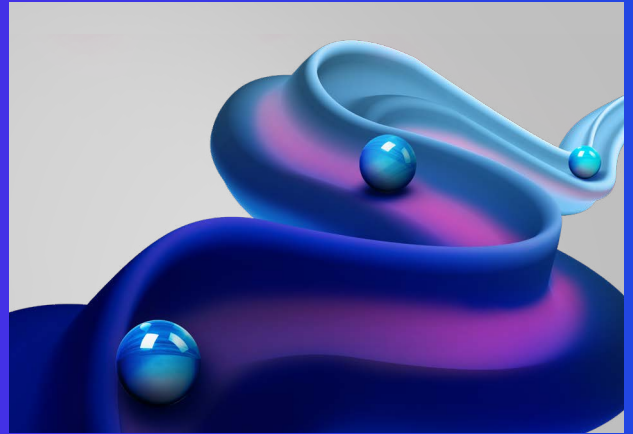


# How to harness the potential of technology to bridge the digital skills gap

a case study from Brent Council



## Digital Skills – Brent Council

The UK has an acknowledged digital skills challenge, which cuts across both the public and private sectors. It has been estimated that the UK economy has only around 60% of the digital skills it needs. Overall, there are around 200,000 vacancies for positions requiring digital skills.



In the public sector, these challenges are especially pronounced. So what actions are being taken to address the digital skills gap and enable public service bodies to harness the technology era?



## Brent Council – an early digital adopter

This is something that has been explored during a series of workshops KPMG has been running with trade body techUK around creating a ‘Smarter State’, identifying the challenges and the best practice solutions. This has included speaking individually to a number of participants for a focused view – including members of the Digital Transformation Team at Brent Council. The Digital Transformation function is responsible for many different areas including digital inclusion, connectivity and automation.

Serving a resident population of nearly 350,000, and with 3,000 staff, Brent is a large council with a mixed and diverse workforce and population. It is widely recognised as a leader in its use of digital technologies and services – and one of the secrets to this is perhaps that it was an early adopter, with its first Digital Strategy dating back to 2017.



The council’s digital programme started very small, with a few small projects in 2016. It has steadily grown from there into a complete strategy which is refreshed every four years. An important factor behind our success has been that the political Leader of the council, Councillor Muhammed Butt, is also Lead Member for Digital Transformation. This has given it profile and importance, and has meant we’ve always been fully invested in what we’re doing. It does require investment to make it work.”

– Madeleine Leathley, Digital Programme Manager



## Digitally enabling citizens

The progress that Brent has been making is visible on a number of fronts. In terms of its residents, research conducted in 2019 found that 18% of the borough's population did not even have foundation level digital skills (such as just being able to start up a laptop). The council discovered that Brent has some of the most digitally excluded wards in England. Accelerated by the arrival of the Covid pandemic, the council put in place a Digital Residents' Support Fund whereby anyone with savings of less than £6,000 could apply for a free device and free connectivity for the first 12 months. This fund continues today, with over 2,000 residents having received devices through it. A similar number also access free digital training every year that the council provides online and also, since 2022, in person via a digital skills hub in Wembley. As a result of these measures, digital exclusion has fallen from 18% to just 6% now.

Is it a council's responsibility to digitally upskill its residents? For Brent, the case to do so is clear. "Helping our residents upskill means they can access council services more easily through online channels if they want to, improving accessibility and, potentially, the citizen experience. Having a digitally skilled resident base also improves employability, creating an economically stronger community and lowering dependence on the council. And it can help attract more businesses and investment into the borough who want to access a digitally enabled talent pool. It becomes a virtuous circle."

– Madeleine Leathley, Digital Programme Manager



## Workforce empowerment and training

Another key strand of the Digital Strategy relates to the workforce – recognising that it's essential to have digitally skilled and confident staff to match the rising profile of digital citizen services.

There has been plenty of activity here too, with the council recently moving to Microsoft 365 and running skills workshops for all 3,000 staff on how to use it. Almost every role, including manual and non-office based ones, comes with access to a device as well as to IT training. A digital platform, run in partnership with Infosys, provides access (for staff as well as residents) to over 2,000 technology-related courses. Over 50,000 residents have accessed this platform and this is now being promoted and accessed by residents across London.

Meanwhile, an event held every two years at the council's flagship offices in Wembley – BrentTech Week – raises the profile of technology to staff and helps them see how they can use it in their everyday roles and in their lives. "The event takes over our offices and creates a buzz. There are displays, seminars, webinars, drop-ins. It makes technology real to our staff and shows how it can be applied to what they actually do."





## The importance of 'growing your own'

Another key feature of Brent's approach has been to 'grow their own talent' for the digital team. It has become quite widespread within the public sector to rely, sometimes heavily, on contractors and outside suppliers. But five years ago, the Digital Transformation Team recruited three apprentices from the borough to form an automation team. The three were trained up and supported, and are now fully-fledged Robotic Process Automation (RPA) experts fluent in coding and software development. The team recently advertised for two more apprentices to increase the team – and had over 100 applications. The expanded team will increasingly start to cover areas like artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning too.

This approach to tackling skills challenges has been highly effective. "It takes a bit of time to skill the apprentices to the right level, but once they hit that you can really begin to move at speed. They also really 'get' the council and what we're trying to do, so they're building solutions that are impactful and relevant. They're fully engaged, so retention is better, while the recruitment process builds engagement and awareness in the community too. You get huge rewards back in return." This way of working has influenced the wider team and all team members are previous employees from the council from a wide range of service areas.

## A people-based strategy

**Brent is clearly making exciting progress on a number of fronts – so what do they see as critical to success?**

"Sponsorship and support at council leadership level has been hugely important. But it's also been about our approach. We review our Digital Strategy every two years which means we keep it fresh and ensure it's staying relevant. The current strategy (covering 2022-2026) is also one of the council's six priority strategies, which means that every other strategy that's written, even if it's relating to a completely different area or service, must look for ways of linking to it, which is a significant builder of internal engagement and buy-in.

"Finally, we've deliberately made our strategy people-based rather than IT-based. If they're solely focused on technical aspects like systems, architecture and design, digital strategies become quite abstract and removed. We try to look at it through the lens of people and users – what do residents and staff want and need from technology to make their lives and jobs easier, more productive and more efficient? That's really what we're aiming to do."

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