

# LIVING COUNCIL



## A MANIFESTO FOR PRACTICE

Jens Gemmel von Döllinger

## About the Author



Jens Gemmel (von Döllinger) has spent the past two decades working across local government, digital transformation, and public service reform. Much of his work has involved stepping into difficult circumstances, mostly in interim roles, and helping organisations find clarity, confidence, and momentum in moments of uncertainty.

Born to refugee parents and raised outside the traditional corridors of power, Jens didn't follow the expected path into leadership. That path had to be built along the way, through persistence, curiosity, and a deep belief in the public good. His career has focused on reimagining services, modernising outdated systems, and building cultures of trust, creativity, and data-led practice, especially in places where the odds felt stacked against progress.

From large cities to coastal communities, from central government advisory groups to grassroots initiatives, Jens has worked with teams to champion equity, transparency, and reform, helping to shape national policy while embedding innovation in local practice. His contributions have twice been recognised by the Institute of Directors with National Director of the Year commendations, though he sees the real reward in the resilience of the communities he has served.

As well as his public service roles, Jens has been a founder, a reformer, and often a gentle disruptor, encouraging more open, listening leadership, and helping public institutions use data, insight, and AI in ways that serve real people.

**Living Council** is the result of years spent in the real trenches of local government. It isn't theory, but a lived practice, a manifesto for anyone who still believes councils can be places of hope and action, not just management and survival.

Jens lives in Hove by the sea with his wife Alicia and their son Oliver Yolo, and remains quietly optimistic about the future of people, place, and public purpose.

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This book is a tapestry of lived experience, hard-won lessons, and imagined futures. Its ideas have been shaped by the author's journey across councils, communities, and moments of change. While grounded in truth, this is not an official record; it is a personal reflection, a manifesto of possibility.

The term "Living Council" is the author's creation. It describes a way of working that is democratic, adaptive, deeply human, and unapologetically hopeful. If others find echoes of their thinking here, that is cause for celebration, not concern. This book is not about claiming ownership of ideas, but about setting them free.

Any similarities with existing models, organisations, or phrases are unintentional and coincidental.

This publication is offered in the spirit of learning, questioning, and rebuilding together. Use it to provoke discussion, inspire action, or simply to reimagine what local government could be.

For permissions, feedback, or to connect, please reach out directly via [LinkedIn](#) or [www.jensgemmel.com](http://www.jensgemmel.com).

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## Preface

*“A new way is possible because the old one is no longer working.”*

I didn't set out to write a book. Like many of us in public service, I've spent years focused on the urgent: budgets, restructures, service redesigns, transformation plans, and the daily push to do more with less.

I've worked in councils under pressure, with staff on the edge, and systems stretched beyond what they were ever designed to do. I've also seen sparks of brilliance, neighbourhood teams who solved problems together, frontline staff who innovated in silence, leaders who quietly reimagined what councils could be.

And I've asked myself, over and over: Why isn't this the norm?

This book is my answer.

It's not a theory piece, or a pitch to Whitehall. It's a practical vision born out of lived experience, of leading change in some of the UK's most complex environments, of witnessing first-hand what works (and what doesn't), and of believing that local government deserves a better operating model than the one it's inherited.

I've called that new model the **Living Council**.

*Because it breathes. It adapts. It learns.*

*It's not locked in hierarchy or weighed down by bureaucracy.*

*It puts prevention before crisis, people before process, and purpose before paperwork.*

*It uses data and AI intelligently, but never forgets the human at the heart of it all.*

And crucially, it's already happening. All over the country, pieces of this model exist. In districts, unitaries, cities, in libraries repurposed for early help, in digital academies that upskill staff in AI, in multi-agency teams working without ego to prevent escalation before it happens.

This book brings those pieces together. It's a manifesto for practice, not theory. A guide for anyone who wants to build something better, whether you're a chief exec, a frontline practitioner, a councillor, a community leader, or someone just starting in local government and wondering what kind of system you've walked into.

If you've ever looked around and thought, surely, we can do this differently, you're in the right place. You don't need permission to start. Just purpose. And a team. And the courage to try.

Let's begin.

**Jens**



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# CHAPTER 1



## DEATH OF THE OLD COUNCIL

Most councils today aren't broken in the way people think; they're not corrupt or lazy or full of dinosaurs. But they are running an operating model that belongs in a different century. It's a bit like watching a steam engine try to run on fibre broadband. No matter how talented the people, how noble the intentions, or how colourful the strategy slides, the machinery grinds and groans under a model that's long past its expiry date.

Welcome to the Old Council:

*A council built on hierarchy, not networks.*

*A culture obsessed with compliance, not curiosity.*

*A place where spreadsheets speak louder than people.*

## **Spreadsheets, structures, and the theatre of transformation**

Transformation is the possibly the most overused and least understood word in local government. Every council has a transformation programme. Some even have an entire transformation directorate. Yet few can explain what, exactly, is transforming. Services remain siloed. Technology is still clunky. Staff morale is stuck somewhere between "resigned" and "resigned."

It's not for lack of trying. The problem is that we keep playing transformation as theatre, not system change. We juggle structures, rename teams, and celebrate savings that don't outlast the next financial year.

We build strategy documents that rival Tolstoy in length but are rarely read after the all-member briefing. We invest in tech, but never fully redesign the services it's supposed to support. We automate broken processes and call it "innovation."

## **The MTFS made me do it**

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) looms like a deity over local government. It determines what lives and dies. It claims to be a plan, but really it's a survival ritual. Entire transformation portfolios are built around avoiding a funding cliff, not creating a better service.

We treat the MTFS like the Bible and innovation like the graffiti in the margins.

We know that if we don't solve the funding gap, nothing else matters. But in trying to fix the gap, we widen the one that matters most: the gap between what we know we should be doing (prevention, early help, joined-up working) and what we do (respond late, silo deeper, cut faster).

## Austerity is no longer a phase. It's a System.

Let's drop the illusion. Austerity isn't temporary. The money is gone. It's not coming back. Even when the headlines say "new funding," the fine print screams "one-off," "ringfenced," or "already spent."

We're in the age of permanent austerity, and we need an operating model that works with what we have, not one that keeps hoping for what we don't.

That's why we need to kill the Old Council. Not because we don't believe in public service. But because we do. Enough to want something better.

## What comes next

This book is not about critique for the sake of it. It's about creating a way forward.

A Living Council:

*One that breathes with its community.*

*One that sees prevention as default, not luxury.*

*One that treats data as insight, not surveillance.*

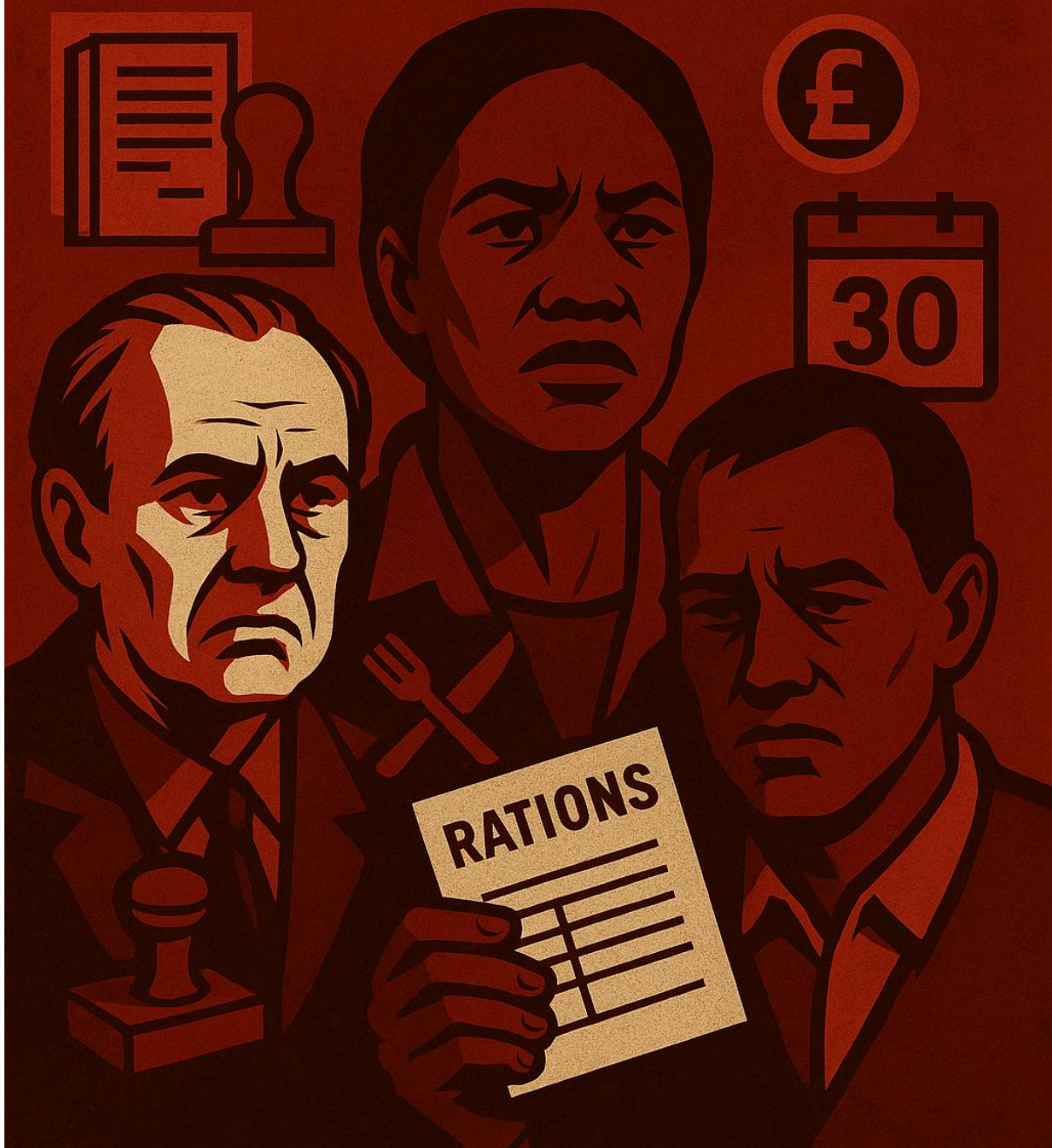
*One that redesigns itself around people, not paperwork.*

In the chapters that follow, I'll explore what that Living Council looks like, how to build it, and why, despite everything, you should still believe it's possible. But first, let's say our final goodbyes to the old ways. RIP Spreadsheet Utopia. You won't be missed.



# CHAPTER 2

## THE ERA OF PERMANENT AUSTERITY





The money is not coming back.

Despite the headlines, the ministerial soundbites, and the cleverly staged photo-ops next to shiny bins or fibre-optic cables, local government is not experiencing a funding dip. We are not in a “challenging financial period.” We are in a structurally baked-in system of permanent austerity.

It’s not a blip. It’s the new default.

The current local government model, how we plan, budget, govern, and deliver, was never designed to function under these conditions. At best, it was engineered for stable funding, predictable demand, and the luxury of long-term investment. At worst, it was cobbled together to comply with Whitehall whims and consultant-created org charts.

We’ve been papering over the cracks with transformation theatre and crisis management. But the foundations are shifting beneath us, and pretending otherwise is a waste of time we don’t have.

## **It didn’t start in 2010, but that’s when the rules changed**

Of course, council funding has always been political. But 2010 marked a deliberate reset. Local government was chosen as the ground zero for fiscal tightening, and it never left the front line. We got cut first and cut deepest.

And then we stayed cut.

Social care demand went up. Children’s complexity increased. Homelessness spiralled. But funding? Funding stagnated or was wrapped in so much bureaucracy that spending it became a project in itself.

We became experts in “doing more with less.” And then “doing less with less.” And now? We’re managing collapse, filing Section 114 notices while juggling inspections, restructures, and the occasional hope that a minister might look our way.

## **The false comfort of growth assumptions**

Every council finance paper includes a graph that slopes gently upward after year three. That is the official fantasy of the MTFS.

It’s the moment when, magically, growth returns. Tax bases expand. Business rates bounce back. Developers queue to pay CIL. You balance the books. Officers breathe. Councillors celebrate. And the future finally looks manageable.

Except it rarely ever happens.

These growth assumptions are a polite fiction, a ritual we perform so we can sign off the next set of savings. But the economy doesn't bend to our budget cycles, and the productivity gains never quite land in the services that need them.

In truth, these graphs slope upward because they have to. Not because they will.

## Funding 'boosts' that aren't

You've seen the headlines: "Government announces £1 billion boost to local authorities!"

Sounds great, until you look at the details:

*Half is already committed to pre-announced social care funding.*

*A quarter is ringfenced for programmes that require 20-page grant applications.*

*The remainder is spread across 350 councils.*

It's the funding equivalent of being offered a feast and then served a pack of peanuts.

The truth? These aren't boosts. They're brief, tactical injections, designed to show motion without real movement. They sustain political narratives, not services.

## Prevention: Always the bridesmaid

Everyone agrees that prevention is good. It's in every strategy document. It gets nods at every cabinet meeting. We all say the right things.

But when the crunch comes? Prevention is always the first to go.

*Because you don't get re-elected for things that didn't happen.*

*You don't get a line in the budget for avoided costs.*

*And you certainly don't get credit for long-term risk mitigation in a 12-month savings plan.*

So, we fund crisis instead. We build more children's homes. We expand reactive housing teams. We plug leaks after they burst, again and again, and then wonder why demand keeps rising.

## The demand trap

Here's the cruel cycle:

*Cuts reduce early help capacity.*

*Needs go unmet until they escalate into crisis.*

*Crisis interventions cost exponentially more.*

*Budgets overspend.*

*Early help gets cut again to save money.*

It's a trap, and it's not just financial, it's operational, cultural, and psychological.

Staff burnout becomes the norm. Talent leaves. Risk aversion grows. Data is used to explain why we can't do something, not to imagine how we might. And somewhere, quietly, the public starts to expect less. That might be the greatest loss of all.

## Technology can't save you (but it might help you survive)

The rise of AI and digital tools has created a new temptation: the belief that we can tech our way out of austerity.

We can't.

AI won't fix a broken funding formula. Automation won't solve systemic housing shortages. Chatbots won't keep a teenager out of care or a vulnerable adult out of crisis.

But here's what AI can do:

*It can help us predict, target, and prevent.*

*It can fill the capacity gaps left behind by years of cuts.*

*It can give staff time back, not to leave, but to lead.*

But only if we stop seeing it as a silver bullet and start seeing it as part of a new operating model.

## **The call to reality (and to courage)**

We have to be honest with ourselves, our residents, and our political leaders.

The old assumptions about money, growth, and rescue packages are gone. And pretending otherwise is costing us more than money; it's costing trust, capability, and belief in the future.

But honesty isn't the end of the story. It's the start. Because once we accept that permanent austerity is the condition, not the problem, we can start designing a model that works in spite of it.

That model is the Living Council. Not a council defined by its budget gap. But by its responsiveness, intelligence, and care. But first, we got to stop fighting the last war, and start building for the next generation.

# CHAPTER 3

## FALSE DAWNS AND EXPENSIVE FIXES



The local government graveyard is littered with the bones of past reforms.

Shared services. ERP overhauls. Outsourced contracts. Best value reviews. Digital strategies with stock photos of Wi-Fi icons and someone pointing at a tablet. Each one arrived with a promise. Slick brochures. High-profile launches. Management consultants who flew in, renamed some things, ran a few workshops, and left behind a Gantt chart and an invoice.

For a moment, hope flickered. Transformation was coming.

But it never stayed. Because these weren't transformations. They were illusions of progress, built to impress budget holders, not to change outcomes. Let's name the patterns. Not to shame the past, but to stop repeating it.

## 1. The ERP Mirage

Every few years, a council somewhere decides that its main problem is its Enterprise Resource Planning system. If only we had a new system, everything else would flow.

Finance, HR, payroll, procurement, all integrated. All automated. All beautiful (at least on the demo screens). So, we spend millions. We freeze recruitment for months. We train staff in new workflows they never wanted. We suffer through parallel runs and "hyper care" periods, until eventually... the new system goes live.

And what happens?

*HR still chases down paper sick notes.*

*Finance still runs shadow spreadsheets.*

*No one knows how to extract a report without three phone calls and a manual.*

The truth? ERP isn't the answer. It's just a very expensive reflection of our existing problems, codified in even harder-to-change software. Unless your processes are reimagined first, ERP just reinforces the old dysfunction in shinier wrappers.



## 2. The outsourcing pendulum

Once hailed as the holy grail of efficiency, outsourcing was supposed to deliver better services at lower cost.

Except what we got was this:

*Call centres where no one understood local needs.*

*Housing contracts where repairs vanished into thin air.*

*Strategic partnerships that became contractual mazes.*

And when it failed? We “in-sourced” everything again. Often with heroic effort from internal teams, who had to rebuild knowledge, systems, and trust from scratch. We swung the pendulum from ideology to ideology, forgetting that governance, culture and purpose matter more than who signs the payslip.

## 3. The cult of best practice

One of the most dangerous phrases in public service is: “We should just do what other councils did.” Now, there’s nothing wrong with learning from peers. But councils are not IKEA kitchens. You can’t just lift a model and plug it in.

Every place has different:

*Demand pressures*

*Workforce capabilities*

*Political dynamics*

*Resident expectations*

*Digital infrastructure (or lack thereof)*

Copy-paste reform fails because it misunderstands context as inconvenience. What we need is not best practice, but next practice. Reform that’s rooted in real-time insight, local needs, and adaptive learning.

## 4. The consultant-industrial complex

Let's address the uncomfortable truth: transformation has become an industry. And many councils, starved of internal capacity, have handed the keys to outside firms. Sometimes it works. When consultants come in as critical friends, co-designing with staff, building capability, not just decks.

But too often we get:

*Framework reports recycled from other clients.*

*Recommendations that require more consultancy to implement.*

*Staff left disempowered, watching their own ideas delivered back to them with a logo.*

Transformation cannot be subcontracted. It must be led from within. Otherwise, we just become customers of our own future.

## 5. The digital strategy that isn't

"Digital" is the most misused word in the public sector. It's not just websites or apps. It's a new way of thinking, organising, delivering.

But most digital strategies don't reflect that. They look like this:

*Buy a new CRM.*

*Redesign the homepage.*

*Launch a chatbot.*

*Move a form online.*

And then claim it's transformation. True digital thinking is about:

*Reimagining services around user needs.*

*Using data to drive decisions.*

*Empowering frontline staff with tools that work.*

*Embedding iterative improvement, not one-off projects.*

Anything less is a digital coat of paint on an analogue house.

## 6. The PowerPoint uplift

You know the type: a bold new vision. Big arrows. Shiny triangles. The transformation journey illustrated by a graphic no one understands but everyone pretends to. We sign off the vision, form a programme board, set up workstreams, and then... not much changes.

Because strategy without delivery is performance art. And delivery without culture change is just fatigue. Transformation isn't a presentation. It's a discipline, a design challenge, and a leadership act. It's hard. It takes time. And it starts with telling the truth about what's not working.

## Why we fall for false dawns

There's a reason we keep returning to these same fixes: we're under pressure.

*We're told to save money and improve outcomes, with less time and fewer people.*

*We're held to account by auditors, regulators, and sometimes even the media, who rarely understand the complexity of what we do.*

*And we care. We really care. So we grab onto anything that promises relief.*

But desperation is not a strategy, and hope is not a plan. And if we want real reform, we need to stop reacting and start redesigning.

That means asking:

*What's the problem we're actually trying to solve?*

*Who is closest to it?*

*What would it look like if it actually worked?*

*How do we design something that adapts over time?*

## From false fixes to living systems

The good news? Some councils have broken the cycle. They've built parts of living systems, not rigid structures. They've focused on prevention, designed around need, and used AI and data as enablers, not gimmicks.

*They didn't start by buying something.*

*They started by listening. Redesigning. Testing. Learning. Evolving.*

*They acted like a Living Council.*

That's the shift we explore next. Because the fix we need isn't external. It's structural, cultural, and systemic. And yes, it's achievable, if we stop chasing false dawns and start building real change, one decision at a time.

# CHAPTER 4

## A COUNCIL THAT BREATHES



Imagine, for a moment, a different kind of council.

*Not one that reacts to failure, but one that anticipates need.*

*Not one that organises itself around departments, but around people.*

*Not one that collapses under pressure, but flexes with intelligence and care.*

This is the Living Council. Not a utopia. Not a TED talk. Not another abstract framework gathering dust on an intranet folder. But a practical, grounded operating model, designed for a world where funding is tight, needs are complex, and the old tools no longer work.

A Living Council isn't a slogan. It's a system. And like all living systems, it:

*Responds to its environment*

*Learns from experience*

*Evolves over time*

*Connects its parts with purpose*

It breathes, and that one shift, from machine to organism, is what gives it life.

## From pyramid to platform

Traditional councils are designed like pyramids:

*Power flows downward*

*Information moves slowly*

*Silos protect territory*

*Compliance trumps creativity*

Decisions made at the top echo slowly downwards, often distorted, delayed, or derailed. But the world doesn't operate like that anymore. Communities are networks. Needs are overlapping. Crises don't wait for sign-off.

That's why the Living Council operates like a platform, not in the tech sense, but in the systems sense. It connects people, data, tools and purpose in a way that allows intelligence to emerge and action to be taken, closer to the problem.



*Instead of centralising control, it decentralises capability.*

*Instead of reporting problems up, it solves them out.*

*Instead of delivering services to people, it builds capacity with them.*

## **The five design principles of a Living Council**

To bring this to life, we need to define its core DNA. The Living Council rests on five interlocking design principles:

### **1. It is prevention-first**

The Living Council does not treat prevention as a cost-saving bolt-on. It is the core business model. It invests early to avoid an expensive crisis later.

That means:

*Integrating data to spot risk earlier.*

*Designing services to intervene before escalation.*

*Funding neighbourhood-based, person-centred responses.*

*Measuring success not by output, but by what didn't happen.*

This isn't a slogan. It's a structural shift in how budgets are built, how teams are organised, and how decisions are made.

### **2. It is need-driven, not service-defined**

Traditional councils are carved into service lines: social care, housing, education, and environment. But people don't experience life in service lines. They experience need.

A Living Council:

*Organises around people, places, and prevention, not structures.*

*Redesigns touchpoints around life journeys, not internal logic.*

*Uses multi-agency teams, co-location, and integrated processes.*

It recognises that someone facing eviction and a mental health crisis shouldn't need to navigate five departments and three referral forms. They need an intelligent system that understands them.

### **3. It is powered by insight**

The Living Council doesn't just collect data. It uses it, with care, with intelligence, and with purpose.

That means:

*Combining housing, health, education, debt, and safeguarding data.*

*Using AI and predictive analytics to identify hidden risk.*

*Sharing insight across services in real time (with governance baked in).*

*Building feedback loops into the system to learn what works.*

This isn't surveillance. It's precision public service, helping people faster, earlier, and more effectively, without waiting for crisis.

### **4. It is AI-native, not AI-add-on**

Most councils today use AI like a fancy bolt-on, chatbots here, form recognition there. But a Living Council sees AI differently: not as a tool for automation, but as an operating advantage.

