oneAdvanced

Government Pioneer Summit 2024

30 Euston Square, London
September 18

Preparing for Change

In September 2024, OneAdvanced hosted the Government Pioneer Summit, an event that brought together leading experts and key decision makers from the public sector.

Chaired by journalist and broadcaster Denise Mahoney, the panel consisted of Lisa Stubbs, Head of Transparent Contracting at the Cabinet Office, Joanne Pitt, Senior Policy Manager at CIPFA, Yogita Popat, VP at SOCITM and Programme Director of Culture and Sustainability at Barnet Council, and Mark Reddy, Global Director of Growth at OneAdvanced.

In this report, we look at the challenges discussed by the panel, including preparedness for the imminent Procurement Act, digital transformation, the vital role of data in decision making, AI, sustainability, and the need to do more with less. An on-demand video of the panel discussion can be viewed here.

We also held a series of roundtables, providing employee-led insight on the most pressing issues of the day. The roundtables highlighted a range of opinions on topics including the Procurement Act, challenges to digital transformation, financial sustainability, and enhancing citizen engagement. You can read our summary of the main points in our 'View from the Coalface' section on p8.

Completing the summit were presentations from Chris Ormerod, Financial Systems Analyst at Teignbridge District Council, who outlined innovative approaches taken by the council against a backdrop of tight financial constraints; John Strelitz, Head of Contracts and Procurement for West Mercia Constabulary, who talked about how his team improves efficiency through robust planning and the use of digital tools; and Philip Fumey from Microsoft, who outlined the capabilities of AI-embedded software for enhanced citizen engagement. Read more detail on the presentations in our 'Expert Insight' section on p10.

Panel Discussion Summary

Getting ready for the Procurement Act

With nearly £400bn spent annually on public procurement, The Procurement Act serves as a transformative framework for local government and other organisations in the public sector. The Act – originally due to go live in October 2024 – has been pushed back to February 24, 2025, giving the government time to restate its policy objectives.

The delay gives contracting authorities much-needed extra time to familiarise themselves with the requirements of the new Act and gain a more complete understanding of the government's goals. The Act will require a cultural shift, with procurement leads given greater scope and authority.

The Cabinet Office notes considerable emphasis on transparency. The Act promises a reduction in bureaucratic obstacles, offering more flexibility in interactions with suppliers and empowering them with early insights into upcoming procurement opportunities. The commitment to transparency is designed to elevate public trust, essential for presenting a governance model marked by integrity.

Local governments are positioned to leverage these changes, although the Act requires enhanced digital capabilities and innovative thinking. It encourages collaboration across councils, and promotes public procurement as a principal, strategic pillar in local governance. Investing in education and digital infrastructure will be vital to prepare teams to embrace these changes, ensuring the best possible outcomes for citizens.

"Procurement as a strategic function is vital. It should be at the top table"

Lisa Stubbs, Cabinet Office

Digital transformation

Digital transformation in the public sector is crucial for enhancing efficiency and improving service delivery. There are, though, several barriers, including cultural resistance to change and financial constraints. In many cases, organisational resistance is the primary barrier to change – senior leaders will need to navigate limited budgets while fostering an environment receptive to change.

The investment in skilled digital teams can help reverse the traditional 'fix-it' perception of IT roles. In Barnet Council, substantial funding has been allocated toward building digital teams that immerse themselves in understanding service needs rather than dictating tech solutions. Such a strategy has allowed Barnet to innovate service delivery, including the creation of a specialist app for social workers to securely upload case notes.

A large part of digital transformation in the public sector has involved the move towards subscription-based services. Software as a Service (SaaS), offers a way to lower costs while increasing technological capabilities. Understanding the total cost of ownership in SaaS models is crucial for public authorities to derive maximum benefits while remaining agile to explore new innovations. Successful digital initiatives require continuous engagement, adaptability to emerging technologies, and competent leadership to capture unfolding benefits and transform public services sustainably.

"Investing in the right digital team is highly important"

Yogita Popat, Barnet Council

Data-driven decisions

Data analysis is changing how councils get to know their communities, improve processes, and deliver better results. Gaining insight from data can be invaluable – especially when working with tight budgets. By weaving data-driven insights into everyday projects (such as net zero emissions), local authorities can get more mileage from their existing efforts without needing extra funds.

To truly unlock the benefits of data, it is crucial to employ skilled data analysts who can offer actionable insights. Local authorities should aim to ask pertinent questions, allowing data experts to offer a variety of solutions and predictions. Data storytelling is also vital, helping teams to present complex information clearly and in a way that connects with stakeholders. Barnet Council's successful net zero initiatives have been driven by robust data analysis.

