right across the organisation to embrace digital transformation.

Automation taking the strain

Working rapidly together, Civica and The Department of Health (DoH) produced a Symptom Checking app around COVID-19 which used a chatbot conversational AI software to answer more common requests.

The introduction of this app enabled a drop from 6,000 calls per day to the 111 COVID helpline number to just 1,000. This reduced strain on the organisation's employees and enabled citizens to receive answers to their questions quicker and more efficiently. The data that was provided from the citizen interactions was then used to formulate the government's wider messaging and actions throughout the pandemic.

6,000
calls per day
reduced to
1,000

Looking back at the pandemic, we can be thankful that it occurred during the connected time that we live in. But imagine how much more resilient we would have been as a nation if digital technology in the public space was even more mature.



5

Trust a single citizen view

Drive efficiencies with data and enable systems to safely share information

Nobody likes to repeat themselves. Repetition isn't just annoying for us as consumers, it can be debilitating for organisations across Northern Ireland who find themselves struggling with the mounting cost and effort of collecting and storing the same data multiple times.

Organisations should explore systems and ways to develop a strategy for a single view of citizen interactions and information. Not only will this reduce frustration – and repetition – for

consumers, it will give organisations a birds-eye view of consumers' queries, wants, needs and allow information to be accessed quickly and easily. This will drive productivity for employees and the organisation.

Bringing data into one central place will also unlock patterns, trends and anomalies. Organisations can then make better informed decisions and uncover new opportunities to enhance the lives of the public.

Northern Ireland is now a digital nation, but 34% of surveyed citizens still believe that concerns about sharing data from government and public sector organisations might be the biggest challenge to delivering full online digital services in NI.

Efficiencies and cost savings are there for the taking when built alongside long-term tech transformation strategies. When done correctly like at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, it can empower an organisation and give back control to patients over their own data health, wellbeing and support.

Steve Thorn,
Executive Director, Civica

There are key elements to consider when pushing a centralised data-driven approach:

Gain citizen trust early:

Trust in the government is as difficult to win as it is easy to lose, so departments must ensure they are clearly communicating how and why they are using citizen data. Getting citizen buy-in during the early stages of implementation will help to maintain trust in public-facing services.

Data governance and management:

This is a legal requirement of GDPR. But it shouldn't be seen as a tick box exercise. Having strong internal frameworks in place helps you maintain compliance whilst also enabling you to grow consumer trust by storing any data held safely and securely.

We need the skills and tools to process and make sense of the data that we have. When the data changes, or more data is added to current systems, too often somebody has to manually update it. We need more automation to save weeks and months of manual work and to reduce human error. It will also keep the information up to date in real-time. Upfront investment in these tools and skills is required, but it will save time and costs in the future.

Eileen Crone, Principal Statistician at Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)

However, pulling this data from various sources is hard, so automating as many of the processes as possible will help. This is where we need to develop strategies for implementing new – or boosting existing – technologies such as AI, machine learning, insight dashboards and chatbots to assist with repetitive tasks and help staff focus on better decisions.



Conclusion

Planning for a successful future

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a steep learning curve for citizens and government. We have yet to fully understand the long-term impact. But the emergency response that followed the initial peak has drastically changed our lives and behaviours for the foreseeable future.

Local public services have done an unprecedented job in recent years already, but the events of 2020 have brought about increasing demand and expectation. Organisations looking to move forward must continue to break new ground in order to dictate their own success. It's clear that Northern Irish citizens agree that positive changes have been made. Over a third of those surveyed **(36%) believe public services will be more suited to public needs following the pandemic.**

The pandemic has shown us that citizens want to be more connected. The public sector must continue to take a leading role in equipping everyone with the tools, services and information to access improved digital services.

Leadership attitudes have to shift from a primarily reactive mode to anticipating how to reinvent organisations, leveraging technology effectively. This will ensure that we use the window of opportunity that this crisis has given us to create a better and more resilient society.

It's about community. There are issues around collaboration and connectivity that need to be addressed but citizens in Northern Ireland believe that digital technology does improve their lives and the lives of people within their communities. We now have to consider the needs of the entire region and build services that benefit everyone to create a stronger Northern Ireland.

Mark Owens, Managing Director,
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