That means:

*Using AI to free up human time, not replace it.*

*Applying it to reduce admin, triage demand, and surface unseen patterns.*

*Embedding local innovation ecosystems, not outsourcing it all to Silicon Valley.*

*Developing in-house capacity through digital academies and collaborative learning.*

AI-native doesn't mean tech-obsessed. It means adaptive by design, a council that grows its own intelligence, every day.

## 5. It is relational, not transactional

Finally, a Living Council understands that trust is built through relationships, not transactions.

It:

*Builds long-term connections with residents, not just interactions.*

*Values community insight, lived experience, and shared ownership.*

*Empowers frontline staff to act with discretion, not scripts.*

*Treats citizens not as customers, but as co-producers of public value.*

It's not soft. It's strategic. Because without trust, services are avoided, resented, or gamed, and outcomes suffer. The Living Council makes trust the foundation, not the afterthought.

## It's not about more money. It's about a different logic.

Some will argue that this all sounds expensive. It isn't.

What's expensive is the current model:

*Late intervention*

*High-cost placements*

*Endless duplication*

*Staff burnout*

*Tech bought but never used*

The Living Council doesn't spend more. It spends differently. And it earns trust, reduces demand, and builds resilience in return.

## What it looks like in practice

Picture this:

*A single front door that recognises need across housing, debt, health and care.*

*Community hubs in libraries that offer early help, triage, and peer support.*

*AI tools that surface risk before crisis hits.*

*Teams that co-locate and co-own complex cases.*

*Budgets that fund shared outcomes, not just departmental activity.*

*Staff who feel empowered, not exhausted.*

*Residents who feel known, not processed.*

This isn't fiction. It's already happening, in parts, in places up and down the country. The question is: will we scale it? Or let it remain the exception?

## **The living metaphor**

Living systems don't ask permission to evolve. They sense, respond, adapt. The same must be true of our councils. The pyramid has had its day. The spreadsheet has met its limits. The performance report no longer tells the real story. It's time for something that breathes. That listens. That learns.

Next, we explore what it means to go from data-rich to data-driven, because breathing without intelligence is just hyperventilation.

# CHAPTER 5

## FROM DATA-RICH TO DATA-DRIVEN



Local government is not short on data. We know who's in council tax arrears, whose bin hasn't been collected, who's on the waiting list for housing, who's had five missed care visits, and who hasn't paid rent since May. We've got dashboards, audits, spreadsheets, trackers, risk logs, and digital warehouses of the stuff.

We're drowning in data, and yet still starved of insight. Why? Because we've built an operating culture that treats data as something to collect, not to understand. Something to report upwards, not to act upon. Something to defend ourselves with, not to design around.

This is the gap. The Living Council doesn't just own data. It uses it, with purpose, with precision, and with humanity.

## The difference between data and insight

*Data tells you 2,734 people are in temporary accommodation.*

*Insight tells you which 86 of them are likely to stay there over a year, which 12 are at immediate risk of eviction, and which 6 had previous contact with early help that never materialised.*

*Data tells you attendance at school X is down 10%.*

*Insight links that with housing instability, social care referrals, and parental debt, predicting a likely rise in safeguarding concerns next term.*

*Data tells you your social care team closed 128 cases this month.*

*Insight tells you that 17 of those cases are likely to return within 6 months, and what preventative support could break the cycle.*

Data shows what. Insight explains the why and suggests the what's next. A Living Council is not built on data volume. It's built on intelligent decisions at every level, powered by integrated insight.

## Why councils get stuck in the “data-rich” trap

You know how it works:

*Each service has its own system.*



*Each system has its own fields, rules, access permissions.*

*Staff log things for compliance, not learning.*

*IT says integration is on the roadmap (somewhere behind replacing the printer fleet).*

*And BI teams drown in freedom of information requests and performance dashboards no one reads.*

The result? Data stays stuck in silos. Risk hides in plain sight. People fall through the gaps. We spend so much time feeding systems that we forget the point is to feed intelligence.

## **The three levels of intelligence in a Living Council**

A Living Council uses data at three interlocking levels:

### **1. Predictive intelligence (seeing the storm before it hits)**

Using AI and analytics to:

*Spot early signs of crisis (e.g., rent arrears plus school absence plus GP data)*

*Identify service users likely to escalate without intervention*

*Map risk at community level, by neighbourhood, school, or household type*

*Model the impact of interventions before you commit resources*

This is not about replacing professional judgement. It's about amplifying it with early warnings, hidden patterns, and real-time insight.

### **2. Operational intelligence (making better decisions today)**

Giving frontline staff the tools to:

*See full case history across services.*

*Flag risks and needs automatically.*

*Track referrals and outcomes live.*

*Collaborate across departments without email chains or workarounds.*

This is where most of the value is won or lost. Not in the data warehouse, but in the moment a housing officer, social worker or customer advisor needs to act. The question is: do they have what they need? If not, no amount of dashboards will help.

### **3. Strategic intelligence (shaping the system itself)**

This is where insight changes how councils work:

*Which interventions are reducing demand, and which are just delaying it?*

*Where is spend rising faster than need?*

*Where are we duplicating effort, or missing it altogether?*

*Which services are doing more harm than good?*

Strategic intelligence allows leadership to shift from firefighting to design. It tells you where to invest, where to disinvest, and where to rethink altogether. But this only works if insight is trusted, used, and embedded, not just printed in reports at year-end.

## **How to become data-driven (without breaking the bank)**

You don't need a Silicon Valley budget. You need a mindset shift and some focused changes. Here's how it can be done:

### **1. Start with the problem, not the platform**

Don't start with tech. Start with the question: "What do we need to know to act earlier, better, and faster?"

Then work backwards.

*Focus on outcomes, not KPIs.*

*Focus on people, not processes.*

*Let frontline teams define what intelligence would help them act.*

## 2. Link systems where it matters most

You don't need a single system. You need useful integration.

That might mean:

*Linking housing and children's services data*

*Creating an early help dashboard fed from multiple case sources*

*Building flags and triggers into existing workflows*

You don't need perfection. You need functionality.

## 3. Build feedback loops

Insight isn't a one-way street. It needs a feedback loop.

*Let staff flag when data is wrong, incomplete, or outdated.*

*Involve communities in validating what the data says about them.*

*Create cycles of learning from what worked and what didn't.*

If insight doesn't evolve, it becomes stale. Living Councils learn.

## 4. Trust people with data, and hold them accountable

Data governance isn't about locking things away. It's about responsible use with a clear purpose.

*Share intelligence across teams with transparency and training.*

*Avoid hoarding data for internal power or "just in case".*

*Make ethical data use part of organisational culture, not just a GDPR checkbox.*

Because insight without ethics is surveillance, and ethics without action is a policy.

## The cultural shift: from surveillance to solidarity

People are rightly sceptical about how councils use data.

*Will it be used to cut their services?*

*Will it be shared with third parties?*

*Will it punish them for asking for help?*

The Living Council must model ethical intelligence. That means:

*Being transparent about what data is used and why.*

*Involving residents in co-designing how data drives services.*

*Making data work for people, not against them.*

Because when people trust the system, they engage earlier, and prevention becomes possible.

## Data without delivery is just decoration

You can have all the data in the world. But unless it's driving better decisions, earlier interventions, and smarter system design, it's just digital wallpaper.

Being data-driven means building a council that:

*Knows what's happening.*

*Understands why it's happening.*

*Can act before it happens again.*

This is what gives the Living Council its eyes and its brain.

Next, we look at what gives it its nervous system: a new relationship with AI, not as an add-on, but as a native part of how we operate.

# CHAPTER 6

## PREVENTION IS A MINDSET, NOT A DEPARTMENT



Every local authority claims to prioritise prevention. It's in the vision. It's in the strategy. It's on every other PowerPoint slide.

But here's the inconvenient truth:

*In most councils, prevention is not a system. It's a pilot.*

*It's not funded. It's commissioned and*

*it's not core business. It's everyone else's responsibility.*

We've created a culture where prevention is seen as important but optional, strategic but expendable, talked up at launch and quietly trimmed at budget time. The result? We don't prevent very much. We respond. We intervene. We manage demand, but only after it's already arrived.

The Living Council turns that logic on its head. In a Living Council, prevention is not a project or programme. It's the operating model.

## **Three levels of prevention ... and why we rarely get past the first**

Let's borrow a concept from public health: the three levels of prevention.

### **1. Primary prevention: stop the problem before it starts**

This is about upstream investment:

*Keeping families stable so children don't enter care.*

*Supporting mental health before crisis.*

*Ensuring homes are safe and warm to prevent hospitalisation.*

*Helping people stay in work, in education, in community.*

It's proactive, universal, and often invisible, because its success is what doesn't happen. But because its outcomes are long-term and difficult to attribute directly, it's often the first thing to get cut. Especially when the MTFs says "deliver in-year savings."

## 2. Secondary prevention: early intervention to stop escalation

This is the “sweet spot” some councils aim for:

*Identifying risk factors (e.g., rent arrears, school absence, domestic abuse indicators)*

*Intervening quickly before things spiral*

*Offering practical support, case management, and wraparound help*

It’s more targeted. More measurable. And more politically defensible. But without sustained capacity, it quickly becomes just another gatekeeping exercise. We tell ourselves we’re intervening early, but really we’re triaging crisis.

## 3. Tertiary prevention: minimise harm once the damage is done

This is where most spending goes.

*High-cost placements.*

*Emergency housing.*

*Reactive mental health support.*

*Complex adult and children’s social care interventions.*

It’s necessary, but it’s not prevention. It’s damage control. And if most of your budget is locked up here, it’s almost impossible to rebalance toward early help.

## The prevention paradox

Everyone agrees that prevention saves money, reduces harm, and improves lives. But no one feels empowered, or funded, to deliver it.

This creates a prevention paradox:

*No political leader wants to announce cuts to crisis services.*

*No director wants to promise savings from prevention that may not materialise during their tenure.*

*No service manager wants to shift budgets when demand is still rising.*

*And no resident notices prevention, until it’s gone.*



So we revert to what feels safe: firefighting, monitoring, rationing. The Living Council breaks that cycle: by making prevention the default behaviour, not an optional extra.

## **What prevention looks like in practice**

Let's move from theory to application. What does this mindset shift actually mean for services?

### **Housing**

**Old model:** Wait until a household is in arrears, then start the eviction process.

**Living Council:** Use rent and benefits data to identify at-risk households, intervene with mediation, employment support, or wraparound care.

**Result:** Fewer evictions. Less homelessness. Lower costs. More dignity.

### **Children's services**

**Old model:** Refer to social care when thresholds are hit.

**Living Council:** Work with schools, GPs, and families to identify vulnerability earlier, then offer coordinated support through trusted community workers.

**Result:** Fewer escalations. Safer children. Families helped before the trauma.

### **Customer services**

**Old model:** Focus on call handling times and closing cases quickly.

**Living Council:** Empower staff to spot patterns (multiple contacts, stress cues) and refer to early help pathways, even if the original request was about bins.

**Result:** The phone call becomes a gateway to support, not just a transaction.

### **Adult social care**

**Old model:** Assess for eligibility, provide care, and review.

**Living Council:** Invest in community connectors, early outreach, and digital monitoring tools to reduce isolation, keep people active and safe.

**Result:** Delayed need, reduced costs, improved quality of life.

# The structural enablers of prevention

Making prevention the operating model isn't just about good intentions. It requires hardwiring it into the system.

## 1. Budgeting for prevention

*Ringfence prevention investment across the MTFs, not just one-off pots*

*Allow services to share savings when demand drops*

*Model long-term benefits and value, not just immediate return*

Remember: prevention doesn't always pay off in 12 months. But it pays off over time, if you let it.

## 2. Integrating insight into decision-making

*Use predictive analytics to identify need early*

*Create shared dashboards across services*

*Build automatic referral triggers and real-time alerts*

Insight without action is wallpaper. Design your systems to act on it.

## 3. Redesigning services around need

*Dismantle silos between housing, care, debt, education*

*Build integrated hubs and multi-disciplinary teams*

*Allow staff to own the whole case, not just their bit of it*

Prevention thrives when services don't pass the buck.

## 4. Investing in community capability

*Support voluntary and peer-led support networks*

*Use libraries, leisure centres and community spaces for prevention*

Sometimes the best prevention isn't a service. It's a relationship.

## The cultural shift: from gatekeeping to enabling

This is the deepest shift. In a Living Council, staff aren't trained to ration access. They're trusted to enable better lives.

That means:

*Less focus on eligibility criteria*

*More focus on capability, wellbeing and resilience*

*Incentivising staff to solve problems, not just close cases*

It also means trusting people to engage with support before they're in crisis, not punishing them for asking early.

## Prevention isn't soft. It's strategic.

Some still see prevention as soft, woolly, or too idealistic.

*Let them walk a mile in the shoes of a housing officer trying to support someone who's lost their job, missed two rent payments, is caring for an elderly parent, and now faces court.*

*Let them read the referral from a teacher worried about a child who hasn't eaten this week.*

*Let them budget for another year of emergency placements because the early help service was cut last year.*

There's nothing soft about fixing broken systems before people break.

## **It's not about stopping bad things. It's about building good ones.**

Ultimately, prevention isn't just the absence of crisis. It's the presence of possibility.

*It's a teenager who finishes school and doesn't enter care.*

*It's a neighbour who gets help before eviction.*

*It's a grandmother who stays active, connected, and in her home.*

*It's a workforce that feels like it's making a difference again.*

This is what the Living Council is here to build. And it only becomes possible when we stop asking "How do we manage the risk?" and start asking "How do we build the conditions for people to thrive?"

Next, we explore how the Living Council builds capacity at scale, through technology, collaboration, and AI-native service design. Because prevention powered by insight needs the right nervous system, and that's where AI steps in.



Let's start with a disclaimer.

*This isn't a chapter about robots taking over.*

*It's not about chatbots answering your bins enquiry in a vaguely polite tone.*

*And it's definitely not about outsourcing your ethics to an algorithm.*

This is about reclaiming AI from the consultants, the tech giants, and the TED Talkers, and putting it to work for the public good. Because in the Living Council, AI isn't the future. It's part of the now, woven quietly into the system, not sitting on top of it like a toy.

This is what it means to be an AI-native council: Not flashy. Not faddish. Just intelligently designed to solve real problems, at scale, with care.

## **First things first: what AI is (and what it isn't)**

AI isn't one thing. It's a toolbox:

*Machine learning that spots patterns and predicts outcomes*

*Natural language processing that helps systems understand text and speech*

*Generative AI that creates draft documents, reports or plans*

*Computer vision that recognises images or objects (e.g. fly-tipping, potholes)*

*Decision support systems that help staff make informed choices*

What it's not is:

*Magic*

*Sentient*

*Always right*

*A replacement for people*

Think of it like electricity. It doesn't do the work for you. But it powers tools that let you do the work faster, smarter, and better.



## From AI-add-on to AI-native

Most councils today treat AI like a shiny new add-on:

*“We’ve launched a chatbot.”*

*“We’re trialling predictive analytics in one service.”*

*“We’ve automated this one process.”*

It’s innovation by press release.

But an AI-native council does something different:

*It embeds AI into core decision-making and operations*

*It uses AI to amplify human capability, not replace it*

*It designs services, structures and skills around augmented intelligence*

This isn’t a tech project. It’s an organisational mindset.

## AI as the nervous system of the Living Council

You’ve got your platform. You’ve got your insight. You’ve got your prevention-first mindset.

Now you need speed, scale, and responsiveness. That’s where AI lives.

Just like the human nervous system:

*It senses early signals (data inputs)*

*Processes those rapidly (machine learning models)*

*Sends actionable signals to where they’re needed (service teams, systems, or citizens)*

It’s not glamorous. But it’s the infrastructure of intelligent action.



# Five ways AI-native councils are already transforming services

## 1. Predicting demand before it peaks

Use AI models to:

*Predict which households may fall into arrears*

*Forecast social care demand based on demography and previous case data*

*Spot likely non-attenders in schools or at risk of exclusion*

**Impact:** Earlier interventions, smarter resource planning, and more stable caseloads.

## 2. Automating admin, not empathy

Use generative AI to:

*Draft care plans, case notes, and meeting minutes*

*Summarise long documents into usable formats*

*Pre-fill forms using historic data and live inputs*

**Impact:** Time saved for staff. Better documentation. Fewer errors. More time for human connection.

## 3. Intelligent triage and routing

Use AI to:

*Triage requests based on complexity, urgency and vulnerability*

*Route cases to the right team or professional instantly*

*Recommend next best actions based on similar cases*

**Impact:** Faster responses. Reduced duplication. More personalised support.

## 4. Mapping community-level risk and opportunity

Combine geospatial data with AI to:

*Map loneliness hotspots*

*Track environmental risks*

*Forecast where prevention investment would have most impact*

**Impact:** Place-based targeting of resources, not just reactive delivery.

## 5. Enabling AI-powered customer journeys

Move beyond webforms:

*Offer predictive support (“You may be eligible for help with this”)*

*Let people interact using plain language, not council-speak*

*Use sentiment analysis to understand how people feel, not just what they say*

**Impact:** A more humane digital front door. Less frustration. More insight.

## Local innovation examples

Local government isn’t waiting around for Silicon Valley. Across the UK, councils are building, buying and co-developing intelligent tools:

*Westminster uses AI to triage 200+ street reports a day with over 80% accuracy.*

*Wigan deployed an AI assistant to support social care triage, reducing staff time per case.*

*Plymouth has launched its Digital AI Academy with an initial cohort of 60 apprentices with the aim to upskill its workforce and then co-develop local solutions to local problems by building ethical tools in-house.*

*Barking & Dagenham is experimenting with predictive case management tools in Community Solutions.*

This isn’t theory. It’s already happening. Quietly. Successfully. Ethically.

## The governance question: AI with values

AI brings power. But it also brings risk.

The Living Council governs AI with:

*Clear policies on procurement, transparency and bias mitigation*

*Ethical review panels including residents and frontline staff*

*Open audit trails for any automated decisions*

*A preference for local development over black-box US platforms (yes, we're looking at you, Palantir)*

Because in public services, how we use technology is just as important as what it does. This is why an AI-native council is not an automated council. It's a values-led, human-augmented, and accountable council.

## The workforce: fear, skills and the future

Let's name it, staff are worried.

*"Will AI take my job?"*

*"Will it tell me what to do?"*

*"Will I be liable if it gets it wrong?"*

*"Is this just the latest reorganisation in disguise?"*

We must meet these concerns with truth and training.

*AI won't replace people. It'll replace the capacity we lost to austerity.*

*It won't make decisions for you. It will support them, if designed well.*

*The best councils will invest in Digital Academies to upskill staff in data, ethics, and AI tools.*

*And AI-literate councils will be better employers, offering more purpose, less burnout.*

AI isn't the threat. Staying stuck in outdated ways of working is.

## **Five traits of an AI-native council**

1. Strategic clarity: AI is aligned to outcomes, not gimmicks
2. Operational integration: AI tools are part of daily workflows, not side projects
3. Human-centred design: AI supports people, not processes
4. Ethical governance: Decisions are transparent, accountable and fair
5. Local capability: Councils grow their own intelligence, not just buy it in

## **Let's not wait to be disrupted**

Private tech companies are already reshaping service expectations. Residents compare our digital offer with banks, airlines, and Amazon, not other councils. If we don't lead our own AI story, someone else will write it for us. And we may not like the ending.

The Living Council chooses to lead, by building AI into the heart of its model. Carefully. Responsibly. Locally. Because used well, AI is not about saving money. It's about saving time, attention, and potential, so people can do what they do best: solve problems, connect with others, and make lives better.

Next, we explore how culture, leadership and bravery can bring this all together, because even with all the insight and AI in the world, nothing changes unless people believe they can.

# CHAPTER 8

Culture, courage, and  
breaking the school rules



*You can have the best strategy in the world.*

*You can have AI models humming in the background.*

*You can have data dashboards glowing like Christmas trees.*

*You can even have a PowerPoint that makes the Chief Executive cry with joy.*

But if your culture doesn't change, nothing does. Because transformation doesn't live in frameworks.

*It lives in people.*

*In habits.*

*In what gets rewarded, tolerated, and quietly ignored.*

And the truth is, most councils are still run like schools.

*We reward the rule-followers.*

*We tolerate the compliant.*

*We quietly sideline the awkward question-askers.*

And we promote people who can "hold the line" rather than reimagine the shape. The Living Council breaks that pattern, not by becoming chaotic, but by becoming creative. It nurtures cultures of bravery, curiosity, and care, because without them, no amount of reform sticks.

## **The culture of the Old Council**

Let's diagnose the dominant culture in many local authorities today. You'll recognise some of this:

### **Compliance-first**

*Processes come before purpose*

*Risk is avoided at all costs*

*Saying "no" is safer than saying "let's try"*

*Performance targets become the end, not the means*

## **Silo protectionism**

*Services operate as kingdoms*

*Data is hoarded, not shared*

*Collaboration happens in theory, not in workflow*

*Success is measured by individual budgets, not collective outcomes*

## **Fear of failure**

*Staff avoid innovation in case it backfires*

*Leaders demand certainty in a world that isn't certain*

*The system punishes mistakes and ignores learning*

*Everyone spends more time covering their backs than exploring new ground*

This isn't because people are bad. It's because the system rewards survival over evolution. But in the Living Council, that changes.

## **What a healthy council culture looks like**

You know you're in a Living Council when ...

### **Staff feel safe to act**

*They don't need ten layers of sign-off to do the right thing*

*They're trusted to use discretion and judgement*

*When something goes wrong, it's a learning moment, not a witch hunt*

### **Leaders model vulnerability**

*They admit when something didn't work*

*They show curiosity, not control*

*They ask "what do you need to succeed?" not "why didn't this hit target?"*



## Teams are connected by purpose

*Housing, social care, early help, education, aligned around shared outcomes*

*Language is collaborative, not transactional*

*Meetings focus on problem-solving, not defending positions*

## Feedback flows in every direction

*Staff can challenge upwards*

*Residents are part of the redesign*

*Success is measured by trust and outcomes, not just spreadsheets*

## Leadership behaviours that shift culture

Changing culture takes more than value posters in the reception. It takes consistent, brave leadership. Here's what that looks like ...

### 1. Leading with clarity, not certainty

In complex systems, you can't guarantee outcomes. But you can be clear on:

*Why we're doing this*

*What principles we'll follow*

*What boundaries we won't cross*

You're not expected to have all the answers, but you must create the space where answers can emerge.

### 2. Being radically transparent

Share what's working and what isn't.

*Make performance data open*

*Show where the money goes*

*Publish your ethical framework for AI and data use*

*Invite scrutiny from residents, staff, and partners*

Transparency builds trust. Trust enables change.

### **3. Aligning permission with purpose**

If your strategy says “be innovative,” but your budget process says “fill in this 40-page form to get £5k,” people will follow the process.

Align your rules with your ambitions.

*Devolve budgets to teams*

*Fund prototypes and pilots quickly*

*Let people spend more time delivering than explaining themselves*

### **4. Protecting the reformers**

Every council has people trying to do things differently. Often, they get burned out, shut down, or quietly redeployed.

The Living Council protects reformers.