Many councils struggle with siloed data systems, leading to inconsistent information across departments. By centralising data management and promoting teamwork among local government bodies, organisations can simplify processes, cut costs, and improve service delivery. With a focus on data-driven decisions and cross-departmental collaboration, local authorities can overcome resource challenges and deliver better, more efficient services to their communities.

"It's taken a lot of work, but we've put data at the heart of everything we've done"

Yogita Popat, Barnet Council

Financial sustainability

In the current financial climate, the challenge of maintaining financial sustainability within public services is becoming increasingly daunting. The escalating costs associated with social care and SEND expenditures, coupled with unprecedented resource prices, are creating significant financial pressure – even for well-managed authorities. According to the Local Government Association (LGA), councils face a projected funding gap of £4bn over the next two years.

Addressing these challenges requires creative and strategic action. While some local authorities have resorted to declaring Section 114 notices, this is not a widespread solution, typically affecting those with unique financial challenges. However, the landscape is shifting, as more councils face budgetary strains due to the rising cost of care. This is compounded by increasing demand and soaring unit costs in children's services. To adapt, councils need to reassess their spending controls, capital strategies, and procurement processes, drawing on best practices from peers and entities like the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

Austerity measures have pushed many councils to take bold, sometimes risky steps to raise funds, including exploring commercial activities outside their expertise. CIPFA has underscored the importance of financial oversight and the necessary skills within councils to manage these ventures successfully. Innovation, while necessary, requires careful consideration of risks and the capacity for effective governance. Local authorities must scrutinise whether they should pursue certain projects, even if feasible, ensuring they have clear exit strategies and robust governance frameworks in place.

Finance professionals play a critical role in helping decision-makers understand complex financial information. The clarity of financial data presentation is essential for councillors, who may not have a financial background, to make informed decisions. Councillors should engage in training and ask questions to bridge knowledge gaps, while finance officers are responsible for making financial data accessible and transparent. Effective communication ensures that leaders and decision makers can grasp financial implications, fostering informed governance and accountability.

"Financial officers have the duty to make sure information is accessible and understandable"

Joanne Pitt, CIPFA

Employee attrition

Attracting and retaining talent in the public sector is a complex issue. Many civil servants are driven by a deep-seated belief in public service, coming to work each day not for financial gain, but because they want to make a meaningful impact, whether that be through influencing national policy or contributing to goals like achieving net zero. Leaders in public service can capitalise on this passion by instilling a strong vision, giving employees a sense of purpose and aligning their roles with organisational goals. This alignment allows them to identify as transformational, enhancing their motivation and commitment to public service.

One of the key strategies to overcome attrition in the public sector is leveraging technology to improve efficiency. Many processes remain manual, creating inefficiencies and increasing the likelihood of errors. By prioritising digital transformation, public sector organisations can streamline operations, reduce costs, and improve service delivery. Improving the efficiency of processes in the workplace will make employees feel like the work they are doing is making a difference at pace.

Addressing workforce challenges requires long-term planning and engagement with younger generations. Encouraging young talent to join the public sector through apprenticeship schemes and promoting the societal impact of public service roles can attract digital natives who are comfortable with technology. These individuals bring fresh perspectives and innovation, helping the public sector evolve and adapt to future challenges.

"As leaders in our spaces, we can give our staff the vision of public service to help them feel good about what they do"

Lisa Stubbs, Cabinet Office

View from the Coalface: The Roundtables

Afternoon roundtable discussion saw public sector professionals sit down with the team from OneAdvanced to discuss key topics including readiness for the Procurement Act, challenges to digital transformation, financial sustainability, and enhancing citizen engagement. It was an excellent chance for sector decision makers to share best practice and benchmark operations against peers.

The Procurement Act

The Procurement Act has been perceived by some as a tick-box exercise rather than an efficient regulatory framework. It introduces ambiguity, leaving grey areas in contracts open to interpretation. The need for transparency is critical; it raises the question of whether the same issues would persist if all processes were visible to the public. Additionally, the act complicates processes by introducing more steps, increasing human error and creating additional administrative hurdles.

The requirement for contract management, including publishing notices and policies on platforms, presents logistical challenges as many systems are not equipped to handle these demands. The associated timelines add pressure, necessitating support systems for procurement professionals who are learning on the job. Suppliers, too, must adapt to new platforms, which impacts their operations as they learn alongside the procurement teams.

Many believe that despite the challenges presented by the Act, there a number of positive potential outcomes, including greater transparency, and the chance to streamline legacy processes. Automation offers a potential solution, simplifying processes, easing resource strain, and reducing human error. The Act also presents the opportunity for the upskilling of staff, continual professional development, and the modernisation of digital infrastructure.

