

How the virus pressed the fast forward button

The pandemic accelerated changes that were already happening in city centres, town halls, and workplaces. The challenge now is how to manage the future, as chief executives from across England's South West discussed in a recent round table organised by *The MJ* and BT. **Michael Burton**, who chaired the virtual discussion, reports

The event was the third South West round table to be hosted by *The MJ* and BT but the first held virtually. An introduction by the eight chief executive guests showed issues around finances, digital transformation post COVID-19, economic growth, town centres, digital exclusion, homeworking and tourism, the last an important area for the South West. It was plain that the pandemic has improved staffing (and elected member) flexibility and indeed shown local government rising to the challenge. As one chief executive commented: 'We've seen maximum flexibility among the staff. Librarians moved on to frontline to look after shielded children and man phone lines. We've really shown the adaptability of local government and we've got to keep that pace of change going.' But the change is at dizzying speed, with one chief saying: 'My organisation will look very different in three years' time than now and it looks different now than it did six months ago.'

Loss of income has been a blow, with one council chief saying that on his £275m budget next year there is a £50m hole, half of it due to loss of fees and income. The South West, a popular tourist destination, was also initially hit by the lockdown. One chief said an internationally popular attraction in his city took £4.5m in April and May 2019 and in the same months in 2020 took £55,000. Another chief reckoned his seaside town's economy lost £100m until July, when hotels reopened, because of the shutdown and 'business conferences aren't happening so our hotels will fall off a cliff again'.

A clear message was that the pandemic had accelerated trends that were already under way. One participant commented: 'We were able to do things so quickly. Things we planned over a two-year period we were able to do over a week.' Another added: 'Everything has changed. The pandemic accelerated everything. Directors said to me in January they couldn't work from home, it absolutely wouldn't work for them, then in April found it very effective to work from home and now in autumn say they might only come back one or two days a week for a bit of face-to-face. Our transformation programme has accelerated. We're looking at 15% fewer staff, moving forward. I'm not sure what that does for economic recovery, but we know we can get this done as the last six months has

shown that. We rolled out 600 laptops in four weeks. Even the planners have discovered they can work on-screen.'

One chief executive called the pandemic 'a massive opportunity to reconfigure what we do and we've done transformation in weeks instead of years' and another, agreeing, said his council went through 'two years of transformation in two weeks'. One participant said that the obstacle to digital change was cultural and that the 'reason we switched swiftly to technology was that the technology was always there. It was just about behaviour and that changed with the crisis'.

Culture will remain a challenge, as having adapted quickly in the short term, staff need now to adapt for the long term. One chief executive said: 'It's exposed people in the organisation who have found it very difficult. Therefore staff development, staff resilience and welfare are real issues going into winter.'

A similar challenge is over digital exclusion among the wider public. Greater reliance on connectivity and digital public and private services assumes a level of technical expertise by users. One chief in a rural area said: 'A lot of people are moving out here from London, as has been the case for a while. But it accentuates differences between the haves and have-nots. There's an issue about local people's lack of access to connectivity which means they don't get access to skills as well. Social inclusion is an issue for us, with 10,000 residents in 5,000 council homes. Our most digitally divided are those living in our own houses, not the silver surfer, and we've got to get them into the digital world.'

A particular concern for participants was the future of city centres and here, too, the coronavirus accelerated changes, such as shopping habits and commuting, which were already occurring, but expected to change over years not months. With many employees working from home the city centre is a ghost town. One city chief executive said: 'The Centre for Cities data for the number of workers in city centres showed it has barely gone up since lockdown. The vast majority of city centre workers have opted not to return to the city. I live in the centre and it's empty. I walk past offices with rows and rows of empty desks. People won't come back and if they do it will for maybe one