*Sponsors change agents at all levels*

*Celebrates experimentation, even when it doesn't land*

*Builds a network of champions who support each other*

*Makes bravery visible*

## **The role of frontline staff**

Most frontline workers already know what needs to change.

*They see where the gaps are*

*They know which forms don't make sense*

*They watch the same families cycle through crisis again and again*

*They know when prevention is possible, but out of reach*

But they rarely feel empowered to fix it. The Living Council treats frontline insight as a strategic asset, not a side note. It creates a culture where frontline voices lead design, not just implement it.

Real transformation is not top-down or bottom-up. It's inside-out, driven by those closest to the work, supported by those with the power to enable it.

## Breaking the school rules

Many of us grew up in systems where:

*Good behaviour = obedience*

*Success = ticking the box*

*Innovation = risk*

*Mistakes = punishment*

That logic seeps into our councils.

But the world we now face (permanent austerity, complex need, AI disruption), requires a different kind of mindset:

*Creative, not compliant*

*Adaptive, not rigid*

*Collaborative, not territorial*

*Curious, not defensive*

We don't need rule-breakers for the sake of it. We need leaders who rewrite the rules so others can thrive.

## Signs you're building a Living Council culture

Ask yourself:

*Do staff feel proud of what they deliver, or just relieved to get through the week?*

*Do people feel safe raising concerns, or stay quiet?*

*Do teams share stories of impact, or just reports of performance?*

*Do your best people stay, or burn out trying to push change uphill?*

Culture lives in moments, not mottos. The Living Council pays attention to those moments.

## The invisible infrastructure

We often talk about systems, processes, data, and tech. But underneath all of it lies something harder to measure, and far more powerful: belief. Belief that things can be better. That risk is worth it. That public service is still a noble cause.

The Living Council isn't just an operating model. It's a cultural movement. And like all movements, it needs leaders who care, staff who are trusted, and communities who are heard.

Next, we move from culture to construction, designing the structures, services, and systems that bring the Living Council to life. Because belief without architecture is just a dream, and we're here to build something that lasts.

# CHAPTER 9

## Designing the Living Council



Up to now, we've explored the Living Council as a mindset, a culture, and an intelligence system. Now we turn to the physical and organisational design of it.

Because the Living Council is not just an idea.

*It has structures, spaces, teams, and tools.*

*It looks and feels different, from the front door to the back office.*

*And its design tells people something before a single word is spoken: "We're here to help early, work together, and solve what matters."*

This chapter is about turning that promise into infrastructure.

## The three core design principles

A Living Council doesn't start with directorates and org charts. It starts with need. And works outwards from there.

### 1. Structure follows function

Don't start with who manages whom. Start with:

*What problems are we trying to solve?*

*What needs are recurring?*

*What touchpoints matter most?*

Then design services, teams, and governance around those problems, not historical silos.

### 2. Services organised around place and people, not departments

No one cares whether their issue sits in Housing or Adult Social Care. They care about getting help.

Design around:

*Neighbourhoods*

*Life events (e.g. new baby, job loss, bereavement)*

*Vulnerability types (e.g. isolation, debt, risk of harm)*

### **3. Systems must connect, not duplicate**

Most failures in councils aren't due to missing services, it's due to unconnected services.

Design systems that:

*Share information*

*Enable co-working*

*Allow hand-offs without hand-washing*

If the organisation can't coordinate, the citizen will be the one stitching it together.

## **The Living Council front door**

Let's start with the entrance point.

In most councils today:

*Services still have separate phone numbers*

*Residents bounce between teams*

*Digital journeys are linear and rule-based*

*Early signs of risk are missed or ignored*

The Living Council replaces that with a multi-channel, multi-need, intelligent front door.

That means:

*One entry point for housing, welfare, family support, and early help*

*AI-assisted triage to surface underlying needs*

*Immediate routing to the right team, not just "logging" a case*



*Frontline staff trained to solve, not just signpost*

This isn't about creating a call centre. It's about creating a first response engine, and it starts from the principle: every contact is an opportunity to prevent escalation.

## **Integrated service hubs**

Once someone comes through the front door, where do they go?

In a Living Council, the next step isn't "refer on", it's wraparound support delivered in one place. That place? The Integrated Service Hub.

Hubs are:

*Physically accessible (often co-located in libraries, leisure centres, or community buildings)*

*Staffed by multi-disciplinary teams*

*Powered by shared insight*

*Designed for face-to-face problem-solving, not just form-filling*

Hubs offer:

*Housing support*

*Debt advice*

*Employment help*

*Domestic abuse services*

*Family support*

*Health and wellbeing triage*

*Digital access support*

Not as siloed drop-ins, but as a joined-up offer. Because people don't live single-issue lives.

## Multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs)

At the heart of the hub and the Living Council is the multi-disciplinary team. Gone are the days of individual officers guarding their caseloads and emailing each other about whose turn it is to “hold risk.”

MDTs bring together:

- Housing officers*
- Social workers*
- Early help practitioners*
- Mental health professionals*
- Employment advisers*
- Community connectors*

MDTs:

- Share cases*
- Share intelligence*
- Share outcomes*

Their job is not to escalate cases. It’s to resolve them, together. And to do that, they need shared tools, shared goals, and shared accountability.

## Case management by purpose, not process

Old systems treat each case as a separate file. The Living Council treats each case as a story in motion.

Case management systems are designed to:

- Show full history across services*
- Flag risk dynamically*
- Recommend next actions using AI*
- Allow different professionals to contribute in real time*

*Track outcomes at both individual and household level*

This isn't CRM. It's intelligent case orchestration.

## **Organisational structure: a flexible platform, not a fixed pyramid**

Here's where it gets interesting. The Living Council isn't structured around rigid directorates. It's structured around platforms and portfolios. A typical model could include ...

### **The Outcomes Portfolio**

Teams organised around key life areas:

- Safe and connected families*
- Stable housing and financial security*
- Good health and wellbeing*
- Skills and employment*
- Resilient neighbourhoods*

These are cross-cutting, owned jointly by service leads, not contained within departments.

### **The Delivery Platform**

Shared capabilities that support every portfolio:

- AI, data and digital tools*
- Service design*
- Customer experience*
- Workforce development*
- Community partnerships*

This platform provides the muscle and mind for every outcome area.

## The Governance Layer

*Small strategic leadership group*

*Clear decision rights*

*Flattened hierarchy to empower teams*

*Democratic oversight that focuses on outcomes, not output*

This structure is not theoretical. It's built to adapt, respond and learn, just like the communities it serves.

## Physical space as cultural signal

Space matters. It tells staff and residents what matters.

In the Living Council, space is:

*Shared, not owned*

*Designed for collaboration, not status*

*Open to community groups*

*Digitally enabled*

*Safe, welcoming, and human*

If your office still has locked floors, fixed desks, and corner offices, your culture has some catching up to do.

## Digital design for real life

Digital in the Living Council is:

*Channel-agnostic: phone, face-to-face, online, whatever works*

*AI-augmented: smarter forms, automated triage, predictive help*

*Trust-building: accessible language, transparent decisions, user control*

*Feedback-driven: always learning, never done*

You don't need a fancy app. You need services that work like people live.

## How to start designing your own Living Council

You don't need a massive restructure to begin. You need to:

*Identify one area of high failure demand*

*Map the journey through that service today*

*Redesign that journey using the principles above*

*Build the minimum viable team, tools and touchpoints*

*Measure the impact, not just on money, but on experience*

Then build from there. Because design is not just about what something looks like. It's about how it works, and how it makes people feel. The Living Council feels coherent, caring, and capable.

Next, we move to the financial heart of the matter, how to fund the Living Council when everyone keeps saying there's no money left. It's not about more funding. It's about smarter flow.

# CHAPTER 10

## THE MONEY BIT



Let's talk about the bit everyone worries about and few want to face: Money.

Because every time you propose a new model, early intervention, AI innovation, joined-up services, someone says:

*"We love the vision, but... where's the money coming from?"*

*It's a fair question. But it's often the wrong question.*

*Because the Living Council is not about spending more.*

*It's about spending differently.*

*Not finding new money but redirecting existing money toward better outcomes.*

This chapter explains how.

## **What's expensive isn't the Living Council. It's the current model.**

Here's the uncomfortable truth most councils already know:

*We spend more managing crises than preventing them*

*We waste millions on duplicate assessments, siloed systems, and avoidable placements.*

*We buy tech that doesn't connect, fund programmes that don't scale, and create strategies that don't deliver*

In short, we're investing in failure demand, not prevention. That's what's unaffordable. The Living Council flips that logic, by treating prevention as an investment, not a luxury.

## **Where the money can come from (today, not someday)**

Let's break it down. Here are five practical ways councils can fund the shift without asking for more:

### **1. Releasing value from demand reduction**

When early help works, demand goes down.

That means:



*Fewer statutory social care interventions*

*Fewer emergency housing placements*

*Fewer high-cost crisis responses*

*Shorter time in the system per case*

Use that value to:

*Reinvest in what works*

*Protect prevention capacity*

*Fund scaling of successful models*

This only works if:

*You measure avoided demand (with predictive modelling or counterfactuals)*

*You protect reinvestment (ringfenced or pooled budgets)*

## **2. Capitalising transformation**

Revenue is tight. But councils do have access to capital.

Use capital funding for:

*Tech infrastructure (AI platforms, shared case management)*

*Refurbishment of libraries into community hubs*

*Service redesign programmes that deliver savings over time*

This isn't creative accounting. It's using available tools to build capacity for reform. The Transformation Capital Grant still exists in many areas, or you can use your own capital programme strategically.

### 3. Repurposing existing spend

Prevention doesn't need new money. It needs better-aligned money.

Map current spend on:

*Crisis response services*

*Temporary accommodation*

*Repeat referrals*

*Failed interventions*

Then:

*Pool budgets across services*

*Redirect funding from reactive to proactive*

*Align commissioning to outcomes, not activity*

This is the “sweat your assets” approach to budgeting.

### 4. Tapping into national pots (but carefully)

Yes, many national funds are short-term and bureaucratic. But some are worth it if you align them to your longer-term model.

Examples:

*DLUHC's Changing Futures Fund*

*Rough Sleeping Initiative*

*Digital Transformation Programmes*

*Social care integration funding*

*UK Shared Prosperity Fund*

Use these to:

*Build early capacity*

*Fund minimum viable infrastructure*

*Demonstrate outcomes to make the case for longer-term core investment*

Just don't become dependent on grants with no runway. Use them to test, learn, and transition.

## **5. Leveraging local partnerships**

Prevention isn't just your job. It's the NHS's job. The VCS's job. Anchor institutions. Police. Schools. Universities.

Use:

*Pooled budgets*

*Joint commissioning*

*Outcome-based investment models (e.g. Social Impact Bonds, if well designed)*

*Community-led delivery (with funding routed through trusted partners)*

The Living Council doesn't fund everything itself. It convenes, enables and aligns, so funding flows toward shared goals.

## **Building a prevention investment case**

Here's how you make the prevention case internally ...

### **Step 1: Cost the cost of doing nothing**

Use historic data to show:

*The rising cost of late intervention*

*Repeat service use*

*Escalation from low to high-cost provision*

*Cost per outcome (e.g. cost to support vs cost of placement)*

## Step 2: Model projected savings

Use:

- Predictive analytics*
- Counterfactual modelling*
- Evidence from other councils*
- Academic research or What Works Centres*

Be honest. Use ranges. Show assumptions. But show something.

## Step 3: Design the reinvestment loop

Create governance that:

- Tracks impact*
- Protects gains*
- Allows recycled savings to scale*
- Shares risk and reward across services*

If you don't lock in the reinvestment logic, you'll lose the savings to the general pot.

## What about austerity and Section 114 risk?

Yes, many councils are on the brink, and a lot are already under emergency measures.

Here's the paradox: The worse your financial position, the more you need a Living Council model, because:

- Prevention reduces long-term pressure*
- AI and automation increase staff capacity*
- Service redesign can release savings quickly*
- Integrated hubs reduce failure demand*

Section 114 doesn't stop you innovating. It demands it. Start small. Start with one service area. Prove the model. Then build outwards.

# Rethinking value, not just savings

Not all returns are cashable. Some are:

- Improved quality of life*
- Reduced stress and burnout for staff*
- Community resilience*
- Better public trust*
- More inclusive services*
- Reduced inequality and trauma*

These aren’t “soft” outcomes. They’re value multipliers. And they create savings downstream, in health, justice, education, and long-term care. The challenge is to track, quantify and communicate them.

## What to say when finance says “no”

Here are some reframes:

Objection	Your response
“We can’t afford this.”	“We can’t afford not to. The cost of failure demand is higher.”
“This isn’t core business.”	“Preventing need is core business. It protects statutory services.”
“We’ve tried this before.”	“We’ve done pieces. This is the system version, with better tools and insight.”
“There’s no appetite at the top.”	“Then start where you can. Prove the case. Invite them in once results show.”

This isn’t about fighting for scraps. It’s about changing the table you’re sitting at.

## **Funding the Living Council isn't the problem. It's the solution.**

What's unaffordable is sending more children into care.

*Housing more families in B&Bs.*

*Running services at breaking point.*

*Losing great staff to burnout and bureaucracy.*

What's affordable is:

*Intervening earlier*

*Scaling what works*

*Using AI to unlock capacity*

*Designing services people actually want to use*

The money bit is not a barrier. It's an enabler, if you're bold enough to shift it.

Next, we explore the other half of the equation: the people, because systems don't transform themselves. People do. And they need the right skills, roles and support to make the Living Council real.

# CHAPTER 11

## The people side





Behind every successful reform, there's a group of exhausted staff wondering if this time will be different.

And rightly so. Because they've heard it all before:

*"This is the big transformation."*

*"This is the digital shift."*

*"This is the strategy that changes everything."*

And yet, here they are, still firefighting, still filling out forms, still underpaid, still over-stretched.

So let's be clear: the Living Council isn't about asking people to work harder. It's about creating an environment where people can work smarter, together, with purpose and support. Because the greatest untapped asset in local government isn't AI, or funding, or even data.

It's the capability, creativity and care of the workforce. The Living Council makes the centre of its model, not a resource to be managed, but a movement to be supported.

## Five things people need to thrive in a Living Council

### 1. Clarity of purpose

People will put up with pressure, uncertainty, and change if they understand why.

The Living Council makes the mission unmissable:

*Early help matters more than process*

*Working across teams is rewarded*

*Solving problems is valued more than escalating them*

*Relationships matter as much as metrics*

This clarity isn't about slogans. It's baked into induction, supervision, performance conversations, and leadership behaviours.

## 2. The right skills (not just more tools)

The future council doesn't just need people who can use AI. It needs people who can:

- Spot need and act on it*
- Collaborate across disciplines*
- Understand data without fear*
- Challenge constructively*
- Work with communities, not just deliver to them*

This is not about creating a new professional class. It's about giving every role the chance to adapt, learn and lead.

## 3. Time to think and learn

You cannot redesign your service between back-to-back appointments and 100 open cases.

A Living Council protects time for:

- Peer learning*
- Reflection*
- Design sprints*
- Prototyping*
- Training in AI, insight, digital tools, trauma-informed practice*

This time is not a luxury. It's the oxygen of reform.

## 4. Safe autonomy

People need permission to try.

That means:

- Letting frontline staff experiment within boundaries*
- Trusting their judgement*

*Protecting them from blame when they act in good faith*

*Backing their decisions when they align with shared values*

Command-and-control kills initiative. Safe autonomy grows leadership at every level.

## **5. Career pathways with purpose**

The Living Council builds careers, not just jobs.

It creates:

*Clear, flexible progression routes*

*Cross-service secondments and hybrid roles*

*Talent pipelines from community roles to professional ones*

*Recognition and reward for those who lead change, not just those who survive it*

This isn't about more job titles. It's about valuing impact, learning, and leadership in all its forms.

## **The Digital AI Academy model**

One of the most powerful enablers of the Living Council is a Digital AI Academy. This isn't just a training programme. It's a people-powered transformation engine.

In a Living Council, it means:

*Co-designing AI tools with staff*

*Training officers in data ethics, AI basics, and digital skills*

*Connecting service teams with local start-ups and universities*

*Building internal capability so digital isn't always outsourced*

The result? A workforce that isn't afraid of AI, but builds it. This is how you future-proof local government from the inside out.

## From 'change fatigue' to 'change by us'

Staff are tired. Tired of top-down restructures. Tired of the latest “transformation” they weren’t involved in. Tired of being told they’re resilient when what they really need is rest. The Living Council takes a different route.

It moves from:

Old	Living Council
Change to staff	Change by staff
Managed programmes	Co-designed models
External solutions	Internal capability
Compliance	Curiosity and courage

This isn’t about doing more with less. It’s about doing better with belief.

## What leaders need to do differently

This isn’t just about the frontline. Leadership needs to shift too.

### Model the mindset

*Be transparent*

*Be curious*

*Share what you’re learning, not just what you’re delivering*

*Listen more than you talk*

### Redesign accountability

*Focus on outcomes, not activity*

*Let teams shape their metrics*

*Celebrate iteration, not just perfection*

## **Tell the story**

*Share examples of what's working*

*Highlight staff who've tried something different*

*Keep the vision alive, especially when things get messy*

Narrative is fuel. Leaders need to keep it flowing.

## **Recruitment and retention in a Living Council**

Right now, councils are struggling to recruit, and even more to retain.

The Living Council changes that by offering:

*Mission-led work that matters*

*Learning and progression*

*Modern tools that reduce burnout*

*Flexible roles that match modern lives*

*Purposeful leadership that supports staff*

In short, it becomes a place where people want to stay, and where new talent wants to come. And yes, that includes digital, AI, data, and design professionals, who increasingly want to work on things that matter. If you build the environment, they will come.

## A Living Council is built by living systems of people

You can't just write the strategy and expect culture to follow. You need to invest in the human system that holds everything else up.

That means:

*Making workforce reform a strategic priority*

*Protecting space for learning and leadership*

*Designing tools with staff, not just for them*

*Embedding care and courage into every level of the organisation*

The Living Council thrives not because of its structure or its AI, but because of its people.

Next, we turn to the question that makes all of this possible, or impossible: Governance. Because if we don't fix how decisions are made, risks are held, and power is shared, even the best ideas will stay locked in the whiteboard.

# CHAPTER 12

## GOVERNANCE, RISK, AND POLITICS



You can have a brilliant strategy, a skilled workforce, and the right tech. But if your governance model hasn't changed, transformation will quietly stall.

*Because the real blockers often aren't structural.*

*They're procedural. Political. Cultural.*

*They sit in board meetings, risk logs, budget cycles, and the invisible wiring of power.*

If we want a Living Council, we need Living Governance. That means decision-making that is:

*Faster but still accountable*

*Shared but still clear*

*Ethical, transparent, and driven by public value*

*Rooted in purpose, not just process*

This isn't just about "good governance." It's about governance that enables the future.

## **What governance looks like in the Old Council**

Let's start with the familiar:

*Multiple layers of sign-off*

*Reports written to avoid blame, not surface truth*

*Risk registers that prioritise reputation over real-world harm*

*Programme boards that meet monthly, review outputs, and adjourn*

In this system:

*Innovation slows to a crawl*

*Accountability becomes a performance*

*Elected members are briefed, not empowered*

*Residents are "consulted," not co-authors*

It creates the illusion of control while quietly haemorrhaging momentum.



## The Living Council flips this logic

In a Living Council:

*Governance is a support structure, not a gatekeeping mechanism*

*Risk is understood as the potential for both harm and progress*

*Politics is honest, courageous, and focused on outcomes*

*The community is not a stakeholder; it's a co-designer*

Let's break that down ...

### 1. Governance that enables learning, not just assurance

Traditional governance is built around assurance:

*Did we follow the plan?*

*Were risks mitigated?*

*Were controls in place?*

But innovation needs governance that also enables learning:

*What surprised us?*

*What did we adapt?*

*What do we know now that we didn't before?*

The Living Council uses adaptive governance:

*Short feedback loops*

*Iterative funding decisions*

*Cross-functional delivery boards*

*Transparent dashboards showing live progress*

*Regular retrospectives, not just audits*

It's not weaker oversight, it's more intelligent oversight.

## 2. Risk as fuel, not just fear

Most councils treat risk as something to be minimised. But in a world of permanent austerity, not acting is often the riskiest thing you can do. The Living Council reframes risk as opportunity and consequence, not just threat.

That means:

- Being clear about what we're willing to try*
- Defining thresholds for "safe to fail"*
- Sharing risk across services, not pushing it down the line*
- Escalating learning, not just problems*

Yes, we need controls. But we also need a system that knows how to take risks wisely, and learn when it gets them wrong.

## 3. Politics with purpose

You can't build a Living Council without elected members. And nor should you try.

Politicians bring:

- Democratic legitimacy*
- Accountability to local people*
- Lived knowledge of place*
- A public narrative*

But too often, they're brought in after the design, asked to approve, endorse or defend.

In the Living Council, politicians are:

- Involved early in co-design*
- Given real-time insight, not just quarterly reports*
- Empowered to lead the public conversation*

*Trained in AI, data, digital, and prevention*

*Trusted to make long-term, sometimes uncomfortable choices*

This is not about depoliticising decision-making. It's about re-politicising it with care, rooted in values, evidence, and local need.

#### **4. Ethical guardrails for tech and data**

You cannot talk about AI, automation, and predictive systems without governance that protects rights.

Living Councils lead with:

*AI ethics panels that include residents, staff, and independent experts*

*Transparent data use policies, written in plain English*

*Open audit trails for algorithmic decisions*

*Procurement standards that reject black-box tech*

*Consent models that give people real choice, not a checkbox*

This isn't just about compliance. It's about trust. And without trust, prevention fails.

#### **5. Community-powered decision-making**

The Living Council sees residents as:

*Experts in their own lives*

*Co-creators of services*

*Stewards of local value*

That means:

*Budgeting with residents (participatory budgeting, lived experience panels)*

*Designing services with the community (not for them)*

*Sharing data with the public, not just about them*

*Opening up power, not just explaining decisions, but sharing the right to make them*

This doesn't slow you down. It builds buy-in, legitimacy, and better design.

## **A model: Living Governance in practice**

Governance in a Living Council might look like this ...

### **Delivery Boards**

*Cross-service, co-chaired by senior officer and frontline rep*

*Monthly learning reviews*

*Decisions made on data, not hierarchy*

*Risks shared, actions owned together*

### **Community Co-Design Forums**

*Thematic panels for housing, wellbeing, families, and employment*

*Lived experience shapes policy*

*Residents help set priorities and test solutions*

*Trust is built through visibility, not just outcomes*

### **AI and Data Ethics Committee**

*Reviews all major AI uses*

*Ensures transparency, fairness, and purpose alignment*

*Includes tech, legal, resident, and political voices*

*Reports to Cabinet and Scrutiny*

### **Strategic Oversight Group**

*Includes elected leaders, community reps, and senior staff*

*Sets direction, holds vision*

*Tracks the delivery of Living Council principles*

*Holds itself to account, visibly*

## **What you stop doing**

Living Governance also means saying goodbye to:

*Performance boards that chase lagging indicators*

*Sign-off chains with six layers of hierarchy*

*Risk registers are designed to avoid headlines, not harm*

*“Consultation” exercises that don’t shift a thing*

*Democratic processes that are excluded by design (timing, language, venue, access)*

This isn’t an attack on governance. It’s a call to make it fit for the world we now live in.