Challenges to digital transformation

Digital transformation within the public sector is fraught with challenges. Existing processes can be rigid, and reliance on outdated systems complicates integration and implementation. The transition to cloud-based services is often hampered by a lack of strategic vision and delayed implementation due to internal resistance. Organisations must overcome cultural barriers to digital adoption, as stakeholders may not perceive the value of such transformations.

The need for collaboration between IT and finance is crucial, yet often overlooked, leading to fragmented efforts. Upskilling staff and ensuring comprehensive training are key to overcoming these barriers, as is fostering a culture that embraces change. Implementing digital solutions requires careful planning, clear objectives, and a commitment to aligning processes with broader organisational goals.

Financial sustainability

Financial sustainability in the face of lower budgets and higher costs requires strategic thinking. Automation and tools like SharePoint can save significant time and resources. However, it is not solely about cost-cutting; enhancing systems and improving experiences for employees and citizens are equally important.

The aim is to do things better, not just cheaper. Senior leaders must recognise that while AI and software solutions offer efficiencies, human involvement remains crucial. The focus should be on creating effective systems that facilitate better outcomes, rather than merely reducing expenditure.

Enhancing citizen engagement

Enhancing citizen engagement involves recognising and accommodating diverse needs. Not everyone has online access, so services must be accessible both digitally and physically. Simplifying processes and making them intuitive can improve user experience, while features like chatbots and translation services can bridge communication gaps.

Engaging communities effectively requires identifying key stakeholders and understanding their preferred methods of interaction. Public sector organisations must ensure that while digital solutions enhance service delivery, they do not replace the essential human element that many constituents still rely on.

Expert Insight

The summit saw presentations from industry experts Philip Fumey, Account CTO and Digital Strategist at Microsoft, Chris Ormerod, Financial Systems Analyst at Teignbridge District Council, and John Strelitz, Head of Contracts and Procurements for West Mercia Constabulary.

Teignbridge Council: Our Digital Journey

Overview

Teignbridge is a district council located in South Devon, nestled between Exeter and Plymouth. The district spans approximately 246 square miles and boasts a diverse landscape, from urban towns like Newton Abbot, where the headquarters are situated, to coastal resorts such as Teignmouth and Dawlish, and even vast open spaces like Dartmoor National Park. Home to roughly 65,000 households, the district serves a population of around 135,000 people. Teignbridge retains most services in-house, including housing, leisure planning, parking, building control, and waste management, despite the norm for outsourcing in many councils.

Financial challenges and strategic partnerships

Teignbridge is navigating financial challenges due to rising costs and reductions in funding from central government sources like the revenue support grant and New Homes Bonus. To counter these challenges, the council is exploring more intuitive, commercially minded operations to balance its budget and continue providing essential services. Teignbridge is a leader in several key partnerships, including the Devon Building Control Partnership, the Southwest Regional Coastal Monitoring Programme, and Strata –

a partnership with Exeter City Council and East Devon District Council that provides IT services and has saved the councils £7m since 2014.

Modernisation initiatives

To drive operational efficiency, Teignbridge launched the Modern 25 programme, aiming to deliver a new operating model across six key areas, including technology. A significant issue currently faced is outdated finance systems that are inefficient and resource-heavy, complicating reporting processes. The single points of knowledge in the system also pose risks if staff members are unavailable.

System convergence and digital transformation

In collaboration with Strata, Teignbridge is working on system convergence projects to enhance efficiency and reduce risks associated with on-premise systems by moving them to the cloud. OneAdvanced has been chosen as the supplier for a new financial management system to simplify reporting processes and improve efficiency. However, challenges such as the impact of COVID-19 on working practices and staff shortages have stalled progress.

Lessons learned and future outlook

The projects have revealed the importance of proper resource allocation and contingency planning for unforeseen circumstances. They have also highlighted skill gaps in reporting and digital transformation. Despite encountering obstacles, Teignbridge is committed to moving forward, with additional resources allocated to ensure successful implementation. The aim is to leverage technology to make processes more digital and effective, empowering the council to overcome operational challenges and better serve its community.

West Mercia Constabulary: Success through innovation

Overview

West Mercia Police covers a vast area within the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire, and Worcestershire, making it the fourth largest policing area in the UK at approximately 2,800 square miles. This expansive region takes about two hours to traverse from one end to the other. The area boasts a diverse and transient population, with around 1.3 million residents, including seasonal workers who come to pick crops.

Organisational structure and strategy

The organisation comprises about 5,000 members, including 2,500 officers and 2,500 staff. Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) are elected every four years to hold the Chief to account, set budgets, and deliver community plans. The overarching strategy of West Mercia Police is to be people-led, tech-enabled, and a crime-fighting organisation. This is supported by three pillars: keeping communities safe, delivering excellent service, and being a great place to work.

