



# Voices of experience

The Citizen Experience Excellence report 2025-26

**Case study: Sunderland City Council**





# A smart city driven by person-centred design

**In the quest to deliver experience excellence to citizens, the city council in Sunderland is strongly backing digitisation as the pathway – embracing bold ambitions to be a ‘smart city’.**

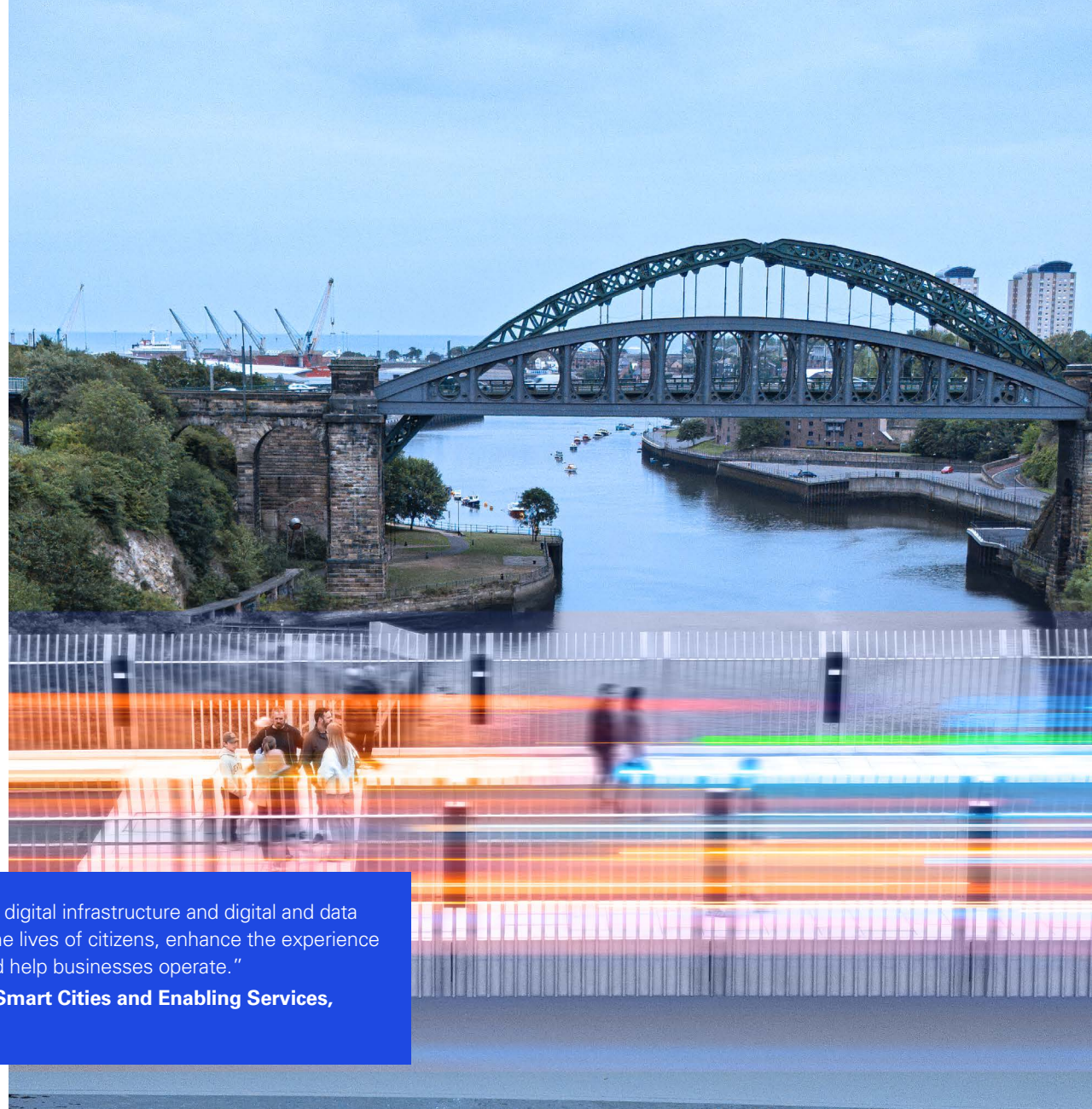
Indeed, Sunderland was proud to be named the UK’s smartest city by the Sunday Times at the end of 2024. This was no accident – starting in 2021, the council entered into a 20-year JV partnership with digital connectivity and shared network specialists Boldyn Networks who are supporting smart initiatives in cities around the world, from London to Hong Kong.