## **Good governance is the Living Council’s backbone**

Without it:

*Change slows*

*Trust erodes*

*Risk aversion wins*

*Innovation dies quietly in committee*

But with it:

*Decisions become faster, fairer, and more informed*

*Services are more accountable to the people they serve*

*Power is distributed, not just managed*

*Reform survives budget cuts, leadership changes, and political cycles*

Because the Living Council is not a personality cult. It's a system, held together by governance that enables it to breathe, learn, and evolve.

Next, we bring it all together in a final playbook: how to start, where to focus, and what your first 100 days of Living Council action might look like. Because it's one thing to believe. It's another to begin.

# CHAPTER 13

## The first 100 days of a Living Council



You've absorbed the ideas. You've felt the frustration. You've seen the possibility. You believe the Living Council is not only necessary, it's possible. But where do you begin?

Nothing kills a good idea faster than trying to start everything at once. Vision without traction becomes theatre. So, this chapter lays out a clear, focused, doable first 100-day plan. Not a big bang. Not a perfect blueprint. But a purposeful beginning.

It's designed for:

*Chief executives*

*Political leaders*

*Directors and transformation leads*

*Cross-service leadership teams*

*And anyone bold enough to start*

## **The first 100 days: a playbook**

### **Week 1–2: Set your intent**

You don't need all the answers. But you do need to be clear on the purpose.

**Do this:**

*Publicly commit to becoming a Living Council*

*Set a "working group" or small cross-service core team*

*Share the Living Council principles with staff, members and partners*

*Be honest: this is an exploration, not a rollout*

Your job here is to create belief.



## **Week 3–4: Pick a place to start**

Don't try to redesign everything. Start with:

*One neighbourhood*

*One need (e.g. housing insecurity, family support, complex debt)*

*One journey with high failure demand*

Ask:

*Where is the pain sharpest?*

*Where are the willing partners?*

*Where can we prove early value?*

Your job here is to focus.

## **Week 5–6: Map the current system**

With your working group:

*Map how this service/need is experienced today*

*Track failure demand, handoffs, duplication, missed prevention*

*Map the staff experience, not just the process*

*Use journey mapping tools. Hold listening sessions. Stay curious.*

Your job here is to understand.

## **Week 7–8: Co-design your MVP (Minimum Viable Product)**

Now, design a small-scale, testable version of a Living Council approach:

*A single triage team that works across services*

*A shared digital tool that helps staff spot hidden needs*

*A repurposed library or community space as an early help hub*

*A reimagined customer journey, digitally and face-to-face*

Keep it lean. Keep it human. Your job here is to test.

### **Week 9–10: Run a live test**

Launch your MVP in real life:

*With real residents*

*With real staff*

*For a limited period and clear scope*

Capture:

*What's easier*

*What's harder*

*What outcomes shift*

*What feedback do you get*

Don't over-plan. Learn by doing. Your job here is to prove it's possible.

### **Week 11–12: Share the learning, shape the path**

*Hold a reflection event, invite staff, members, partners, and residents*

*Share honest feedback (not just positives)*

*Identify what to scale next*

*Decide what infrastructure is needed (data, workforce, governance)*

Then publish a short “Living Council: What We Learned” update. Your job here is to codify and invite others in.

## Your toolkit for the first 100 days

Here's what you'll need in your backpack:

Tool	Purpose
Living Council principles	Shared vision, shared language
A starter team	Cross-service champions, trusted operators, energetic doers
A mapped journey	Visual proof of how the system works today
Resident insight	What people actually experience—not what your structure chart says
A flexible budget	Small pot for testing tools, co-design events, quick wins
Leadership air cover	Someone senior saying: “Try it. Learn. We’ll protect you.”

## Common blockers, and how to handle them

Blocker	What to do
“We don’t have capacity”	Start smaller. Redesign one step, not the whole journey.
“We need a business case”	Fine. Use what’s in Chapter 10. But don’t wait forever.
“People are tired of change”	That’s why this needs to feel different: co-owned, human, hopeful.
“We need political sign-off”	Bring members into the story early. Invite, not just inform.
“What if it fails?”	What if it doesn’t? Or worse, what if the current model succeeds in delivering the same harm more efficiently?

## Signs you’re on the right path

You’ll know your first 100 days are working when:

*Staff start using the phrase “Living Council” without prompting*

*Residents say, “This feels easier,” or “Someone finally listened.”*

*Services ask to be part of the next test*

*Your old silos start getting curious, not defensive*

*You stop asking for permission to collaborate, and just do it*

## **You’re not trying to be perfect. You’re trying to begin.**

This isn’t a project launch. It’s a movement start. And movements don’t begin with perfection. They begin with possibility. The Living Council is not a final destination. It’s a way of being, designing, working, and serving.

And the first 100 days are not about solving everything. They’re about showing that a different way is possible. You don’t need to do it all. You just need to do the next right thing.

The final chapter brings us home, with a letter to the next generation. Because they’re the ones who will inherit what we build, or fail to build, today.

# **CHAPTER 14**

## **A LETTER TO THE NEXT GENERATION**



### **Dear future public servant,**

If you're reading this, maybe you're just starting out. Maybe you're in your first local authority role. Or maybe you're still deciding whether this sector is worth your energy.

Let me tell you something straight away: This work matters. You matter. And the system needs you far more than you need it.

I've spent my life walking through the corridors of councils, some on the brink of collapse, some on the edge of brilliance, and many somewhere in between. What I've seen again and again is that the biggest asset we have isn't a clever strategy or the newest software.

It's people like you: People who care enough to want something better; People who know that budgets are tight, but ideas are free; People who believe that public service can still be a noble, powerful force for good.

So I want to say a few things that I wish someone had said to me when I started.

### **You will feel like the system wasn't built for you.**

That's because, in many ways, it wasn't. You may not come from the "right" university. You may not speak the same jargon. You might ask inconvenient questions or see things others don't want to look at.

Good. Keep doing that. You are not here to fit in. You are here to help redesign the whole thing.

### **You'll be told to wait your turn.**

To keep your head down. To earn the right to lead. But the truth is, local government doesn't have time for a queue. It needs leadership now.

That doesn't mean shouting the loudest. It means listening better. Designing smarter. Speaking up when others stay quiet. Leading by doing, not by title.

### **You'll meet people who are burnt out, cynical, tired of change.**

Love them anyway. Because even the most jaded officer started in this sector for a reason. Sometimes that reason got buried under targets, restructures and austerity.

But it's still there. Remind them. Reawaken them.

### **You don't have to choose between being radical and being practical.**

You can be both. In fact, the best public servants are. They know the law and know how to stretch it for good. They understand the rules and when to break them gently. They speak the language of data and the language of hope.

Be one of those people.

**Technology will tempt you to go faster than wisdom allows.**

Pause. Ask questions. Demand ethics. AI is powerful. But so is trauma, bias, exclusion, and bad design. Make sure your tools are built with people, not just for them. If you don't know how to code, that's fine.

Just don't forget how to care.

**Never underestimate the power of a small team with a clear “why”.**

The world doesn't change through committees. It changes through a few brave people who decide to start anyway.

You don't need permission. You need purpose. And maybe a post-it note or two.

**Most of all, remember:**

This is not just a job. It's a craft. It's a cause. It's a place where lives are made better, not in grand gestures, but in small, consistent acts of public service.

One day, I hope you'll take this book and make it better. Tear bits out. Add your own chapters. Build Living Councils in ways I haven't imagined yet.

That's what this whole thing is about: a living system that grows as we grow, shaped by each generation that carries it forward.

So keep going. Keep questioning. Keep building. Keep caring. The Living Council is yours now.

Take good care of it. With respect, hope, and solidarity,

**- Jens**



# APPENDIX 1

## THE LIVING COUNCIL CHECKLIST





## Appendix 1: The Living Council checklist

*“A practical guide to help councils assess, align, and activate the shift toward a Living Council model.”*

This checklist is not a tick-box exercise. It’s a reflection tool. A provocation. A framework for leadership teams, service managers, and frontline practitioners to ask: are we operating as a Living Council, or just talking like one?

Use it:

*In strategy sessions*

*With transformation boards*

*In directorate away days*

*As part of induction and leadership development*

*Or simply as a personal reflection*

The goal isn’t to score 100%. It’s to start moving, with intent, purpose, and collective clarity.

### 1. Operating Model

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We design services around need, not departments	
We prioritise prevention as a core operating principle	
We use data and insight to drive decisions, not just report upwards	
We’ve replaced siloed delivery with multi-disciplinary working	
Our “front door” is intelligent, triaged, and designed for early help	

## 2. Culture and Values

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
Staff are empowered to make decisions and act without excessive sign-off	
Failure is treated as a learning opportunity, not a career risk	
Our culture values curiosity, collaboration, and care	
Transformation is co-designed with staff and residents, not delivered to them	
Leadership behaviours reflect our stated values, consistently and visibly	

## 3. Data, Insight and Technology

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We use predictive analytics to identify need and reduce crisis demand	
AI is used ethically and embedded in service design—not just as a bolt-on	
Staff can access joined-up case data across services	
Our performance management system values outcomes, not just outputs	
We have a data governance model that is transparent and aligned with public trust	

## 4. Workforce and Capability

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We invest in learning and development focused on AI, insight, and design	

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We run or partner in a Digital Academy to build internal capability	
Career progression is flexible, purpose-driven, and accessible to all	
Frontline staff have space for creativity, reflection, and peer learning	
We have a pipeline for diverse future leaders, supported by coaching and trust	

## 5. Governance and Risk

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
Governance structures support iteration, not just assurance	
Risks are shared across services and managed transparently	
Residents are part of decision-making—not just post-decision consultation	
Councillors are trained in digital, data and prevention principles	
AI use is reviewed through an ethics panel or equivalent accountability mechanism	

## 6. Community and Co-Design

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We co-design services with residents, not for them	
We involve lived experience in service reviews and design sessions	
Our community spaces (like libraries) are repurposed for integrated support	
Local partners (NHS, VCS, Police, etc.) are active co-deliverers, not just consultees	

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We treat the community as an asset—not a liability or audience	

## 7. Financial Strategy

Indicator	Yes / No / In Progress
We can clearly identify current spend on failure demand	
We have a mechanism to ringfence savings from prevention for reinvestment	
Capital and revenue funding is aligned to long-term service redesign	
Finance colleagues are active partners in transformation, not gatekeepers	
We model and track the cost of doing nothing—not just the cost of change	

### How to use this checklist

**Discuss it openly:** Use it with your leadership team, directorate, or whole service group.

**Identify priorities:** Where are your biggest gaps? Where's the energy to move first?

**Pair it with action:** Don't just identify issues—assign ownership and next steps.

**Repeat it quarterly:** Track your Living Council journey over time.

**Celebrate progress:** Transformation is slow, but every step counts. Mark it.

### Final note

Becoming a Living Council isn't about scoring high. It's about asking the right questions, creating the right space, and moving forward with shared purpose.

Checklists don't change systems. People do. This one just helps you do it a little more bravely, and with a clearer map.

# APPENDIX 2

## FIRST 100 DAYS ROADMAP



## Appendix 2: First 100 days roadmap

*“A focused, achievable guide to launching a Living Council transformation in your first 100 days.”*

This roadmap is not a rigid checklist. It’s a flexible guide for those ready to move, from vision to traction, from conversation to action. Whether you’re a chief executive, a transformation lead, or a head of service tasked with building something new, this 100-day plan helps you create early clarity, deliver visible change, and build trust.

### Phase 1: Days 1–30 – Orientation and ownership

*“Slow down to speed up.”*

These first 30 days are about building shared understanding, identifying quick wins, and framing the journey ahead.

Actions	Outcome
Assemble a small core team of trusted thinkers and doers	A guiding coalition with capacity and credibility
Agree your ‘why’, create a shared case for change in plain language	A compelling narrative that everyone can repeat
Baseline where you are today using the Living Council Checklist (Appendix 1)	A realistic self-assessment to prioritise next steps
Map the key partnerships and silos, inside and outside the council	Understanding the current system landscape
Identify one directorate or theme as your early prototype (e.g. early help, homelessness, debt)	A focused space for visible change
Engage political leadership early, seek alignment, not perfection	Political backing and air cover for bold moves
Review existing strategies, but don’t get stuck rewriting them yet	Context, not bureaucracy

## Phase 2: Days 31–60 – Deliver early proof

*“Start small, show results, scale fast.”*

In this phase, you’re proving the value of the Living Council approach. Small wins build confidence and unlock energy.

Actions	Outcome
Launch your prototype initiative, co-designed with staff and community	A visible early example of working differently
Set up data-sharing and case coordination tools (even if basic)	Operational improvement that reduces duplication
Begin shadow-tracking failure demand (e.g. avoidable crisis, repeat visits)	Insight into the cost of inaction
Start a Living Council staff group, open, cross-cutting, curious	Culture shift through informal leadership
Publish a fortnightly transformation update, honest and energising	Build trust through transparency
Test one AI or automation solution in a service area (e.g. triage, reporting, assessment)	Tech-enabled capacity and learning
Meet the finance team, reframe risk and start modelling prevention ROI	Lay foundations for reinvestment later

## Phase 3: Days 61–100 – Build momentum and embed

*“Now it gets real.”*

This phase is about turning the first wave of wins into a movement, building mechanisms that sustain change beyond day 100.

Actions	Outcome
Present results from the prototype (both impact and learning)	Credibility and buy-in from peers and members
Create a Living Council delivery plan, practical, agile, accountable	From intention to execution

Actions	Outcome
Launch or formalise a Digital and Data Academy or partnership	Skills and capability investment for the long haul
Identify further service areas for Living Council redesign	Begin to scale the model
Embed ethics and co-design in all new initiatives (see Appendices 5 & 6)	Governance that builds public trust
Celebrate and recognise the people who led and tried	Embed belief and momentum
Set 6-month and 12-month horizon goals	Stretch thinking beyond firefighting

## Principles to carry through all 100 days

**Clarity over consensus:** Don't wait for everyone to agree before moving.

**People before process:** Lead with relationships, not checklists.

**Learning is the product:** Even failed experiments create value.

**Start where the energy is:** Go where there's hope, not just hierarchy.

**Document visibly:** Create a Living Council journal (blog, newsletter, wall).

**Build bridges constantly:** With finance, legal, IT, unions, community.

## Final note

You don't need to change everything in 100 days. You just need to show that change is possible, and that it starts with you. By Day 100, people should no longer be asking "What is the Living Council?" but instead "How do I get involved?"



## APPENDIX 3

# Living Council Structure Model



## Appendix 3: Living Council structure model

*“A practical rethinking of how councils can be organised around purpose, people and prevention.”*

Most councils today still look like they did in 1985: departmental silos, vertical hierarchies, and a back-office/front-office divide. This structure wasn’t built for complexity, chronic need, or the era of permanent austerity.

The Living Council model is different. It organises around people and place, not services and silos. It’s more like a living system than a machine.

### The core shift: from pyramid to platform

Traditional Council	Living Council
Hierarchical	Networked
Service-led	Need-led
Reactive	Preventative
Siloed	Multi-disciplinary
Output-focused	Outcome-driven
Department-centred	Resident-centred

### Three-layer structure of a Living Council

This model is designed to be modular, flexible and cross-functional, not fixed or rigid.

#### 1. Community-facing hubs (“the front line of prevention”)

*Integrated local teams organised around place, not department*

*Multi-agency presence: housing, social care, early help, benefits, VCS*

*Community connectors, not gatekeepers*

*Use of repurposed libraries, children’s centres, or town halls*

*AI-assisted case triage and predictive modelling*

*Co-design and resident feedback embedded in daily practice*

**Purpose:** to understand need early, solve problems before crisis, and support people in the round.

## 2. The enabling platform (“the nervous system”)

*Core functions like HR, Finance, IT, Legal, rebuilt as enablers, not blockers*

*Data and insight team with access to joined-up datasets across domains*

*AI & automation capabilities embedded in services*

*A Digital Academy to upskill the workforce and build tech capability*

*Shared standards for ethics, governance, and service design*

*“Platform as a service” approach: toolkits, reusable components, open APIs*

**Purpose:** to give staff the tools, data, and support to deliver flexibly and intelligently.

## 3. Strategy and commissioning (“the brain and the conscience”)

*A small strategic centre focused on outcomes, not control*

*Corporate strategy team aligned to needs, not portfolios*

*Strategic commissioning with embedded user voice*

*Investment board that uses ROI modelling to shift spend upstream*

*Leadership team behaviours focused on modelling trust, pace, and adaptability*

*A standing innovation group with external partners, startups, and residents*

**Purpose:** to think long-term, prioritise prevention, and model a culture of trust and shared ownership.

## Governance and accountability structure

**Cabinet/Executive:** retains democratic oversight and resource decisions

**Local Prevention Boards:** co-chaired by senior council leaders and community reps

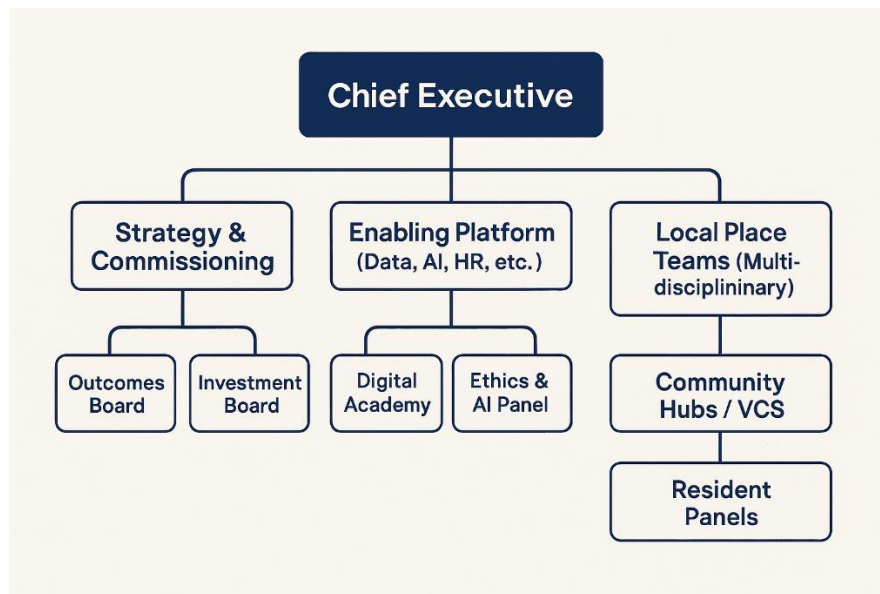
**Insight & Impact Group:** replaces traditional performance boards, focused on outcomes

**AI & Ethics Panel:** reviews automation use, data sharing, and public trust concerns

**Staff Reference Group:** a standing group of cross-level staff helping shape the journey

### Example organogram (illustrative model)

The Living Council does not have a single 'correct' structure, but below is a simplified illustrative layout:



This structure is flatter, more flexible, and designed to support movement, not bureaucracy.

### Key design principles

**Start with need, not structure:** Build around what people experience, not what departments deliver.

**Design for flow:** Focus on how people move through the system, not just what sits on the org chart.

**Think like a platform:** Reuse tools, share data, reduce duplication.

**Keep governance light but honest:** Create challenge and oversight without paralysis.

**People & titles:** Invest in those who energise change, not just those with seniority.

## **Final note**

The Living Council structure isn't just about boxes and lines. It's about creating a system that can adapt, learn, and care, at scale. Form follows function. But in this case, it also follows belief. Because if we want a more human system, we have to structure it like one.



# APPENDIX 4

## FINANCE REFRAMING WORKBOOK



## Appendix 4: Financial reframing workbook

*“A practical tool to help shift your budget narrative from ‘what we spend’ to ‘what we buy’”*

Money is not neutral. It reflects your choices, your mindset, and your operating model. This workbook helps you reframe the way your council sees its financial position, by identifying hidden costs, surfacing avoidable spend, and supporting the redirection of funding toward prevention, not just crisis.

It’s not about creating new money. It’s about making better use of the money you already spend.

### Section 1: Defining your problem statements

Start by identifying where reactive spend dominates your current budget. Pick no more than 3–5 major areas to focus on.

Service Area	Problem Statement	What’s driving demand?	What does “good” look like?
e.g. Temporary Accommodation	£12m spent annually on B&B and hotels	Evictions, lack of upstream support, broken pathways from prevention	More families supported to stay in homes; fewer repeat crises

Repeat for areas such as:

*High-cost children’s placements*

*Reablement and readmission rates in adult care*

*Debt recovery and repeat contact*

*Crisis mental health referrals*

*Rising numbers in statutory homelessness*

### Section 2: Quantifying failure demand

Use this simple table to begin capturing the cost of avoidable demand, not just what you currently budget.

Area of Spend	Reactive Cost (£)	% Avoidable?	Total Avoidable Spend (£)
e.g. Homeless placements	£12,000,000	40%	£4,800,000
e.g. High needs transport	£6,500,000	25%	£1,625,000
e.g. Hospital discharge delays	£2,300,000	50%	£1,150,000

You don't need perfect data, just enough to start the conversation.

### Section 3: Mapping reinvestment opportunities

Identify opportunities to redirect a portion of avoidable spend into preventative action.

Area	Opportunity	Proposed Investment	Expected Benefit / ROI
Temporary Accommodation	Integrated housing triage & tenancy sustainment team	£750k	Reduce placements by 30%, saving £2m annually
CYP Placements	Local in-house children's homes	£3m capital / £1.2m annual	Savings of £1.5m+ per year from 3rd year
Debt recovery	AI-led proactive contact for arrears	£250k	Reduce arrears by 15%, increase recovery rates

### Section 4: Enabling conditions

Now assess the capabilities and conditions you need to make the shift possible.

Enabler	Status	Action Required
Data and insight on demand drivers	Incomplete	Build integrated data dashboard
Finance collaboration	Emerging	Schedule monthly joint sessions with transformation team
Political backing for prevention	Mixed	Run early workshop with cabinet members



Enabler	Status	Action Required
Tools to track outcomes	Not in place	Build cross-service impact framework

## Section 5: Making the case for reinvestment

Reinvestment is a mindset shift. Use the prompts below to frame your internal business case:

- What are we currently spending money on that we don't want to buy anymore?*
- What evidence can we present that doing nothing is more expensive than change?*
- Which areas have 'low regret' investment potential, where even partial success improves outcomes?*
- Can we build a multi-year ROI model to fund up-front investment?*
- Are there grants, capital funds, or reserves that could kickstart early phases?*
- How can we protect gains, so savings aren't simply absorbed elsewhere?*

## Section 6: Communication and framing

Changing how you manage money requires changing how you talk about it. Shift the narrative with your teams, members, and residents using these phrases:

Old language	Living Council language
"We can't afford it"	"We can't afford to keep spending money solving the same problem twice"
"This is a cut"	"This is a shift, from managing failure to enabling resilience"
"We're saving £1m"	"We're avoiding £1m in reactive cost and redirecting it into early support"
"Where's the quick win?"	"Where's the high-cost crisis we can stop from happening next year?"