Round table participants	
Graham Farrant	Chief executive, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
Will Godfrey	Chief executive, Bath and North East Somerset Council
Karime Hassan	Chief executive, Exeter City Council
Mike Jackson	Chief executive, Bristol City Council
Tracey Lee	Chief executive, Plymouth City Council
John Metcalfe	Chief executive, Isle of Wight Council
Matt Prosser	Chief executive, Dorset Council
Kathy O'Leary	Chief executive, Stroud DC
Alex Hearn	Assistant director, placemaking and growth, North Somerset Council
Simon Haston	Principal technology partner, devolved government, BT
Shadi Malkawi	Head of client partners, business and public sector, Wales and South West, BT
Sam Toombs	Wales & South West sales director, BT
Michael Burton	Editorial director, <i>The MJ</i> (chair)

or two days a week. The city centre is a fragile eco system that has fallen apart and we haven't had time to make the transition which without COVID would have been 10-20 years. We saw it coming but it's happened so quickly.'

Another participant pointed out that scaled down civic centres would also contribute to the emptying of the city saying: 'I don't expect our staff to be back more than one or two days a week, whereas we had 3,000 in our HQ before. That will impact on the centre. Most of our big businesses are saying they're not going back to where they were before. The virus has undermined a lot of development deals and we're seeing office deals frustrated. The most valuable use for offices will be as apartments and we'll have to reinvent the city centre.'

But reinventing the city cannot happen overnight. One city chief said: 'The inherent problem with regeneration is, it takes years.' In the meantime the big challenge is to get people back into the centre while it adapts.

One chief said a survey showed what people under lockdown most missed was 'going out to the pub, second having a coffee, while shopping and retail were down the list. Most came into town to socialise.'

Another chief said there 'won't be the traditional turn up at 9am, finish at 6pm and sit in traffic for an hour. Work spaces will become blurred with social

activity. People want to come back to work for the interactive and social aspect, not the transactional, earn a living aspect.' Many shops as a result are likely to go out of business without the daily footfall and so they and offices will be converted into homes.

There has been some controversy about the quality of change of use conversions but one chief's view was that 'not getting people back into centre is bigger

problem than whether it's right type of change of use. Getting some of that wrong is better than having centres sitting empty for years.'

On the plus side, many people working from home are likely to spend locally giving a boost to suburban and smaller town centres. One chief from a rural authority said 'we're getting people coming to us saying they want to see developments in smaller

places' while another added: 'Secondary shopping areas are thriving. Most are occupied by independent businesses and they've been very creative.'

Coronavirus has thrown up immense challenges for the round table participants but as one summed up: 'From a professional perspective it's the most interesting time I've lived through with big opportunities.'

Sam Toombs, Wales & South West sales director, BT, comments on the conclusions

In response to the pandemic, BT has received and implemented hundreds of requests for new, innovative and enhanced connectivity across all public and private sectors in the South West. Staying as close as we possibly can to our customers in a virtual way has been essential in order to respond to some of the most urgent citizen needs for a generation. This virtual round table with chief executives from across England's South West was an incredible privilege to facilitate. It was also a critical milestone in understanding how BT can help the region further through co-innovation, with the shared goal to accelerate more citizen-led

outcomes and build a more connected, cared-for society.

Our aim to be the most trusted connectivity and digital transformation champion across the region has accelerated and become even more important. We have seen the positive impact of technology in recent months and want to continue to help everyone make the most of its potential, in order to thrive in an accelerated digital world.

That is why we are also empowering people with the skills they need today, for a better tomorrow. Technology is a powerful enabler, but we also recognise that many people lack

the skills and the confidence to make the most of it in their home and work lives. We're well placed to tackle this challenge with our reach, partnerships and strong track record on digital skills training.

We have also broadened and deepened our commitment in our Skills for Tomorrow programme, and we are partnering with organisations and places to help economic recovery post pandemic. Our Skills for Tomorrow programme is designed to support communities across the South West – from school children, jobseekers and small businesses to older and more vulnerable members of society.

Visit: <https://www.bt.com/about/digital-impact-and-sustainability/building-better-digital-lives>

● To find out more, get in touch directly with shadi.malkawi@bt.com

Join BT on the 24th November to learn how digital technology will be fundamental to the recovery of Wales and the South West post-COVID-19.

Register at: <https://waterfront.eventscase.com/EN/dt20>