Liz St Louis, Director of Smart Cities and Enabling Services at Sunderland City Council sums up very simply what a smart city is: “A smart city is about using digital infrastructure and digital and data technologies to improve the lives of citizens, enhance the experience of visitors and tourists, and help businesses operate. In Sunderland, we’ve been doing this by driving forward multiple digital and data initiatives, with investment in next gen digital infrastructure across the city landscape.”



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**Liz St Louis, Director of Smart Cities and Enabling Services,  
Sunderland City Council**





### Smart initiatives bringing real life benefits

This isn't just a futuristic ambition – it is producing significant real-world benefits right now. Numerous examples show how being a smart city both creates efficiencies and productivity gains for the council and creates a place that people can be healthy and thrive in, strengthening trust in the council and the services it delivers and building respect and empathy before citizens even need to access council services.

Liz gives a recent example which is helping to combat crime and anti-social behaviour. Six multi-agency hubs have been set up across the city, bringing council services together with police, fire and other emergency workers. Through the smart city investments made in digital systems, they are now able to bring the data they need together to create data visualisations of crime and anti-social behaviour patterns and trends, as well as hot spot predictions for the next 24 hours, including linking in CCTV footage and data logs.

“This has really generated excitement amongst senior leaders,” Liz says. “Now we have the data coming in, it opens up so many possibilities. It takes time and you need to build up the trust in order to share data between departments and agencies, but the end result is that we can target our resources, work smarter and deliver more for less.”

Other measures can directly improve outcomes for citizens. Sensors in council properties to detect mould and damp levels mean that council staff can educate tenants if needed on simple measures like opening a window when having a shower – improving the health and well-being of the individual as well as protecting the condition of the property. Sensor readings can also indicate if the property may have been

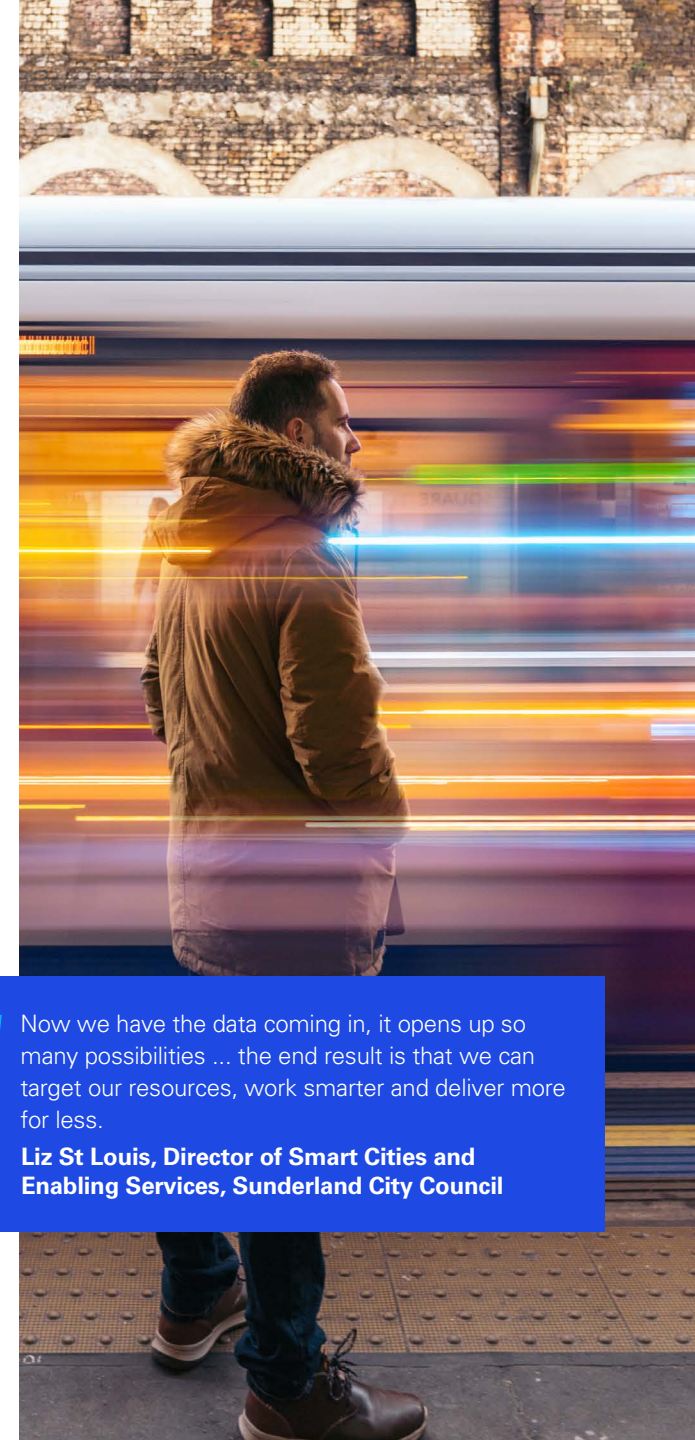
vacated, prompting the council to investigate and take action earlier – meaning they may be able to make it available to another family in need of accommodation sooner. Meanwhile, sensors on life buoys around the city indicate if one has been moved; rather than needing to drive round inspecting all of them, an operative can go and put that specific lifebuoy back in place. “This could prove critical in saving a life if an incident occurs such as someone falling into the river,” Liz says. “Some of this is really profound.”