## Final note

This workbook won't balance your budget on its own. But it will help you:

*Change how you view spend*

*Expose the hidden cost of late intervention*

*Find space to invest in what matters*

*Create a permission space for transformation*

Because the truth is: you are already spending the money. The question is: are you buying the outcomes you want?

# APPENDIX 5

## ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE PROMPTS FOR AI



## Appendix 5: Ethics and governance prompts for AI

*“A self-assessment and design guide for responsible, transparent, and values-led use of AI in local government.”*

AI has enormous potential to free up capacity, improve access, and help councils deliver better services for less. But it also raises serious questions around trust, transparency, data privacy, and bias.

This appendix isn't a policy, it's a provocation. A practical checklist of ethical prompts designed to guide teams, suppliers, and leaders in building AI that aligns with public values. Think of it as your AI conscience.

### Section 1: Purpose and necessity

Prompt	Notes
What problem are we trying to solve, and why does AI help?	Ensure AI is the right tool, not just the shiny one.
Does this solution reduce workload or risk, or just automate poor processes?	Avoid automating inefficiency.
Can the same value be achieved by improving human processes instead?	Consider whether AI is supplementing or replacing unnecessarily.

### Section 2: Accountability and transparency

Prompt	Notes
Who is accountable for decisions made or supported by AI?	Human oversight must be explicit and traceable.
Is the AI model explainable and auditable?	Avoid black box models for sensitive or life-impacting decisions.
Are staff and residents told when they are interacting with AI or automated systems?	Transparency builds trust.
Can decisions be challenged, and is there a clear redress mechanism?	Residents must retain the right to question outcomes.

### Section 3: Data, privacy and consent

Prompt	Notes
What data is used to train or feed the AI, and do we have lawful access?	Ensure GDPR compliance and avoid data creep.
Are there checks in place for data quality, bias, and representativeness?	Biased data leads to biased outcomes.
Is data minimised, encrypted, and anonymised where possible?	Embed privacy by design.
Has a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) been completed?	This is a legal and ethical minimum standard.

### Section 4: Bias, harm and equity

Prompt	Notes
Could this system disproportionately disadvantage any group (e.g. race, gender, age, disability)?	Conduct an Equality Impact Assessment.
Is there evidence that similar tools elsewhere have caused harm?	Learn from other sectors and countries.
Have frontline staff and residents been involved in testing or training?	Human-centred design mitigates harm.
Do we have an active feedback loop to identify issues early?	Systems must learn, and so must we.

### Section 5: Procurement and supplier ethics

Prompt	Notes
Does the supplier align with our values on transparency, explainability and public interest?	Ethical procurement starts with supplier selection.
Can we access the source logic or require an explainable AI approach?	Avoid closed platforms that limit scrutiny.

Prompt	Notes
Are there exit clauses if the system fails to meet ethical or legal standards?	Build governance into the contract.
Have we asked for assurance on carbon impact and energy usage of the model?	AI isn't free from environmental cost.

## Section 6: Oversight and governance

Prompt	Notes
Do we have an internal AI & Ethics review board or advisory panel?	Even a small one can offer critical challenge.
Are councillors engaged and trained in AI governance basics?	Democratic accountability must evolve with tech.
Do we regularly report AI usage, performance, and risks to a public forum or scrutiny body?	Public confidence comes from transparency.
Are we publishing clear AI principles or standards?	Helps staff, partners, and the public understand our guardrails.

## Red flag indicators

Watch for these warning signs:

*"Don't worry, it's just a pilot."*

*"The supplier won't share the algorithm."*

*"We've saved money but can't explain how."*

*"We don't need to involve legal or comms."*

*"There's no need to tell residents."*

*"It's not our responsibility if the AI made the decision."*

Each of these is a prompt to pause, question, and escalate.

## **Final note**

AI is neither good nor bad, it's a reflection of the people, values, and systems that build and govern it.

A Living Council doesn't just adopt AI. It governs it with care. It asks more of its suppliers, more of itself, and more of its systems. Because in the public sector, trust is our licence to operate. And we can't afford to automate that away.



## APPENDIX 6

# COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN TOOLKIT





## Appendix 6: Community co-design toolkit

*“A practical framework for involving residents, staff, and communities in shaping services that work better for everyone.”*

The best ideas don’t come from whiteboards. They come from lived experience. Co-design is about working with, not doing to. It’s a shift in power, process, and perspective. And when done well, it creates better services, stronger trust, and faster change.

This toolkit offers a step-by-step guide to running inclusive, low-cost, and high-impact co-design activity, even if you’re short on staff, money, or time.

### Section 1: Preparing for co-design

Before you begin, ask:

Prompt	Why it matters
What is the specific problem we’re trying to solve?	Clarity prevents aimless engagement.
Who is most affected by this issue?	Prioritise those with lived experience.
Who holds power in the current system?	You need both voices—lived and professional.
Are we willing to change based on what we hear?	Co-design without intent is extraction.

**Do this now:** Create a shared purpose statement:

“We are bringing together [people] to improve [problem] so that [outcome].”

### Section 2: Designing the sessions

Co-design works best when it’s human, messy, and safe, not overly corporate.

Element	What good looks like
Facilitation	Trauma-informed, inclusive, confident in holding space
Venue	Local, accessible, not intimidating (e.g. community hall, library)

Element	What good looks like
Timing	Fit around school runs, shift work, and community rhythms
Language	Plain English, no jargon, translators if needed
Format	Small groups, visual tools, not endless talking
Offer	Cover expenses, provide food, say thank you

**Tip:** Always start with storytelling. Data is useful, but people connect through stories.

### Section 3: Inclusive methods and activities

Here are a few tested tools and techniques that work in local government settings:

Method	How it works
Journey Mapping	Ask people to draw their experience through a service—where things worked, broke down, or felt unfair.
Experience Cards	Print quotes or situations from real cases and ask participants to sort, react, and build solutions around them.
5 Whys	For every challenge raised, ask “why?” five times to get to the root cause.
Dot Voting	Use sticky dots to prioritise the most important issues or ideas.
System Mapping	Create a shared visual of how services, teams, and people interact—and where friction occurs.
Dream Redesign	Give participants blank templates to sketch or describe their ideal service interaction.

**Facilitator rule:** Never jump to solutions in the first session. Honour the stories first.

## Section 4: After the session

What happens next matters most.

Step	Purpose
The playback	Share back what you heard, visually, clearly, without spin.
The promise	Be honest about what will change, what won't, and why.
The invitation	Keep participants involved, invite them to build prototypes, test ideas, or join panels.
The feedback loop	Report on what changed as a result of their input. "You said, we did" is only the start.

**Do this now:** Assign a named officer or team as guardians of follow-through. Accountability matters.

## Section 5: Embedding co-design as a habit

Co-design shouldn't be a one-off project. It should become how you work.

Embed it in...	How
Procurement	Require co-design in supplier briefs and bids
Transformation	Run co-design at the start of every redesign
Scrutiny	Invite residents to present to boards alongside officers
Recruitment	Involve residents and frontline staff in panels
Performance	Make lived experience feedback part of service KPIs

**Build a network:** Train a network of "Community Designers" from staff and residents who can support co-design activity across the council.

### Final note

Community co-design isn't soft. It's strategic. It brings speed, trust, and better ideas, especially when the money's tight.

A Living Council knows that people are not the problem. They are the designers, testers, guardians and owners of the solution. If you want to change the system, start with the people who live in it.

# White Paper: From Pyramid to Platform - Rethinking the Council as a Living System

(Originally published on [LinkedIn](#) 07/2025)



I've spent enough nights poring over budget spreadsheets and emergency briefings to know one thing for certain - our traditional council hierarchies are running on fumes.

We stand at an uncomfortable crossroad: Demand is rising, resources are flatlining, and the public's patience wears thinner by the day. Yet, amidst the clamour, something extraordinary is happening: Artificial intelligence is racing from the edges into the very heart of public service, and self managed teams are quietly rewriting the rule book on how work gets done. The question is no longer whether these forces will reshape our councils, but how, and whether we harness them for liberation or allow them to entrench old patterns of control.

This write-up is for everyone who believes local government can be both compassionate and lightning fast, both fiscally responsible and creatively bold. It is rooted in systems thinking and lived experience, from scrambling to plug a budget gap on Monday to coaching frontline colleagues through AI powered case triage on Friday. Throughout, I will challenge cherished assumptions, share lessons drawn from councils experimenting at the edge, and sketch a credible path from today's pyramid to tomorrow's adaptive, AI native hive.

Nothing here is theoretical; the stakes are too high for mere theory. Each section points towards tangible levers we can pull in the next budget cycle, the next sprint review, the very next conversation with a resident. By the final page, I hope you'll not only see the art of the possible but feel compelled to pick up a chisel and start sculpting your own corner of the future council.

So, take a breath, suspend disbelief, and let's imagine, and build, something flatter, better, and more agile.

## 0. Why I get itchy when I see another org chart

I've been around long enough to know the pattern. When a service falls short, when residents complain, when audit flags a risk or the next budget target lands with a thud, someone reaches for the org chart. It's a reflex. It offers the illusion of control: lines of accountability, formal reporting structures, boxes in neat little tiers. But here's the truth I've learned after years on the inside: The org chart doesn't fix the problem. It often is the problem.

Councils are some of the most complex, people powered institutions we've built, and yet we still manage them with models designed for Victorian factories. We segment human needs into departments, build barriers around budgets, and stretch decisions across ladders of approval so tall you lose sight of what the question was in the first place.

When things go wrong, whether in children's services, housing allocations or regeneration delivery, we instinctively reorganise, not because it works, but because hierarchy gives us something solid to cling to. We shuffle chairs on the deck, redraw responsibilities, write job descriptions for things no one will read twice. We keep doing it because the pyramid feels safe. It's what we know. It's how we've always done it.

But that pyramid is hurting us. It's choking frontline innovation. It's killing staff morale. It's making residents wait longer for worse outcomes, and crucially, it's blinding us to the real possibility in front of us: That we could design councils around human need, not corporate lines.

[Corporate rebels](#) call this out powerfully: in a world where everything from software engineering to social care is being reimaged, it's time to ask why are councils still organised like military units from the 1950s?

It's not about being anti management. It's about recognising that most of our hierarchy isn't management, it's inertia, it's slows, it distances, it dilutes, and in an age of instant data, machine learning, and 24/7 public expectation, that drag becomes fatal.

So yes, I get itchy when I see another org chart, not because it's wrong to know who does what, but because the chart rarely shows where the real value lives. It's not in the lines. It's in the loops: teams collaborating, insight flowing, action happening close to the need.

This is where we begin our rethink. Not with a better org chart, but with the courage to ask: what if we didn't need one at all?

## 1. The problem we refuse to fix

There's a quiet consensus in local government, unspoken, but deeply embedded, that hierarchy is how we stay safe. It's how we stay in control, show accountability, maintain grip. It's how we protect ourselves from blame when things go wrong. But here's the uncomfortable truth: that same hierarchy is also why things go wrong in the first place.

We know this. We feel it every time frontline staff escalate an urgent issue up the ladder, only to wait days or weeks for a decision that could've been made on the spot. We see it in the layers of middle management that translate strategy into delivery and often distort both in the process. We hear it in the frustration of residents stuck in loops, bounced from housing to social care to revenues, each department saying: "that's not us."

And yet, despite the mounting pressure (fiscal, moral, operational), we resist structural reform. We tweak, we reorganise, we launch transformation programmes that focus on tech or culture but leave the core structure untouched. We act like the pyramid is sacred, when in reality, it's holding us hostage.

It's not just inefficient, it's traumatising, it undermines staff confidence, isolates good people inside bad systems, and creates a cycle of mistrust between residents and the services designed to support them. We see safeguarding cases bounce between teams until crisis explodes. We watch preventable homelessness unfold because no one owns the full picture. We waste millions managing failure, demand that could have been avoided if someone, anyone, had the authority and support to act earlier.

We've built systems optimised for permission, not outcomes, and that's the problem we refuse to fix. Because fixing it means letting go of control, of hierarchy, of the illusion that seniority equals insight.

But letting go doesn't mean chaos. It means reimagining. It means designing councils as learning systems where decisions are made closest to the need, where trust is the default setting, and where new tools, like AI, amplify local intelligence rather than replacing it.

We are long past the point of marginal gains. The world has changed, the residents we serve are digitally fluent, emotionally intelligent, and rightly impatient. They don't care who signs the form, they want a council that works.

And so, if we are honest, the real problem isn't capacity, technology or even funding - it's courage. The courage to admit that the system isn't broken, it's doing exactly what it was designed to do, and if we want a different result, we need a different design.

That's what this article is about, not another reorg, not another strategic review, but a fundamental rethink of what a council is, who it exists for, and how it might finally start working with people, not on them.

## 2. The rise of post hierarchy thinking

History tells us that when the world becomes too complex for the charts to keep up, people experiment. Over the last twenty years, a quiet revolution has gathered pace in boardrooms, charities and yes, the public sector. Names like Buurtzorg, Haier, Morning Star, Spotify Squads and the Finnish Panelfisa project appear on conference slides as proof that organisations can thrive without a manager in every box. Corporate Rebels spent seven years visiting more than two hundred of these workplaces and found a recurring pattern: self management drives higher engagement, faster decision cycles and a quantum leap in customer satisfaction.

Let's linger on a few examples because they are more than anecdotes, they are blueprints. Buurtzorg reorganised Dutch Home, care around autonomous neighbourhood teams of twelve nurses. No middle management, just a small coaching hub and a digital platform that shares data in real time. The results? Costs fell by thirty per cent while patient satisfaction topped national charts. Closer to home, Wigan council's 'deal' gave frontline staff permission to bend rules when that meant preventing crisis. Audits later showed ten pounds saved for every pound invested in early help. Even in heavy industry, China's Haier broke a ninety thousand person colossus into four thousand micro enterprises, each with its own profit and loss and the freedom to source services from any internal or external supplier. Product release times shrank from years to months.

These successes are not about charisma, they are about design. They share four design principles that matter for councils:

1. **Purpose before structure**, teams organise around a mission not a department,
2. **Transparency over control**, data flows to everyone, so decision rights can safely follow,
3. **Small is beautiful**, keep units under fifteen people and coordination becomes human again, and
4. **Roles not ranks**, authority is attached to work, not pay grade.

[Frédéric Laloux, in Reinventing Organisations](#), calls this the "Teal Breakthrough". I am less interested in colour theory and more in the hard numbers - fewer layers deliver better outcomes. The World Economic Forum now predicts that networked, role-based structures will be the dominant model for knowledge work by 2030. That prediction matters because local government is knowledge work, complex, relational, driven by judgement rather than widgets.

Still, many public bodies hesitate. They fear a loss of accountability, unions fear a loss of protection, leaders fear chaos. Here is where technology steps in: the self, managed pioneers of the 2000s relied on wiki pages and trust. Today we have something more potent, AI, enabled coordination. Large language models can surface relevant policy, flag safeguarding thresholds and simulate the downstream impact of choices in seconds. Predictive analytics can alert a neighbourhood team that a particular street is about to experience a spike in damp, related illness because the weather, tenancy and repair data says so.



In other words, the two big forces of our time, self-management and artificial intelligence, are not rivals, they are complements. The flatter you go, the more you need rich, real time information. The smarter your information system, the less you need bureaucratic layers to interpret it. This is the hinge on which the future council swings.

And there is appetite. A recent survey by [SOLACE](#) found that 21% of senior officers believe their organisation would perform better with fewer layers and more empowered teams, but only 14% felt confident about how to make the leap. That gap, between aspiration and method, is precisely what my next sections will tackle.

Before I map the architecture of an AI native, post-hierarchical council, we must acknowledge a delicate truth: dumping hierarchy is not about removing leaders, it is about redistributing leadership. The job title changes from controller to steward, from permission giver to pattern holder. That shift can feel threatening, but as the global case studies show, it is also liberating. Leaders gain time to work on the system rather than inside it, and staff gain the dignity of agency.

So, the rise of post-hierarchy thinking is not a fad, it is a response to complexity, to digital possibility, to human aspiration. The question is no longer whether it works, but whether we in local government will have the courage, and the craft, to adapt it to our unique context. In the next section, I will start that adaptation by re-imagining the council as a living system of flows and feedback, rather than as a static tree of departments.

### **3. Rethinking the council as a living system**

If we accept that hierarchy isn't fit for complexity, then we must ask, what comes next? For me, the answer has always started with systems thinking. Not as a management fad but as a way of seeing the world: interconnected, dynamic, full of feedback loops and unintended consequences. A council is not a machine with levers; it's a living system of people, places and pressures.

A living system doesn't thrive through control. It thrives through relationships, learning and flow, and yet, so much of our current council design is the opposite of this. Insight is hoarded at the top. Budget is fenced in by directorates. Services are delivered in silos. Feedback is delayed or dismissed. Energy drains away as staff navigate process rather than purpose.

So what if we designed councils like ecosystems, not factories?

In a living council system:

- Teams are defined by purpose, not structure. Their boundaries are porous, able to flex and adapt based on the needs of the place.
- Information flows horizontally, not just up and down. The frontline has access to the same insight as the leadership team, and decisions can happen where knowledge lives.

- Accountability is collective and peer, held, not vertical. Teams support, challenge and learn from each other.
- Feedback loops are fast and meaningful, allowing services to evolve in real time based on what's working, what's not, and what residents are telling us.

Let's take a concrete example. In most councils today, a child at risk of neglect might be flagged to a contact centre, passed to an assessment team, referred to a safeguarding board, with every step guarded by thresholds, emails and meeting schedules. A systems lens asks: what if the team responding included housing, education, police and social care from the outset? What if they shared one dashboard, one funding pot, and one mission: keep this child safe and thriving? What if they could act immediately, with shared authority and shared trust?

In this model, we replace the traditional 'department' with what I call "mission cells". These are small, cross, functional teams built around problems, not services, like preventing youth homelessness, or reducing delayed hospital discharges. They are embedded in communities, not head offices. They have clear outcomes, devolved budgets, and open access to data. They form, reform, and dissolve as needs change.

This may sound radical, but it isn't new. We see it in how emergency services collaborate during a crisis. We see it in agile software teams that swarm around a product. We see it in the best voluntary sector projects that wrap around families without worrying about whose logo is on the funding.

Rethinking the council as a living system is not about abandoning structure, it's about letting structure follow function. It's about recognising that the real organisation is not the chart on the wall, it's the web of relationships, insight, trust and action that gets things done when no one's watching.

In living systems, diversity is strength, not a management challenge, local knowledge is gold, not a liability, learning is continuous, not a quarterly review. And the most important leadership skill isn't control, it's curation. Creating the conditions where others can succeed.

This mindset matters more than ever as we introduce AI into the ecosystem. Because AI, too, works best in networks, not silos. The intelligence we unlock through data and prediction can only reach its potential if it flows to the edge of the organisation, where decisions are made, where people live, where services touch lives.

So, in the next section, I will begin to sketch what this looks like in practice: The architecture of a flat, AI native council designed not for command and control, but for learning, adaptability and real time problem solving.

## 4. What an AI native post-hierarchical council actually looks like

So let's get practical: What would a council actually look like if we took all of this seriously? If we flattened the hierarchy, embraced systems thinking, and embedded AI as an enabling layer, not a bolt on to existing dysfunctions?

First, imagine walking into your council headquarters and not finding layers of heads of service tucked away in corner offices, but instead open, networked hubs of mission cells, each focused on a defined local challenge. one cell is working to reduce rough sleeping, another is targeting childhood obesity, another is designing out anti-social behaviour in a particular estate. Each team is cross functional, made up of people from housing, public health, community safety, and digital, working side by side, co located in the community when needed, and empowered to act.

These teams aren't waiting for permission, they are supported by a new organisational backbone: The Civic Intelligence Layer.

AI here isn't some abstract future, it's deeply embedded into daily practice:

- Every team has access to an AI Copilot, trained on council policies, historical data and live context. It helps them draft responses, simulate options, flag risks and propose next best actions.
- Residents interact with AI, powered citizen agents, always on support that can help them navigate services, track progress on cases, and get answers without waiting on hold.
- Services use predictive analytics and digital twins to test ideas before deploying them, running stress tests on interventions, identifying vulnerable hotspots before crises emerge, and prioritising resources dynamically.

but it's not just about tools. it's about roles and culture:

- There are no line managers in the traditional sense. Instead, the system supports role based work: you might be a coach in one mission cell, a data translator in another, and a convenor for a strategic outcome board.
- Traditional departments are gone, replaced by networked functions that offer support into teams as needed: legal, finance, governance, data science.
- Budgets aren't fixed to services, but pooled into purpose funds, governed through participatory methods. Teams draw down money based on need, evidence, and public engagement, not bidding wars.
- Accountability is real time and transparent. Each mission cell maintain live dashboards showing outcomes, feedback, and activity. Trust is built through visibility, not reporting lines.

And what about councillors? They aren't sidelined. Instead, they become stewards of place and convenors of democratic insight. They work alongside mission cells, surfacing community intelligence, holding space for difficult conversations, and ensuring alignment with political priorities. In many cases, they chair outcome boards that integrate citizen voice and technical expertise to shape shared priorities.

Importantly, all of this is scaffolded by a digital core that is built to connect, not control. It's an AI first architecture: Open by design, able to plug in AI models, data sets, community platforms, and third party services without months of procurement or a change request logged in triplicate.

This is a council that learns, it's adaptive, it listens to its environment, tests ideas quickly, and scales what works. When a mission is achieved, the team dissolves. people move on to new challenges. Knowledge is retained and reused. Insight flows laterally, not hoarded.

For the workforce, it's a breath of fresh air: roles feel purposeful, decision making is closer to the action, and the drudgery of administrative coordination is handled by smart systems. For residents, it means faster, clearer, more human services, and for politicians, it means being able to see, in real time, the impact of choices, not months after the fact.

If this all sounds impossible, I'd argue the opposite - it is already emerging: in pieces, in pilots, in postcodes, our task now is to weave those fragments into a new operating model, a model that recognises that hierarchy might help you survive, but it won't help you grow. Only networks can do that and only intelligence, human and artificial, shared and distributed at the edge, can make it sing.

In the next section, I will take a closer look at how AI enables this kind of structure to thrive, what it replaces, what it augments, and how it creates the conditions for distributed power and smarter decisions.

## **5. How AI supports this model, not replaces it**

Let's be clear: AI is not a magic wand, it won't solve poor leadership, it won't repair broken trust, and it certainly won't replace the deep human work of care, empathy, and judgement. But what it can do, if we design for it thoughtfully, is remove the friction that slows councils down and unlock the intelligence already sitting in our systems, teams, and communities.

In a flat, mission led council, coordination is the hardest part. Without a hierarchy of command, we need something else to make sense of complexity and help distributed teams act with confidence. That's where AI comes in.

## **AI removes the coordination drag**

Think of all the time spent in councils just trying to understand what's going on, tracking cases, emailing for updates, waiting for reports, pulling data from siloed systems. This isn't value adding work, it's coordination drag. Large language models (LLMs) and AI agents can do this in seconds:

- AI co-pilots summarise case histories, flag outliers, and pull in relevant best practice from across the country.
- Real, time dashboards aggregate data from housing, social care, health and benefits, making it visible and usable at the edge.
- Meeting bots draft agendas based on team priorities, track actions, and prompt nudges to keep things moving.