Local challenges

Each year, West Mercia Police handles approximately 110,000 incidents, with violence, injury, and theft comprising the majority. Despite nationwide challenges such as issues of legitimacy and trust, the force strives to improve data sharing under GDPR regulations. Additional local challenges include funding for prevention, investigations, victim support, and outdated infrastructure and IT systems.

Financial and technological approach

Funding remains a cyclical challenge, with resources split evenly between government grants and local precepts. The organisation focuses on technology integration to streamline operations and improve service delivery. Initiatives like the 'critical shift' project aim to align strategy with operational needs, leveraging tools such as Viva Goals and Power BI for efficient management and planning.

Lessons from procurement and supplier management

Procurement practices have evolved to manage costs and improve service delivery. By transitioning uniform supply in-house, for example, West Mercia Police saved nearly £500,000 and improved logistics. Lessons learned highlight the importance of supplier management, digital data integration, and effective planning to avoid inefficiencies.

Cultural and Strategic Development

Cultural transformation is a priority, with efforts to improve organisational planning and decision-making. Collaboration with other forces and the adoption of best practices help promote a supportive environment. The aim is to empower staff with knowledge and skills, creating a commercially aware and cohesive team.

Celebrating success and continuous improvement

West Mercia Police's achievements have been recognised at the National Go Awards, where the team were shortlisted as finalists for excellence in procurement. The team recognises the importance of celebrating success and sharing best practice across the organisation. The focus remains on building strong, long-term relationships with suppliers and stakeholders, ensuring continued improvement and service excellence.

Microsoft: Leveraging AI for enhanced communication

AI acceleration

In the last eighteen months, the capabilities of AI have significantly advanced. This development presents opportunities across various sectors, including in local and central government, housing associations, charities, and other publicly driven organisations. AI is being positioned as a tool to address current challenges, improve efficiency, and make technology more accessible and relevant to people's daily interactions.

AI applications in government

- AI promotes inclusivity by offering multi-language support and addressing literacy and SEND challenges, broadening service access.

- AI has the potential to increase citizen engagement and uptake through personalised experiences.

- The ability to analyse large datasets is transforming data accessibility, allowing governments to derive insights for informed decision-making and improved service delivery.

- AI solutions boost efficiency and cost-effectiveness, reshaping governmental processes. These advancements streamline operations and reduce costs.

Responsible AI implementation

While the advantages of AI are undeniable, implementing AI solutions responsibly is essential. Guardrails and safety measures must be in place, with a strong emphasis on accountability, inclusiveness, and transparency. These principles ensure that AI technologies are deployed ethically, minimising potential risks while maximizing benefits.

Future prospects

AI has the potential to empower citizens and the public sector to achieve more by addressing diverse societal needs and challenges. The focus is on developing innovative, inclusive solutions that enhance public sector capabilities and improve citizen experiences.

In Summary

The landscape of public procurement is set for significant change with the introduction of The Procurement Act, designed to enhance transparency and efficiency within local governments and the public sector. The new rules grant procurement leads increased authority and necessitate a shift towards digital innovation and collaboration.

The discussions at the summit were not only enlightening but also highlighted the immense potential for positive change. Data-driven decision-making is changing how councils interact with their communities, offering crucial insights into need and service delivery. The exploration of SaaS models and AI-enabled automation tools highlight their ability to streamline efficiencies while delivering substantial financial benefits.

Moreover, the summit provided a platform for sharing best practises and innovative strategies, making it a valuable experience for all attendees. Financial sustainability remains a challenge due to rising costs in social care and day-to-day services. To address this, councils need to reassess their spending controls and capital strategies, drawing on best practices from established organisations such as CIPFA. Effective financial oversight and strong governance are crucial, requiring clear communication between finance teams and decision makers.

Overall, the summit was a remarkable opportunity to engage with thought leaders and peers, fostering collaboration and inspiring actionable solutions for the future of public procurement.

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Powering the world of work

OneAdvanced is one of the UK's largest and most respected providers of sector-focused business software and services. Based on long experience and understanding of local government and other public sector service providers, our solutions help deliver regular savings while continually improving efficiencies. Our designed-for-purpose digital solutions help get finance and budgeting under control, provide sight of all procurement and contract activity, and help organisations stay within planned budget. They help people get their jobs done more effectively and efficiently, allowing government organisations to focus on delivering the very best services to their communities.

Get in touch

+44(0) 330 343 4000   www.oneadvanced.com   hello@oneadvanced.com