It's a similar story across other services. The city's 106 play parks, for example, need to be inspected for health and safety every week. Previously, this was done with clipboards and pen and paper, with the results then having to be manually typed into the computer system; now, an app has been created which inspectors can use on their handheld device to file instant reports with automated alerts and escalations. As a result, parents can have confidence that health and safety issues for their children will be acted on faster and more effectively.

“These smart city enhancements have multiple benefits,” Liz reflects. “We use the insights from the data that's now connected to improve the quality of service and experience that citizens receive. On our side, we can work much more efficiently, saving hours of wasted time. And it's not just efficiency – by not having to drive around collecting data or checking physical assets, we also lower our carbon footprint, another key objective. We used to talk about being data rich but intelligence poor – that's not nearly so much the case anymore!”

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### Citizen-centric services and design

A fundamental principle in all the work Sunderland is doing is that the citizen must be at the heart. Liz talks more than once of 'people-centred design', with one of her team's core development principles being that the customer voice must always be heard. This means consulting with users and communities, whether that's a generic high-level consultation or very detailed listening to specific cohorts, such as the users of assistive technologies at home.

These principles help ensure that citizens are remembered and recognised, with pathways and channels of interaction that suit them and help them achieve their desired outcomes more easily. There are high degrees of digitisation to Sunderland's services, as you might expect, and Liz explains that a lo-code front-end toolset enables the council's IT team to create new functionality for users internally themselves that can be integrated with payment or booking services for a smooth, one-stop-shop experience. "We absolutely recognise that it's up to us do the work behind the scenes joining up the dots so that the user just sees one simple interface," Liz says. "We have been investing in our systems and have adopted a Microsoft-based data architecture. We're on a journey and maturing."

However, it isn't only about digitisation and self-serve. Liz explains that the council has "gone deep" on telephony services too. About 60% of contacts are now digital but telephone remains very important. "Some councils take quite a narrow approach to telephony, handing customers off early, but we train our customer advocates (agents) in-depth so they can really help the customer and resolve their question or issue first time if at all possible."

Another key point Liz makes is the importance of partnerships. "The council doesn't always have to be in the middle of everything," she says. "Our voluntary and community-based partners play a really important role."

In particular, there are now 37 digital hubs around Sunderland, funded by the council but run by voluntary/community groups, that make internet connectivity and devices available to those without them as well as helping build up levels of digital literacy. Sitting alongside this is a network of 'data banks' – like food banks but providing people with SIM cards and data allowances.

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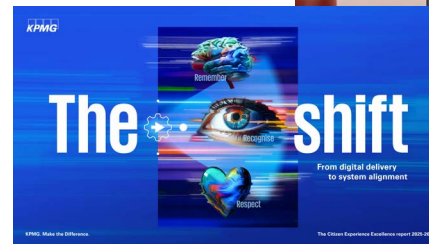
### ‘Independent and resilient’ citizen ambition

Looking ahead, a key aim is to keep on equipping citizens to be independent and resilient, while providing support for those most in need. There is a growing focus on prevention – using the signals that are often connected across areas like housing, adult social care and education to help prevent people spiralling into difficulty.

And what advice does Liz have to other councils and public bodies striving to improve the citizen experience? “Put people-centred design at the heart of everything you do, supported by evidence and data. Work with partners in areas where you don’t have the in-house skills or capacity – you can’t do everything yourself, so partnerships are key. Finally, recognise that this is a journey. You won’t get there overnight, so create specific targets and goals along the way that align with your guiding principles. Our CEO Patrick Melia talks about being a ‘smart city, smart council’. That’s really what we’re about. Technology is the enabler that helps us and the communities we serve; the yardstick of success is the outcomes that citizens live, experience and feel.”



Click here to read our full 2026 UK Citizen Experience Excellence Report – **The shift from digital delivery to system alignment**





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