In short, AI handles the admin, so humans can handle the nuance.

## **AI enhances frontline judgement**

There's a myth that AI undermines professional skill. but in reality, it enhances it, by making patterns visible, reducing blind spots, and providing options, not orders:

- a social worker can simulate the likely outcomes of different interventions using predictive models.
- a planning officer can use AI to pre, assess policy compliance on new applications.
- a family support worker can surface early, warning signs from school attendance, housing instability, and domestic abuse data combined.

The decision remains human, but it's informed by insight that no individual could hold alone.

## **AI amplifies resident voice**

In a traditional council, residents are often heard late, after a complaint, at a public meeting, or via consultation that's already decided the outcome. AI can turn that on its head:

- natural language processing tools can synthesise input from thousands of citizen comments, emails, and chats to identify themes and concerns.
- personalised citizen agents can support residents 24/7, explaining options, escalating complex issues, and translating bureaucracy into plain English.
- sentiment analysis helps mission teams stay tuned to community mood, not just formal metrics.

This isn't surveillance, it's attentiveness. It's building a council that listens in real time, not just when the inbox explodes.

## **AI protects the system from ethical failure**

One of the biggest fears about AI is that it becomes a black box, making decisions no one understands. That's why any AI native council needs robust guardrails:

- every model must pass ethical audits, checking for bias, explainability and risk.
- open standards and transparent algorithms ensure accountability.
- community oversight boards, including residents, hold the system to account.

In my work, I use the PEARLS framework: Prevention, Ethics, Accountability, Risk, Legibility, Sustainability, as the foundation of AI governance. Not just technical checks, but cultural commitments.

## **AI enables truly adaptive learning**

Finally, AI creates the conditions for the council to become a learning organisation:

- feedback loops are instant.
- lessons from one mission cell can be codified and shared system-wide.
- continuous improvement becomes part of the operating rhythm, not an annual review.

This is where AI shines, not as a tool to enforce control, but as a partner in shared intelligence. It doesn't centralise power, it distributes it. It doesn't replace the human, it liberates them.

In the next section, I will look at how to transition from where we are now to this model, safely, incrementally, and with the people who matter most: the teams and communities on the front line.

## **6. The transitional model: How councils can get there, step by step**

For most councils, the vision of a flat, AI native mission led organisation might feel like a world away - and that's okay. Transformation at this scale isn't a leap, it's a series of deliberate, often uncomfortable, steps. This isn't about scrapping your structure tomorrow. It's about evolving in place, experimenting at the edge, and learning your way forward. Here's how that journey might begin.

## **Step 1: Start with the pain, not the plan**

Most transformation programmes start with a blueprint. But living systems don't change by design alone, they shift through tension and purpose. Begin by identifying where the pain is greatest: where residents are angry, where staff are exhausted, where outcomes keep slipping. This is your entry point.

Maybe it's housing voids, maybe it's school exclusions, maybe it's the discharge crisis. Pick one area where the system is clearly failing and where you have courageous people ready to try something different.

## **Step 2: Stand up your first mission cell**

Don't wait for permission. Assemble a small, cross, functional team (8–12 people), give them a clear outcome, a 90 day window, and permission to redesign how they work. Include frontline staff, community voices, digital and data leads, co locate them, give them shared data access, and assign them a coach, not a manager.

Most importantly, shield them from bureaucracy. Let them define their roles, make decisions in the room, and iterate rapidly.

## **Step 3: Install your civic intelligence layer**

You don't need a full AI platform on day one, start small: a shared case overview dashboard, a co-piloting tool trained on internal documents, a chatbot for triaging resident queries. The goal is to reduce admin load and increase situational awareness for everyone in the mission cell.

Partner with your digital and data teams, but don't overcomplicate it. Value comes from usability, not perfection.

## **Step 4: Replace status updates with real time feedback**

Stop running monthly update meetings. Instead, build a live feedback system, use slack or teams channels, real time dashboards, and shared learning logs. Show progress, failures, learning, all in the open. If you want trust and pace, you need visibility.

## **Step 5: Repurpose your middle managers**

You can't flatten the structure without rethinking the roles. Most councils are heavy with team managers, service managers, assistant directors - don't cut them, retrain them. Give them new hats:

- Coaches who help teams navigate complexity and tension
- Data translators who turn insight into usable intelligence
- Pattern holders who look across cells and spot systemic risks
- Connectors who broker relationships across place and partners

These roles are not about control, they're about enabling.

## **Step 6: Rewrite the rulebook, slowly**

You can't run new ways of working with old HR policies, rigid budget codes, and ten step procurement forms. As mission cells succeed, use their learning to update your governance: shorten cycles, devolve budgets, and introduce rolling role definitions instead of static job descriptions.

The goal is to create a new operating system, not just better apps.

## **Step 7: Expand by invitation, not mandate**

When one mission cell succeeds, others will want in. Don't force it, share learning, create space for curiosity, and let the next team self-organise. This is how culture spreads: peer to peer, not top down.

Support a growing network of cells with tools, coaching, and light touch infrastructure. Resist the urge to scale too fast.

## **Step 8: Institutionalise reflection, not perfection**

The path will be messy, mistakes will happen, some cells will fail. This is normal, build in regular cycles of reflection: retrospectives, peer learning sessions, resident feedback loops. Treat every project as a prototype, not a promise.

Leaders must model humility instead of asking "why haven't you hit your target?". Ask "what did you learn and how can we help?"



This isn't a linear roadmap, it's a living, breathing transition. Each council will move differently based on its culture, capability and context, but the pattern is clear: start small, go deep, build trust, share learning, and grow from the edges in.

In the next section, I will explore how to measure whether this new model is actually working, what we count, who we listen to, and how we stay anchored to purpose as the system evolves.

## **7. Measuring success in a post hierarchy world**

When we flatten structures, distribute authority, and embed AI into the system, we can't keep measuring progress like we used to. Traditional metrics, like service level agreements, performance indicators, and red, amber, green dashboards, don't work in a world of distributed teams solving complex, adaptive problems. They're too slow, too blunt, and too disconnected from what really matters.

If we're serious about moving beyond hierarchy, we need to reimagine how we measure success, not just to prove the model works, but to help the system learn.

### **Outcome over output**

First, we must shift from measuring what we do to what we change. an old system might report:

- 2,000 benefit applications processed,
- 95% of potholes filled within 10 days,
- 1,500 children referred to early help.

but a post-hierarchical, mission led council asks:

- how many residents are financially resilient six months after receiving support?
- has active travel increased in neighbourhoods where roads were repaired?
- are children safer, happier, and more connected to school and community?

That means working with complex, real, world outcomes, not simplistic targets. And it means investing in mixed methods evaluation, blending quantitative data, case studies, resident stories, and team reflections.

### **Real, time, not retrospective**

Traditional performance reports arrive weeks or months after the work is done. That's too late. In an adaptive system, we need real time feedback:

- live dashboards for mission teams, showing trends, risks, and progress
- sentiment analysis from resident interactions
- pulse surveys to understand team health, trust and collaboration
- community feedback tools that gather insight in days, not quarters

With AI, much of this can be automated and visualised, surfacing issues before they become crises.

## **Learning over blame**

Most public sector performance regimes are still rooted in blame. when something fails, we look for the accountable officer, the failed process, the scapegoat. In a networked council, that mindset kills innovation.

Instead, we need psychologically safe reflection loops:

- regular retrospectives with mission cells
- systems reviews that explore patterns and root causes
- transparent documentation of what worked and what didn't

Leaders must model learning by sharing their own mistakes and adaptations. when failure is seen as insight, the whole system gets smarter.

## **Trust and experience as primary indicators**

in a networked, people centred system, trust is the currency that matters most:

- do residents trust the council to act fairly, quickly and with care?
- do teams trust each other to make decisions and support learning?
- do councillors trust the system to be transparent and responsive?

These are not soft measures, they're foundational. Councils can measure trust through well designed surveys, net promoter scores, complaints data, and even the tone and language used in resident communications (using natural language processing).

Similarly, experience becomes a central metric:

- how do residents experience accessing support?
- how do staff experience their roles, autonomy and impact?
- how do councillors experience their role in a networked model?

When we measure experience, we make dignity visible.

## **Transparent, shared data**

Finally, we must make measurement itself more democratic. Data should not live in the finance team's spreadsheets or the performance manager's slide deck. It should be open, real, time, and co, owned by those who need it:

- teams should have autonomy to define what success means in their context.
- residents should be able to see, in plain language, what's working and where we're falling short.
- councillors should have live access to outcomes, not just quarterly reports.

This isn't just about tech, it's about trust.

In a post hierarchy council, measurement becomes a living practice, not a reporting requirement. We use data to learn, to adapt, and to stay anchored to purpose. When we get this right, we no longer fear scrutiny, we invite it.

Next, I will look at the risks: what can go wrong, and how we hold the system to account without rebuilding the hierarchies we just dismantled.

## **8. Risks, resistance and radical stewardship**

I'd love to tell you that flattening hierarchies and unleashing civic intelligence is easy, but it's not. It's disruptive, it threatens old power structures, professional identities, even how we think about control. And if we're honest, some of the resistance is not irrational, it's protective. Because systems built on trust can break just as quickly as those built on fear. But risk isn't a reason to stay still. It's a reason to design better.

### **The risk of chaos**

One of the most common fears is that without hierarchy, the system will descend into confusion, duplicated efforts, clashing priorities, and rogue decisions. This is a real danger, but only if we flatten without scaffolding. Self-management doesn't mean everyone does what they want, it means clear missions, strong data, shared norms, and visible feedback.

Radical clarity replaces bureaucratic control. Decision making rights are distributed, but the purpose is shared. When teams have live access to data and outcomes, they can align without being told.

## **The risk of inequity**

Another fear is that localised decision-making leads to postcode lotteries or reinforces existing bias. AI can also encode discrimination if not carefully designed. This is why equity must be built into the system architecture, not treated as a bolt, on:

- algorithms must be explainable, auditable, and tested for bias
- decisions must be peer, reviewed and visible
- community oversight panels should play a formal role in shaping, reviewing and challenging how tools are used

You don't eliminate risk by centralising control, you reduce it by spreading intelligence and embedding accountability everywhere.

## **The risk of burnout**

Flat structures can sometimes overload people. If everyone owns everything, no one knows where to begin. That's why role clarity, strong rituals, and coaching support are vital. In a networked model, leadership shifts from control to curation: holding the pattern, nurturing connection, and spotting emerging stress.

Former managers become coaches, data translators, facilitators. their value increases as they create space for others to lead safely.

## **The risk of re centralisation**

Perhaps the greatest danger is that the old habits creep back in. When things go wrong, people reach for hierarchy, they start adding layers, rewriting RACI charts, reintroducing sign off protocols. This is why we need radical stewardship, a deliberate act of holding the system open.

Stewardship is leadership without dominance. It asks different questions:

- are decisions happening at the edge, or drifting back to the centre?
- are we learning, or just reporting?
- are we building trust, or creating dependency?

Stewards use data not to punish, but to nourish. They model vulnerability, they share power, they protect space for experimentation.

## Anchoring the change: PEARLS

To help hold this new model accountable, I used and recommend the PEARLS framework:

- **Prevention:** are we investing in long, term wellbeing, not just crisis response?
- **Ethics:** is our use of AI and data guided by integrity and fairness?
- **Accountability:** can decisions be traced, questioned and improved?
- **Risk:** are we managing complexity without falling into control traps?
- **Legibility:** is the system understandable to those it serves and those who work in it?
- **Sustainability:** can this model survive turnover, turbulence, and time?

When councils embed pearls into their governance, they create a culture where innovation is possible without sacrificing values.

Transformation at this scale is never tidy. It stirs anxiety, triggers resistance, and exposes fault lines, but it also builds something resilient, adaptive and human. In the next section, I will look at why now, why this moment, with all its mess and promise, is the time to act boldly and reshape local government for the world we actually live in.

## 9. Why now: The case for courage in 2025–2030

We are not starting from a blank slate; we are starting from a burning platform.

Local government is now navigating a perfect storm: deepening need, fiscal constraint, workforce fatigue, public distrust and the accelerating disruption of AI. By 2030, the councils that thrive will be the ones that let go early, learn fast and redistribute power with purpose.

The truth is that the current model is unsustainable. The era of incrementalism is over. Austerity is not temporary; it has become a design principle. Every budget cycle brings harder choices, fewer people, and more to do. Every transformation programme promises agility, but too often delivers new layers of process without changing the core logic.

in 2025, we stand at a rare convergence:

- We have accessible AI tools that can radically increase productivity, surface insight and automate complexity,
- We have emerging blueprints from other sectors and forward, leaning councils, showing how mission led, team based, AI enabled models can deliver better outcomes,
- We have growing appetite for change at all levels, political, professional and community, though often without a shared language or roadmap.

This convergence creates a window. but it won't stay open forever.

If we don't act, we face two futures:

- a future where AI is layered onto existing dysfunctions, speeding up inequity and locking in centralised control,
- or a future where we design from first principles, where technology supports autonomy, where intelligence flows to the frontline, and where councils become trusted, adaptive, and deeply human public institutions.

We know what happens when systems ignore structural change: they ossify, they become brittle, and when they break, they break hard. We've already seen this in social care markets, in SEND systems buckling under demand, in homelessness services overwhelmed by fragmentation. But we've also seen the green shoots of something better:

- councils experimenting with self, managed teams,
- frontline staff using AI copilots to triage and navigate complexity,
- neighbourhood budgeting experiments reconnecting power to place.

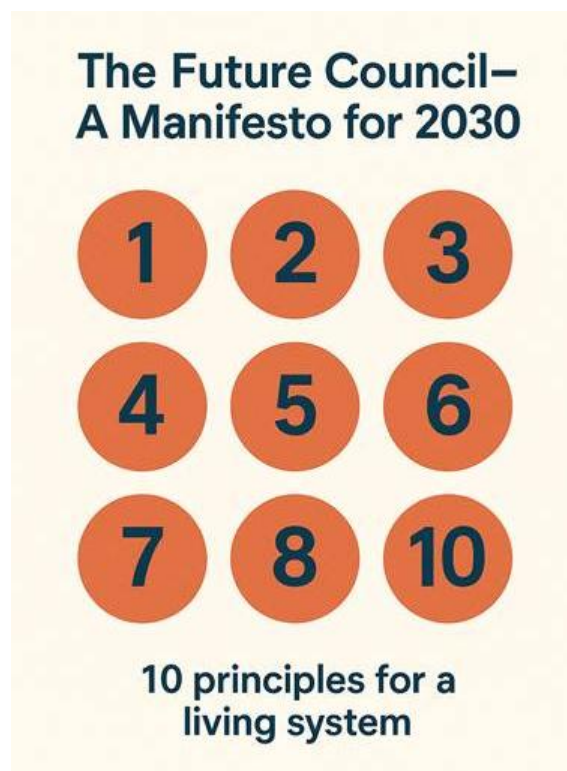
This is not theory. It is already happening, in fragments, in pilots, in places. the difference between the councils that thrive and those that collapse won't be who had the most funding, it'll be who had the most courage. Courage to:

- question the sacred assumptions of hierarchy
- back their people to lead at every level
- invest in learning over performance
- choose equity over control
- design with, not for, communities

The next five years will set the trajectory for a generation. We can't defer the hard work, but we can do it with purpose, with solidarity, and with a vision worth working toward.

In the next section, I will pull it all together: a manifesto for the council of 2030, not as a service machine, but as a distributed civic intelligence network that holds place, people and potential at its centre.

## 10. The Future Council: A Manifesto for 2030



This isn't a vision of what might be, it's a manifesto for what must be. If we want councils that are fit for the realities of the 2030s, climate shocks, economic volatility, demographic shifts, digital acceleration, we need more than reform. We need a reinvention. not just of services, but of the very architecture of public institutions.

This manifesto is built on what I've learned from practice, systems thinking, lived experience and the quiet revolutions already happening across the sector. It is not a utopia, it is a grounded, credible alternative to collapse.

### 1. The council is no longer a hierarchy, it's a platform

It connects people, teams, tools and data in real time. It doesn't do everything, but it enables others to act. It offers civic infrastructure: trust, standards, networks, ethics. It is agile, not brittle, adaptive, not reactive.

## **2. The core unit is the mission cell**

Small, cross functional, self-organising teams working on real problems: reducing exclusions, cleaning up a river, improving housing conditions. These cells have autonomy, data access and shared purpose. they swarm around need, not structure.

## **3. Leadership is redistributed**

Power no longer lives in job titles; it lives in roles. Councillors steward purpose and values, officers hold space for learning and coordination, former managers become coaches and connectors, teams lead together.

## **4. Intelligence is ambient and agentic**

AI is embedded everywhere, not as a central command tool, but as a partner. Copilots support staff, citizen agents support residents. Predictive models support prevention, insight flows sideways, not just up.

## **5. Governance is shared**

Residents co create priorities, budget decisions are made through participatory tools, oversight is live, visible and accountable. Equity audits, data ethics boards, and citizen panels are the norm, not the exception.

## **6. Measurement is purpose led**

Success is judged by real world impact, not volume. Metrics are co designed. Trust, dignity, learning and wellbeing are measured alongside speed and savings. Data is open, shared and acted on.

## **7. Structure is fluid**

The council shifts shape based on demand, mission cells form and dissolve. Talent flows across boundaries, roles evolve, systems remember what works and adapt what doesn't.



## **8. Culture is curious, not compliant**

Learning is rewarded, challenge is welcomed. Feedback is normal, failure is surfaced quickly and used to get better. There is no fear in saying: “we tried, it didn’t work, here’s what we learned.”

## **9. Community is core**

Residents are not just users or customers, they are co creators, watchdogs, stewards. The council doesn’t act on their behalf, it acts alongside. Place making becomes a shared endeavour.

## **10. The whole is more than the sum**

Councils operate as part of a broader civic intelligence network, a distributed ecosystem of communities, providers, technologies, spaces and shared standards. We stop reinventing the wheel. We start building the road together.

This manifesto doesn’t ask us to believe in fantasy, it asks us to believe in each other, and to believe that councils can be places of dignity, imagination, and collective care; places that don’t just manage decline, but shape futures.

And now, to close, a final personal reflection on why this matters and what each of us can do to begin.

## **My personal call to action**

I didn’t write this as a consultant. I wrote it as someone who has sat in the thick of it, leading turnaround programmes, holding the line in crisis, coaching exhausted teams through yet another restructure, all while knowing that something deeper needed to shift. This article is a reflection of that experience and a provocation.

It’s for every chief executive who knows they’re running out of levers, every team manager who sees their people burning out, every councillor who wants to reconnect with the community they serve, and every frontline worker who is quietly making things work despite the system, not because of it.

I’ve seen what’s possible. I’ve worked in councils that chose to break the mould. I’ve witnessed teams light up when given trust, when hierarchy falls away and purpose takes its place - and I’ve seen how technology, used wisely, can create the space for that human touch to re-enter public service.

But this change won't come from a white paper. It'll come from us. From the people brave enough to ask different questions in the next leadership meeting, from the officers who start a mission cell, even if it's unofficial. from the teams who use a shared dashboard to act faster, before the crisis hits, from the leaders who say: "we don't know everything, but we're willing to try, to learn, to build something better."

This is our moment, the window is narrow, the need is urgent, and the tools are finally within reach. So let's not tweak the org chart one more time, let's build the next system. Start small, be bold, stay human. And if you're doing this work already, or about to begin, let's connect. Because this future won't be designed by one person. It'll be co-created by all of us.

# Green Paper: Turning the Living Council from Blueprint to Build

(Originally published on [LinkedIn](#) 07/2025)



In my [White Paper \(from Council Pyramid to Council Platform: Rethinking the Council as a Living System\)](#), I asked a simple but profound question: “What if our councils weren’t stuck in hierarchy, but became living, learning, adaptive systems?”

I challenged the idea that control is the only route to accountability. I questioned why, in a world of complexity, we still insist on rigid org-charts and slow approvals. And I tried to offer a hopeful alternative: a model of post-hierarchical councils, rooted in purpose, designed around people, and fuelled by ethical, community-led AI. The paper started the conversation, but it also raised a deeper demand:

## **“If not hierarchy, then what?” “If not the old way, how?”**

This paper is my answer to that call. Where the white paper made the case for change, this write-up maps the path. It shifts us from vision to implementation, from strategy to delivery, from theory to tooling, from critique to capability. And it’s built not as a blueprint locked in stone, but as a living, evolving architecture, one that can flex with context, culture, and community need.

## What this paper offers

Across seven practical parts, this green paper unpacks the how of transformation:

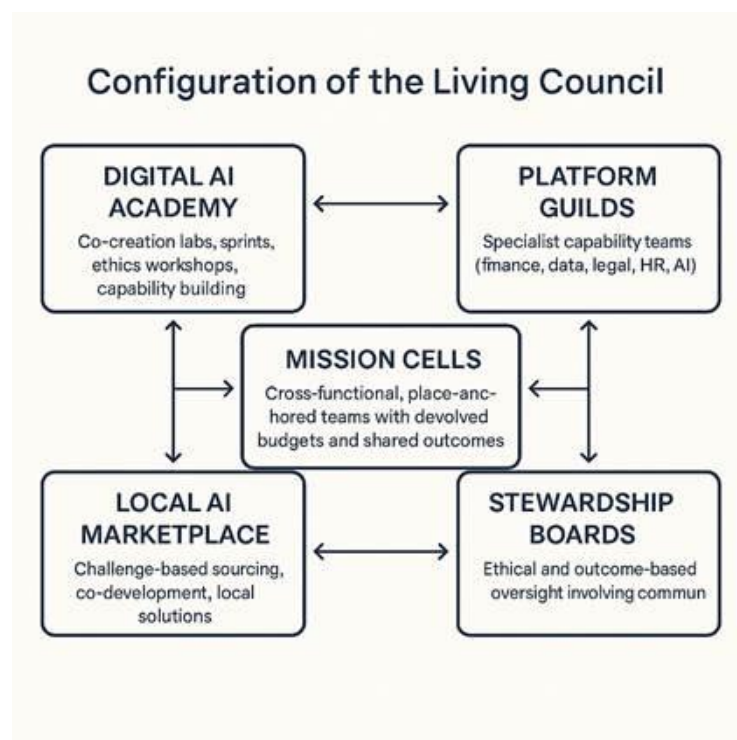
1. A conceptual design of the Living Council operating model, including roles, rhythms, mission cells, and guilds.
2. The performance and interaction architecture, reframing accountability around shared outcomes and systemic learning.
3. A Test, Learn & Grow rollout framework, enabling bold experimentation with local adaptation.
4. A practical charter for the AI–human partnership, redefining collaboration in a post-automation world.
5. A detailed model of resource requirements and transition costs, complete with example financial projections.
6. The enabling conditions from upskilling to procurement reform that councils will need to unlock success.
7. A national roadmap and calls to action, inviting government, partners, and residents into co-stewardship of a new public future.

## Who this paper is for

This isn't just for policy wonks or digital leads. It's for:

- Council leaders wondering how to break the cycle of short-termism and regain purpose.
- Managers and officers seeking more meaningful, creative ways of working.
- Community partners tired of gatekeeping and hungry for shared power.
- Technologists and designers who want to build tools that matter.
- Politicians and funders who know incrementalism won't cut it anymore.

## Part 1: Conceptual design of the living council



We've spent decades tuning up the machinery of local government. But the core design? That hasn't changed. We're still structured like 1950s bureaucracies: vertical, rigid, siloed. And yet, the world around us is now messy, fast, digital, networked. No machine can thrive in a living ecosystem.

If we want public services that listen, adapt, and regenerate, we need to build councils that behave more like living systems. This first section sets out five design pillars of that future model:

1. Mission cells,
2. Platform guilds,
3. Digital AI academy,
4. Dynamic local AI marketplace, and
5. Stewardship boards.

This is not just a new structure. It's a new social contract for how we work, share power, learn, and lead.

## 1.1 Mission cells

*“Cross-functional, place-anchored teams with devolved budgets and shared outcomes”*

Feature	Description
Purpose	Deliver priority outcomes by focusing on place, people, and need—not services
Form	Multidisciplinary teams with authority to act and adapt
Budget	Devolved from central cost centres; pooled across departments
Governance	Held by stewardship boards and shared KPIs
Tools	AI-assisted triage, real-time dashboards, copilot-enhanced casework

Mission cells are the beating heart of the Living Council. They replace vertical command with horizontal care, bringing together people from across departments, agencies, and communities who are all contributing to the same outcome.

These aren’t ‘task-and-finish’ groups. They are enduring, adaptive units entrusted with decision-making and budget responsibility. They work on the ground, close to the community, accountable not to a hierarchy but to their purpose.

Each cell has:

- A unifying mission (e.g. “Reduce homelessness among under-25s”)
- Power to commission flexibly
- Embedded insight tools and AI support
- Peer-led reflection cycles, not performance appraisals

**Example: “Safe Start” Mission Cell:** In a deprived cluster of primary schools, a cell is formed with:

- A trauma-informed teacher
- A youth justice worker
- A SEND officer
- A data analyst
- Two family support workers
- A parent peer

Together, they aim to reduce exclusions by 30% in 18 months. They run early morning check-ins, AI-guided triage, and shared family plans. The results are reviewed by a stewardship board every quarter.

1.2 Platform guilds

*“Specialist capability teams that support and serve mission cells and wider outcomes”*

Feature	Description
Purpose	Provide responsive expertise (finance, data, legal, HR, AI) to enable mission work
Form	Agile, embedded, interdisciplinary teams, not “departments”
Interface	Plug-in style cells request support, guilds co-deliver
Culture	Ethic of service to outcomes, not gatekeeping
Tools	Shared repositories, AI copilots, open access design assets

Platform guilds are like flexible connective tissue, supporting all parts of the council without pulling rank. They don’t hoard knowledge. They democratise it. They act as enablers, mentors, problem-solvers, ready to drop into mission teams when needed.

Think of them as the engine room of capability, but designed to be transparent, responsive, and collaborative.

**Example: The “Insight Guild”:** Supporting a rough sleeping mission in the city centre, the guild:

- Builds a live dashboard of bed availability across hostels
- Trains outreach workers to use predictive mapping
- Co-designs with residents to visualise rough sleeper journeys
- Monitors equity implications of algorithmic risk scoring

### 1.3 Digital AI academy

*“A living skills and co-creation ecosystem, not just a training programme”*

Feature	Description
Purpose	Build confidence and fluency in AI, data, and digital tools across the workforce
Audience	Council staff, community partners, local SMEs, residents
Activities	Sprints, labs, ethics workshops, skills bootcamps
Outputs	AI-literate frontline teams, co-developed tools, shared playbooks
Delivery	Led by mixed faculty (internal staff, tech partners, civic universities)

Transformation fails when it’s imposed. The AI Academy flips the script. It says: let’s co-create understanding. Let’s make this journey human.

The Academy becomes a safe space to test, learn and lead together, for care workers, housing officers, HR assistants, and digital natives. It unlocks skills, voice, and courage.

**Example: AI Bootcamp for Adult Social Care:** A cohort of reablement staff pilot a local chatbot for care handoffs. They train it with real scenarios, embed it into mobile devices, and reflect weekly. One team codes an early prototype for triaging low-risk cases. Within three months, missed visits drop by 40%, and staff morale improves.

### 1.4 Local AI marketplace

*“A dynamic open innovation platform for solving real council challenges, locally”*

Feature	Description
Purpose	Source, test, and scale civic tech innovations grounded in local need
Structure	Challenge-led, outcome-focused, IP-sharing rules
Participants	Local start-ups, civic hackers, universities, in-house teams
Ethics	Bias audits, resident panels, sustainability metrics
Alignment	Feeds back into mission cells, academy, and procurement reforms



The marketplace replaces "procure and hope" with "co-create and learn." It enables us to support local tech ecosystems and build tools that fit the grain of our places.

The platform:

- Posts real-life council challenges (from call centre drop-offs to AI guardrails)
- Offers micro-grants and coaching to local solvers
- Trials low-risk pilots with built-in feedback loops
- Shares results openly for reuse

**Example: Student-Led Benefits Assistant:** A group from a local university trains a language model to help residents navigate housing benefit claims.

- The marketplace team pairs them with benefit officers and residents
- Ethics panel reviews for bias and clarity
- The solution is piloted in one neighbourhood hub, then scaled

### 1.5 Stewardship boards

*“Governing with people, not just for them”*

Feature	Description
Purpose	Democratic, ethical, and community-centred governance for mission work
Membership	Councillor, resident, staff rep, young person, independent steward
Duties	Monitor progress, unblock barriers, guide funding, safeguard ethics
Approach	Story + data + learning = judgement
Cadence	Quarterly public retrospectives; published learning logs

These boards embody a new philosophy: governance through care and learning, not just control.

They are the antidote to top-down target culture. They bring lived experience, professional wisdom, and democratic legitimacy into the same room, and they hold power together.

**Example: Family Resilience Board:** Quarterly sessions combine:

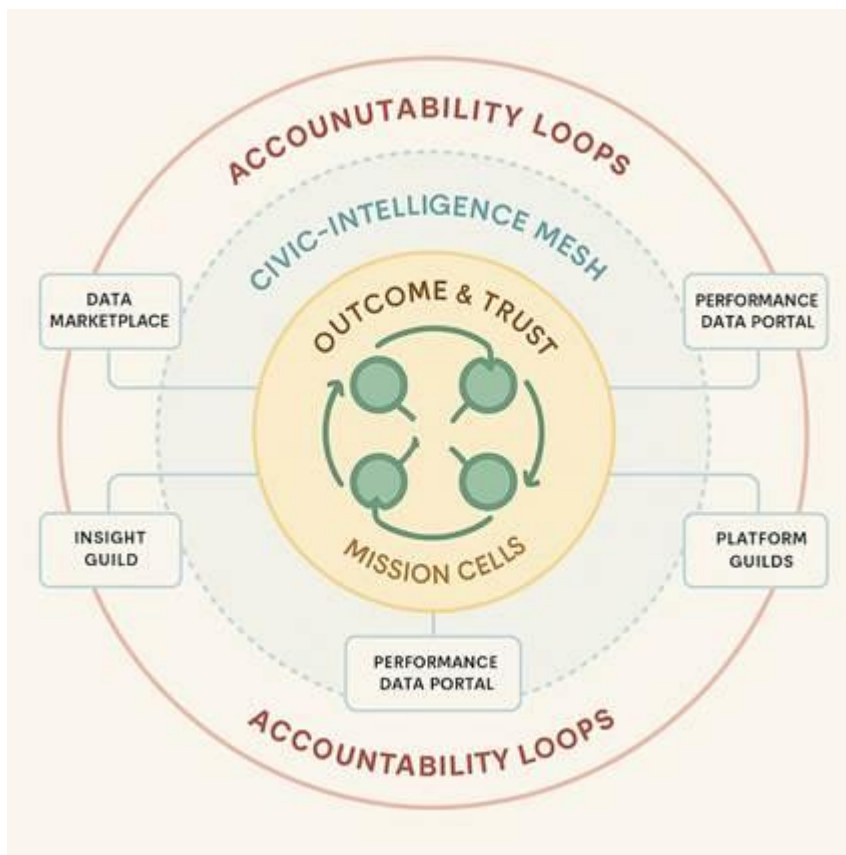
- Resident testimony
- Predictive analytics

- Staff stories
- Cell outcome tracking

They greenlight budget extensions based on holistic progress, not tick boxes. They escalate barriers to senior leadership. And they publicly reflect on what's working and what isn't.

## Part 2: Interaction & performance architecture

*"No more dashboards nobody sees. No more data hoarded by managers. No more targets that distort the work."*



If we're serious about ditching hierarchies, then we must also change how information flows, how value is measured, and how power is held to account.

In a traditional council structure, insight is often owned by the centre. Performance is measured through targets that speak more to compliance than to outcomes. The people doing the work are often excluded from shaping the way we understand what works.

But in a Living Council, this is flipped on its head. Instead of fixed KPIs and top-down reporting, we introduce a fluid, transparent system of real-time learning, civic intelligence, and multi-directional accountability. Everyone, not just senior officers, can see what's happening, learn from what's working, and act on insight. That's the real culture shift. And it's how we unlock continuous improvement without adding more layers of control.

## 2.1 Civic-intelligence mesh

*“A real-time, open information ecosystem that connects the entire organisation”*

Element	Description	Key Tools	Guardrails
<b>Data fabric</b>	Event-stream architecture connecting operational systems, IoT feeds, and open data	Azure / AWS streaming, open APIs, geospatial data layers	UK GDPR, synthetic test environments
<b>AI copilots</b>	Role-based assistants that surface guidance, insights, prompts, and decision support	GPT-based LLMs, retrieval-augmented search, policy graphing tools	PEARLS ethics checklist, bias audits, human-in-the-loop fallback
<b>Digital twin</b>	A real-time simulator that models what’s happening in the place: across people, assets, and outcomes	GIS + systems dynamics + scenario planning tools	Resident-accessible version, participatory forecasting
<b>Open portal</b>	A public, shared dashboard space where residents, staff and partners view live data	Power BI / Looker studio, versioned code repo	Open licence, plain-language overlays

Think of this as the nervous system of the Living Council. It replaces disconnected spreadsheets and siloed reports with a dynamic mesh of shared insight, available to anyone, at any time.

It starts with a data fabric, a modern architecture that pulls together every relevant data source, from children’s services caseloads to housing repairs, live air quality monitors, and population movement.

From this fabric, AI copilots emerge. They sit beside every key role, helping a caseworker spot patterns before a family hits crisis, or prompting a housing officer to proactively check for damp-related health risks in high-risk homes.

A digital twin simulates "what if" futures: what if we shift investment from crisis housing into upstream prevention? What if a heatwave hits the city next week? And it’s all channelled into an open portal, so residents don’t just receive reports, they see and interpret the same data council staff do.

**Example:** A family support worker logs in and opens their AI copilot. It immediately flags a rising pattern of school non-attendance linked to children living in temporary accommodation. The same insight appears in the public portal. The stewardship board calls a session. The housing and children’s services teams form a new mission cell. A week later, a prototype prevention plan is deployed, no committee papers, no six-month delay.

## 2.2 Outcome & trust framework

*“A simple, honest way to measure progress that matters to people”*

Pillar	Primary Metric	Supplementary Signals	Publication Rhythm
Well-being	Local Well-being Index (ONS-aligned)	School attendance, A&E admissions, self-reported loneliness	Monthly
Prevention dividend	£ saved by avoiding crisis	Avoided emergency placements, tenancy failures, hospital admissions	Quarterly
Trust index	Resident Net Promoter Score (NPS) + fairness rating	Complaints, FOI responsiveness, sentiment tracking	Monthly
Learning velocity	% of actions closed from cell retrospectives	Staff pulse on “psychological safety” and failure culture	6-weekly

Forget output targets like “number of cases closed.” Let’s ask better questions.

- Are people thriving, or merely surviving?
- Are we avoiding harm, or cleaning up the aftermath?
- Do people trust us, or tolerate us?
- Are we learning, or just reporting?

The Outcome & Trust Framework answers these by combining hard metrics with lived experience. It shifts our focus from volume to value, from effort to impact. And crucially, the framework is shared. Cells are not judged by someone else’s dashboard, they co-own the definition of success.

**Example:** A mission cell working on reducing evictions agrees their top metric is “tenancies sustained for 6+ months.” But they also track resident voice: “Do you feel you’re being supported fairly?” The Trust Index rises 20% after the team co-designs new support offers with the local housing association.

## 2.3 Accountability loops

*“Where reflection replaces blame, and transparency builds trust”*

Loop	Who's Involved	Cadence	Outputs
Cell retrospectives	Cell members + peer coach	Every 6 weeks	Action backlog, risks escalated, learning published
Stewardship panels	Councillor, community rep, staff peer, system steward	Quarterly, public	Mission progress review, budget flex, ethical check-in
Open audits	Insight guild + independent observers	Bi-annually	PEARLS ethical rating, AI bias reports
Civic hack-days	Residents, staff, students, SMEs	Twice yearly	Prototype ideas, open data stories, future problem briefs

Traditional performance reviews can be demoralising. They happen too late, they measure the wrong things, and they miss the chance to fix what's broken.

Instead, the Living Council uses accountability loops. Every 6 weeks, cells pause to reflect, log their learning, and course correct. Every 3 months, stewardship panels, led by citizens, not just officers, hold open sessions to review progress. These are not tick-box updates, but genuine conversations: What's working? What's not? What do we need to change?

Open audits keep our use of AI and data in check, publishing ethical reports that anyone can access. And civic hack-days bring the community into the creative space of solving problems together.

**Example:** A surge in missed recycling collections triggers resident frustration. At the next civic hack-day, a teenager proposes a bot that sends updates via WhatsApp when rounds are delayed. Two weeks later, the prototype is live, and complaints drop by half.

### How it all fits together

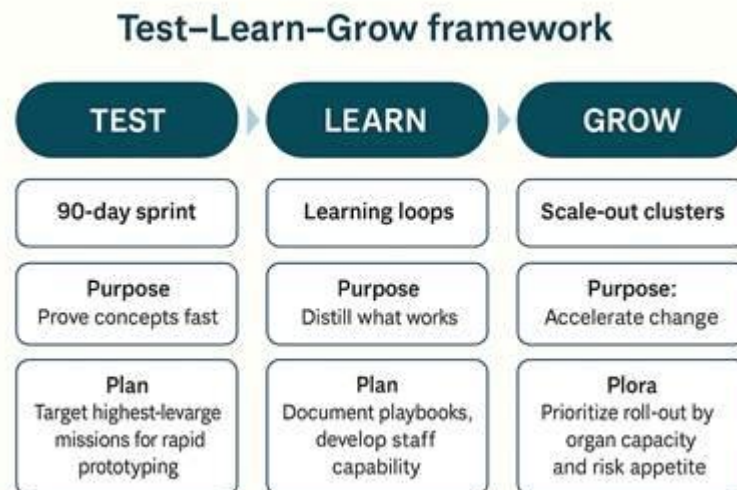
Here's how the system links:

- The civic-intelligence mesh feeds insight to mission cells, residents, and decision-makers in real time.
- The outcome & trust framework tracks the things that really matter, well-being, fairness, and avoided harm.
- The accountability loops give everyone a seat at the table to reflect, adjust and co-own the path forward.

This is the opposite of bureaucratic theatre. It's a living, breathing model of shared intelligence and shared responsibility. When done right, it becomes not just a new performance system, but a new democratic muscle.

### Part 3: Test, Learn & Grow framework

*"You don't scale ideas. You scale what works. But first, you have to create space for it to grow."*



When people hear the phrase “council transformation,” they often picture top-down restructures, rebranded services, and a 200-slide PowerPoint pack no one reads.

This isn't that. The Living Council isn't delivered through a single restructure. It evolves through disciplined, local experimentation. We scale through learning, not planning. We build legitimacy not by mandating change but by demonstrating what works, what doesn't, and what we learn along the way.

So rather than a grand rollout, we adopt a Test, Learn & Grow approach, one that protects time and space for bold trials, uses real-time feedback loops to refine, and grows new practices organically across the system.

This section sets out what that framework looks like, how to use it, and a suggested rollout plan.

### 3.1 The Test, Learn & Grow model

Phase	Purpose	Core Activities	Success Criteria
<b>Test</b>	Trial the new way of working in one or two high-leverage cells	Co-design roles, governance, workflows, dashboards. Set mission brief. Recruit coach.	Staff agency, early feedback, transparent KPIs
<b>Learn</b>	Observe what works, what breaks, and what needs adaptation	Fortnightly retros, open data dashboard, peer sense-making, storytelling	Course corrections made, shared language, visible value
<b>Grow</b>	Expand working practices to new cells, start to align council-wide processes	New cells formed, knowledge shared, performance system adjusted	Culture shift, positive outcome trends, buy-in beyond pilot

Start small. The first cell might focus on reducing the number of children entering emergency care. The team is empowered to co-design how they work: what data they need, how they make decisions, how they use their AI copilots, and how they hold retrospectives.

Their journey is fully visible, residents can follow along via a digital dashboard. Mistakes are logged, insights shared. Within 12 weeks, a pattern emerges: certain interventions are preventing escalation. A second cell starts, focused on homelessness. Then a third, tackling youth employment. Over time, what was once an experiment becomes the new normal.

### 3.2 Learning system mechanics

*“Building the support structure that makes learning contagious”*

Element	Description	Role in the Framework
<b>Learning sprints</b>	6-week cycles embedded into every mission cell	Provide rhythm for reflection, course correction, and retrospectives
<b>AI-enabled insight board</b>	Council-wide learning dashboard populated by cell data and story cards	Makes experimentation visible, connects patterns across silos
<b>Peer coaching</b>	Experienced internal staff trained to support new cells	Builds internal capacity, maintains cultural alignment
<b>Digital AI Academy</b>	Provides training, ethical literacy, and onboarding to new tools	Ensures every participant has the skills and confidence to engage
<b>Open sandbox</b>	Safe space to co-develop tools, tweak performance models, or simulate change	Prevents change fatigue, encourages creative ownership

You can't just tell a team "Be agile" and hope it sticks. You need rhythm, support, and shared language. That's what the learning system provides. Every 6 weeks, cells pause and reflect: What surprised us? Where did we fail fast? What's the next bet we want to try?

These reflections feed into a Learning Dashboard, which becomes a live repository of experiments across the organisation. Councillors, residents, partners and other cells can see not just what's working, but how learning is happening.

To help cells stay on track, trained peer coaches offer hands-on support, not to enforce rules, but to enable good culture. New staff are brought up to speed through the Digital AI Academy, where they learn tools, ethics, and methods in practical, creative sprints.

### 3.3 Rollout roadmap

*"A practical, achievable route to transformation in the AI age"*

Timeframe	Milestone	Description
0–3 months	Set-up	Form programme team. Launch Digital Academy. Recruit first mission cell. Configure AI copilots and dashboard MVP.
3–6 months	Test	First two mission cells go live. Learning dashboard launched. First civic retro published. Begin peer coaching.
6–12 months	Learn	Quarterly outcome tracking in place. Cells iterate. Digital twin introduced for one service area. AI tools refined.
12–18 months	Grow	4–6 cells live. Academy cohort scaled. Performance framework updated. Community trust index measured.
18–24 months	Embed	Shared playbook created. Stewardship panels fully functioning. Marketplace co-developments launched.

In the first 3 months, it's all about preparation. You recruit the first few champions, define success in your context, and remove barriers.

By month 6, the first mission cells are live, supported by their coach and AI copilots. They publish their first learning cycles. The academy helps onboard curious peers.

From 6 to 12 months, cells deepen their work, and the learning dashboard becomes a central resource. More council functions begin adapting performance goals to match the mission-based model.

By 18 months, multiple cells are live. Culture begins to shift. The buzz is no longer about the pilot, it's about the future of the organisation.



### 3.4 Principles to protect

What we hold sacred during the roll-out:

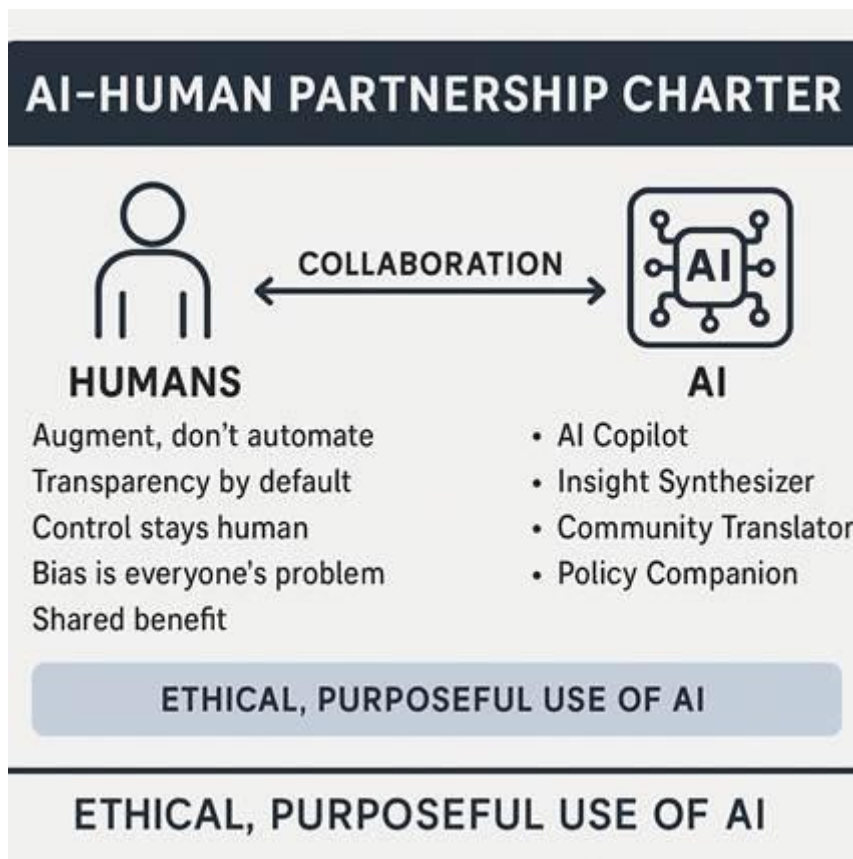
- Transparency over perfection: show the messy middle, not just the end state
- Participation over prescription: let cells build their own ways of working within common principles
- Diversity over uniformity: value multiple ways of solving complex problems
- Learning over blame: track what we tried, not just what we achieved
- Trust over control: don't scale if it means reverting to hierarchy

**Example:** A Council launches a mission cell focused on 16–24-year-olds not in education or employment (NEET). The team brings together youth workers, education reps, housing officers, and a data scientist. The AI co-pilot highlights previously unseen correlations between housing instability and NEET status. Working in six-week sprints, they test new drop-in hubs in high-risk areas and prototyped a WhatsApp-based support line. Within four months, early NEET figures fall by 11%, and the Trust Index among young people rises significantly. The learning was shared via the council's open dashboard and their model was picked up by a neighbouring borough.

The Test, Learn & Grow Framework isn't just about how we change. It's about how we change with dignity, creativity, and purpose.

## Part 4: The AI–human partnership charter

*“AI doesn't replace people. It restores their time, reveals their insight, and rehumanises their work.”*



AI is not some looming threat that's going to wipe out local government jobs and turn services into soulless automations. Nor is it a panacea that solves everything with a chatbot. It's much more nuanced than that, and far more promising.

AI, when deployed with care and clarity, can liberate the frontline from bureaucracy. It can make sense of patterns we can't see. It can give residents back control. But only if it's used intentionally, ethically, and collaboratively.

So, if we're serious about rethinking the council as a living system, then we need to redesign our relationship with machines from the ground up. Not as tools bolted onto legacy systems, but as partners in a new civic operating model.

This is what the AI-Human Partnership Charter is all about: a local social contract between people and technology. A clear set of expectations, boundaries, and cultural norms for how we make AI work for us, not the other way around.

## 4.1 Our five guiding principles

*“These aren’t just design rules. They’re cultural commitments.”*

Principle	What it means	Practical example
<b>Augment, don’t automate</b>	Use AI to assist human insight, not to eliminate human roles	A housing officer uses an AI copilot to flag tenancy risk but still chooses the human-centred response
<b>Transparency by default</b>	Every AI suggestion, prompt, or decision must be explainable, auditable, and open	Officers can click “why this prompt?” and see the data, logic or historical pattern that led to the recommendation
<b>Control stays human</b>	People remain accountable for all legal, ethical, or financial decisions—AI is always advisory	No AI can issue a fine, deny care, or assign a home without human sign-off
<b>Bias is everyone’s problem</b>	Bias isn’t a technical bug—it’s a shared responsibility across suppliers, staff, and services to detect, discuss, and address	Local “data stewards” review dashboards for exclusions and flag underrepresentation in audit reports
<b>Shared benefit</b>	AI must demonstrably improve time, wellbeing, decision quality, or equity, and those benefits must be felt by staff and residents alike	If AI saves 4 hours a week, staff decide how to reinvest that time, e.g. in preventative calls or home visits

These five principles are the spine of the new operating system. They ensure we don’t lose what makes councils human: care, empathy, accountability, in the rush to digitise. And they help us focus on what AI does best: pattern spotting, admin elimination, contextual support. Not judgment, not care, not trust. Those remain proudly human.

## 4.2 The new roles in a human–AI ecosystem

*“Think of this as your council’s new workmate ecosystem. These roles are not jobs, they’re functions fulfilled by AI tools in support of the humans doing the hard stuff.”*

Role	What it does	How it works in practice
<b>AI Copilot</b>	Summarises case data, highlights <u>risks</u> , suggests next steps	Integrated into Teams, Outlook, or CRM, presents options, not orders
<b>Insight Synthesiser</b>	Scans service data and surfacing trends and anomalies for review	Sends short weekly pattern reports to mission cells, e.g. spikes in evictions, gaps in take-up
<b>Community Translator</b>	Converts policy decisions into plain English, local dialects, visuals or voice	Provides WhatsApp updates to residents or creates explainers in Polish, Urdu, Somali etc.
<b>Policy Companion</b>	Helps staff draft, compare, simulate or audit policies using large legal datasets	Offers quick comparisons of models or flags missed implications

We mustn't think of AI as “one big system.” In the Living Council, AI works more like a team of digital companions. Some sit quietly in the background (like a whisper in your ear), while others jump in when invited (like a helpful colleague with the answers ready). Crucially, you're always in the lead.

Imagine a children's services team running a daily huddle. The Copilot quietly suggests cases that might be escalating. The team looks, discusses, decides. The AI nudges but never dictates.

At the same time, residents exploring housing options get a message, in their language, explaining the process in simple terms. The AI empowers, not obscures.

### 4.3 Ethics, governance, and trust infrastructure

*“Good tech governance isn't a tick-box. It's civic hygiene. It keeps power in check. It ensures equity. It earns trust.”*

Mechanism	Description	Frequency
<b>Ethics Board</b>	A cross-sector group of residents, staff, councillors, and data experts overseeing use	Bi-monthly, public
<b>Bias &amp; Risk Audits</b>	Technical tests and narrative reviews of AI behaviour and outcomes	Quarterly, published
<b>PEARLS Retros</b>	Values-based sprint retros using the PEARLS model (Purpose, Equity, Accountability, Risk, Learning, Stewardship)	Every 6 weeks
<b>Vendor Declarations</b>	Suppliers must sign up to the council's AI Ethics & Transparency Agreement	At onboarding + annual

Governance needs to be more than a few lines in a contract. We need public rituals of reflection, spaces where people can challenge, learn, and improve the systems we build.

That's what the Ethics Board does. It invites scrutiny. It forces us to slow down and explain. It lets residents have a say in how their data shapes their lives. And it's backed by real mechanisms: audits, check-ins, and declarations that signal: we take this seriously. Because the minute we lose trust in AI, we lose the power it has to help.

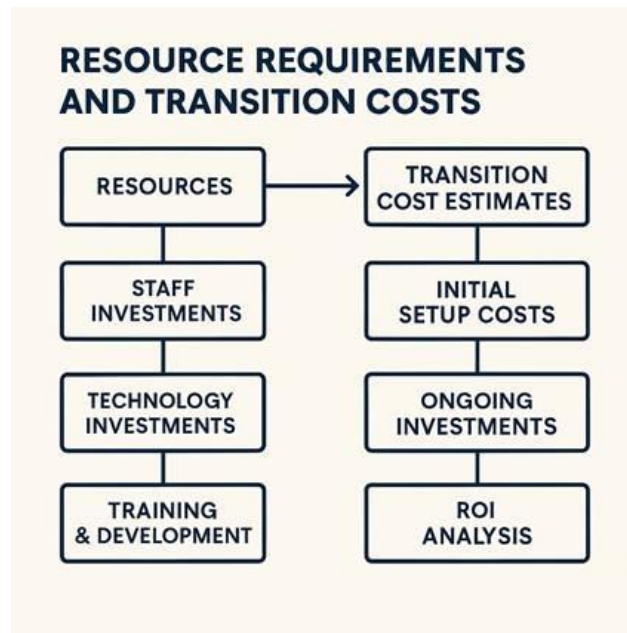
There's a lot of hype out there. But there's also a real, grounded, human way to use AI that aligns with our values, our missions, and our people. The AI–Human Partnership Charter is more than a policy. It's a promise:

- To lead with people.
- To design with ethics.
- To serve with purpose.

In the Living Council, machines don't run things: People do, better, bolder, and with tools that finally serve them.

## Part 5: Resource requirements & transition costs

*"Investment isn't an overhead. It's the bridge between the system we have, and the one we desperately need."*



When you propose a radical redesign of how councils work, the first question you get isn't "how does it help?" but "how will we pay for it?"

That's not cynical. It's rational. Local government has been backed into survival mode for so long that even talking about transformation feels risky. But we're at the point where not transforming is the bigger risk. The money we "save" by deferring reform quietly leaks out through agency fees, failed placements, B&Bs, re-referrals, broken IT, disengaged staff, and the endless cost of crisis.

So, in this section, I stop being vague and start being specific. This is the financial architecture of a Living Council: up-front investment, long-term dividends, staffing implications, funding mechanisms, and real-world examples that show why this isn't just possible, but essential.

## 5.1 Investment categories: what you spend on, and why it matters

Spend Area	Year-1 Up-front	Ongoing (p.a.)	Description
<b>Data &amp; Platform</b>	£1.2 m	£400 k	Build the connective tissue of the Living Council: cloud-based data platform, open APIs, AI licences, a civic digital twin
<b>Digital AI Academy</b>	£600 k	£350 k	Upskill the workforce through bootcamps, peer-led labs, and live product sprints; ethical literacy for all staff
<b>Mission Cell Pump-Prime</b>	£450 k	£200 k	Seeding funds for cross-functional teams to run ‘learning sprints’ focused on prevention and outcomes
<b>Governance &amp; Ethics</b>	£100 k	£60 k	Resident ethics board, audit tooling, open dashboards, and public AI explainability
<b>Contingency &amp; Change Fund</b>	£300 k	—	Flexibility for unknowns, failures, and iteration—because not everything will work first time

These aren’t IT upgrades. They’re enablers of a fundamentally different way of working. We invest in a data infrastructure that listens, a workforce that learns, teams that test and adapt, and governance that earns trust.

Yes, £2.65 million sounds like a lot. But it’s what many councils quietly spend every year just plugging holes. This, by contrast, is designed to seal them for good.

## 5.2 Three-year cost–benefit profile: when the dividend kicks in

Year	Gross Investment	Prevented Crisis Costs*	Net Budget Impact	Cumulative Savings
1	£2.65 m	£0.9 m	£1.75 m	£0.9 m
2	£1.01 m	£2.8 m	<b>–£1.79 m</b>	£3.7 m
3	£1.05 m	£5.2 m	<b>–£4.15 m</b>	£8.9 m

\* Derived from benchmarks across five authorities: reduced use of agency staff, B&B, tribunals, rework, complaints, and hospital admissions.

Like any capital investment, the first year is front-loaded. But already in Year 2, the model begins to pay for itself, and by Year 3, it generates more than double the cost in prevented spend. These savings aren’t theoretical, they come from real services spending less because they’re working earlier, smarter, and in joined-up ways.

### 5.3 Funding options: where the money comes from

Lever	Detail	Pros	Watch-outs
<b>Capital re-profiling</b>	Redirect underspend in IT or estate projects into digital prevention capital	Keeps control in-house, no new borrowing	Needs political will to de-prioritise legacy schemes
<b>Prevention Bond (or Social Impact Bond)</b>	Attract external funding tied to outcome payments (e.g. reduced hospital admission, rough sleeping)	Transfers delivery risk, appeals to ESG investors	Complex setup, needs robust impact tracking
<b>Revenue-recycling</b>	Ring-fence a % of annual cashable savings for reinvestment into future cells and training	Creates compounding impact over time	Needs Section 151 buy-in and clear governance rules
<b>Shared IP model</b>	Licence <u>locally-developed</u> AI or digital tools to peer councils	Unlocks income stream, supports SME growth	Avoids vendor lock-in if built open-source from the start

We don't need to wait for central government or new grants. We already have tools, capital re-profiling, social investors, and reinvestment loops. We just need to use them on Purpose.

### 5.4 Staffing strategy: not more staff, but better deployment

Role Group	Existing FTE Re-deployed	New FTE Required	Comment
From Line managers to Peer coaches	30	—	Transition 30% of mid-level managers into new enabling roles: coaches, stewards, insight brokers
Data & AI team	—	+8	New hires in analytics, prompt engineering, civic design; co-located with mission cells
Community catalysts	—	+6	Recruit residents to work alongside staff as liaison and learning partners
Mission cell core	50	—	Drawn from existing staff across departments; roles flex with the mission, not locked into org chart



This is not about mass recruitment or redundancies. It's about releasing trapped capacity in managers buried in spreadsheets, in caseworkers swamped by admin, in data sitting unused. We move people from oversight to insight, from command to collaboration.

## 5.5 Risk matrix: facing reality, and preparing for it

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Midway funding cliff	Medium	High	Stage-gate milestones with built-in pause points; use savings for continuity
Vendor lock-in	Medium	Medium	Build on open standards; mandate source-code access in contracts
Staff disengagement	Medium	High	Co-design missions; invest in coaching; give space to fail without blame
Political turnover	Medium	Medium	Anchor in cross-party boards and resident charters that outlast election cycles
Equity drift in AI	Low	High	Regular public audits, representative test datasets, feedback from community ethics panels

A Living Council doesn't avoid risk. It acknowledges it, prepares for it, and adapts in real time. The biggest risk isn't that something goes wrong, it's that we don't learn fast enough when it does.

### Example: AI Academy rollout

**Context:** A council's social care team is losing 15% of its experienced staff each year. Morale is low, paperwork is high, and early help is underused.

**Intervention:** The council launches a Digital AI Academy, co-designed with the local university and two local start-ups. 100 frontline staff across housing, youth, and adult care took part in 8-week learning sprints.

- They test AI co-pilots for case triage
- Build an "insight synthesiser" to flag hidden risks
- Create a council-wide prompt library
- Run a 'bias lab' with community residents

### Outcomes in Year 1:

- 30% average time saved on form completion and triage
- Re-referral rates dropping by 19%

- 4 caseworkers promoted into newly created Insight Coach roles
- 2 SMEs offered contracts to expand their tools in other councils

This isn't innovation theatre. It's real money saved, lives improved, and a workforce re-energised. The AI Academy isn't an add-on. It is the fuel for systemic change. Building a Living Council is not a vanity project. It's a fiscal strategy, a moral obligation, and a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fix what hasn't worked in decades. The numbers work. The risks are manageable. The benefits are measurable. All that's missing is the will to act, and the courage to invest in a better way forward.

## Part 6: Governance, policy & the enabling environment

*"We can't build living systems inside dead structures."*



**Table 6.1: Reimagined governance architecture**

Feature	Description	Example
Stewardship Boards	Multi-disciplinary boards guiding each mission cell, with citizen, partner, and staff reps.	A Housing & Wellbeing cell includes a tenant leader, public health nurse, and VCS rep.
Safe Harbour Oversight	Cross-party agreement to allow for early-stage failure in innovation efforts.	Scrutiny commits to quarterly reflection sessions instead of reactive call-ins.
AI Ethics Board	Permanent panel to review use of AI, algorithms, and sensitive data-sharing.	A board reviews the rollout of a predictive children's safeguarding tool.
Living Cabinet	Refocused Cabinet acting as enabler, blocker-buster, and outcome steward.	The Cabinet prioritises live metrics and system-wide learning over static performance packs.

### **Stewardship Boards**

In a Living Council, the real work doesn't happen in directorate meetings, it happens in stewardship boards that guide each mission cell. These are intimate, cross-boundary working groups that hold space for learning, sensemaking, and support. They're made up of:

- At least one resident with lived experience
- A partner from the wider system (e.g. health, police, VCS)
- A staff rep from the mission cell itself
- A learning lead to capture insight, not just outputs

These boards don't just report up. They hold power with, not over. They co-design pivots, unblock operational barriers, and make visible the learning that matters.

### **Safe Harbour Oversight**

Innovation dies when scrutiny gets weaponised. So, we need new social contracts. The Safe Harbour is a cross-party agreement (public, published and time-limited), that creates protective space for experimentation.

For example, a children's mission cell running a test on AI-assisted referrals might:

- Present learning milestones quarterly to a Reflective Scrutiny Panel
- Publish updates in plain English for residents and press
- Agree thresholds for escalation, but not default to punishment when things wobble

### **AI Ethics Board**

This is non-negotiable in a data-rich, AI-native future. The board is:

- Independent, including community leaders and ethicists
- Supported by technical and legal advisors
- Transparent: publishing reviews, challenges and decisions openly

This isn't tick-box ethics. It's active, civic, and protective. It safeguards both public trust and front-line confidence to innovate.

**Living Cabinet**

Cabinet members in the Living Council act more like gardeners than generals. They:

- Create clarity of mission
- Advocate for resource shifts
- Make blockers visible across silos
- Sponsor cross-cell insight reviews
- Act as translators between the public, services, and policy

The shift is radical but simple: from command to connection.

**Table 6.2: Policy levers required nationally**

Policy Lever	Description	Example
Prevention Data-Sharing Framework	Clear national guidance and lawful basis for cross-sector predictive work.	NHS and council co-develop predictive adult care dashboard.
Prevention Reinvestment Flexibility	Power to redirect unspent crisis funds into long-term preventative spend.	£200k unspent temp accommodation funds reinvested in outreach.
Agile Procurement for Local SMEs	Direct awards or microgrants for place-based pilots under £500k.	Local AI start-up codes anti-fraud bot with benefits team.
NJC Role Flexibility	Ability to create blended, multi-disciplinary posts supporting cross-functional work.	New “mission specialist” role combining data and family support.

**Policy lever 1: Prevention data-sharing framework**

We don't need more pilots, we need legal certainty. A national data framework co-produced with the ICO and NHS Digital would finally give councils a shared foundation to build safe, compliant, impactful models.

## Policy lever 2: Reinvestment powers

What's the point of saving £300k in high-cost placements if you can't use that money to prevent the next wave of crisis? Local flex to reinvest underspends into prevention must be formalised, not left to year-end accounting games.

## Policy lever 3: Agile procurement for local SMEs

We've got brilliant local tech talent. But they can't wait 9 months for a procurement framework to open. Councils need discretion to award under £500k to trusted partners, especially when speed and iteration matter.

## Policy lever 4: NJC flexibility

Flat structures and mission-based working don't work if the workforce is still trapped in outdated role definitions. The national pay framework must allow blended roles, like a digital housing coach, or an AI ethics steward.

**Table 6.3: Enabling partnerships and civic ecosystems**

Partnership Type	Role in Living Council	Example
System integration	Embed joint data, workforce, and budget ownership across key missions.	A mental health mission cell with shared NHS, council and VCS delivery.
Civic innovation hubs	Local marketplaces <u>where</u> tech talent co-designs tools with public service users.	A council's AI Marketplace co-develops predictive tools for social care.
University alliances	Bring applied research, ethics review, and data scientists into mission work.	University embeds PhD students into the council's prevention model.
Community co-production	Funding and empowering lived experience to shape and deliver change from below.	Early Help Board's including parents, refugees and young people.

## System integration

System working doesn't mean another Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. It means co-owned resources, shared accountability, and mutual trust.

One children's services example: a mission cell includes school leads, youth workers, CAMHS nurses and council staff, all contributing to the same KPIs, same budget envelope, and same story of change.

## Civic innovation hubs

Your Living Council should have its own AI & Insight Innovation Hub, like a civic WeWork for local talent. Think:

- £10k starter grants for problem solvers
- Digital Academy graduates mentoring VCS teams
- Frontline staff co-designing tools with students

It's not a pilot. It's an ecosystem that builds capacity in place.

### **University alliances**

Universities shouldn't just write reports. They should sit inside the cell, challenging assumptions, reviewing data models, testing causality. They're your critical friends and your learning lab.

### **Community co-production**

And at the heart of it all: people who live with the system every day. Not focus group tokenism, but genuine, funded, supported co-leadership.

That means:

- £500 stipends for involvement
- Coaching in systems literacy
- Platforms for storytelling
- Trust

## **Part 7: The 5 truths about Living Councils**

*"We've shown the map, walked the first mile, and proved the ground is solid. The only question left is: who's brave enough to keep walking?"*

## Five Truths About Living Councils



Prevention is cheaper than cure – but only if we move money early.



Trust is built in the open – dashboards, bias audits, public retros.



AI is a utility – its value depends on ethics, data quality and human judgment.



People stay when work has purpose and autonomy – hierarchy drives turnover.



Learning beats planning in complex systems – Test ▶ Learn ▶ Grow is our new rhythm.

### 7.0 Why this moment matters

- The fiscal cliff is real. Another year of salami-slicing will push vital services past the point of no return.
- AI is here. Either we shape it to serve public value or we inherit models designed for someone else's profit.
- Communities are ready. After a decade of crisis, residents are hungry for councils that listen, learn and act with them, not to them.

If we miss this window, we lock a generation into firefighting. If we seize it, we build the first truly preventative, learning-centred public institution of the 21st century.

## 7.1 The ‘four-by-four’ call-to-action table

Who	4 Critical Moves (2025-27)	4 Structural Shifts (by 2030)
<b>Local councils</b>	1 Launch three mission cells 2 Publish an open AI register 3 Ring-fence 5 % budget for prevention pilots 4 Retrain 20 % managers as peer-coaches	a $\geq 50$ % spend under outcome-based budgets b All frontline staff AI-literate c Resident Trust Index +20 pts d Crisis demand down 25 %
<b>Central government</b>	1 Enact data-sharing ‘safe harbour’ for prevention 2 Permit recycling of underspends into long-term prevention funds 3 Lift SME direct-award cap to £500 k 4 Create national Living-Council Challenge Fund (£250 m)	a Outcome-based revenue settlement model b NJC pay spine revised for blended roles c Statutory AI ethics framework for public service vendors d National prevention dividend target in CSR
<b>NHS &amp; system partners</b>	1 Second analysts into mission cells 2 Share real-time demand data 3 Co-fund Digital AI Academy seats 4 Adopt joint dashboards	a Shared prevention savings pool b Unified digital twins for place-based planning c Integrated workforce plans d Common data standards across health & LG
<b>Civic tech &amp; academia</b>	1 Open-source AI tools under permissive licences 2 Embed researchers in cells 3 Co-run bias hack-days with residents 4 Create local talent pipelines	a 20 UK civic-tech scale-ups trading internationally b 50 joint peer-reviewed papers on learning councils c Resident digital fellowships in every authority d Exportable “Living Council OS” platform



## 7.2 National roadmap: 10 milestones to hit before the general election

Quarter	Milestone	Lead	Evidence of Success
Q4 2025	50 councils publish open AI registers	DLUHC + LGA	Registers live, searchable, citizen-friendly
Q1 2026	Prevention Data-Sharing Code of Practice issued	ICO + DHSC	90 % councils adopt within 6 months
Q3 2026	£250 m Living-Council Challenge Fund awards first 30 grants	HMT + DLUHC	Public dashboard tracks outcomes & learning
Q4 2026	Procurement cap uplift enacted	Cabinet Office	500 SME pilots logged on Contracts Finder
Q2 2027	NJC blended-role framework ratified	LGA + Unions	20,000 staff migrated to cross-professional roles
Q4 2027	National Prevention Dividend included in CSR	HMT	Treasury baseline shows ≥ £2 bn crisis-cost avoidance
Q1 2028	Every ICS has at least one shared digital twin with councils	NHS England	Reduction in duplicated modelling spend
Q2 2028	Resident Trust Index adopted as official LG metric	ONS	Year-on-year uplift becomes headline KPI
Q3 2028	AI Ethics (Public Services) Act gains Royal Assent	Parliament	Mandatory PEARLS compliance for vendors
Q4 2028	100 “Living Council OS” tools exported internationally	Innovate UK	New export revenue streams fund UK civic tech

## 7.3 Closing message to each audience

- **To councillors:** Your legacy is not the number of meetings you chaired; it’s the systems you leave behind. Back mission cells and steward the conditions for learning.
- **To officers:** This is permission to be brave. Re-route the forms, publish the data, ask for forgiveness not permission.
- **To residents:** Hold us to account. Demand dashboards in plain language, insist on seats at stewardship boards, refuse black-box decisions.
- **To Whitehall:** Power is safe to share when outcomes are transparent. Loosen the reins and watch prevention bloom.

- **To civic tech and academia:** Build with us, not for us. The market opportunity lies in open, ethical, place-based tools.

I started this journey calling for a council that behaves like a living system: adaptive, ethical, and radically human. I have shown the blueprint and examples, designed the details, and mapped the policy road. Now it comes down to courage. The courage to bet on trust over control, on prevention over firefighting, on learning over blame.

Because if not now, when? And if not us, who?

# FINAL THOUGHTS



We began this journey in the shadow of old thinking, examining the false starts, expensive fixes, and bureaucratic rituals that have long shaped our councils. But through each chapter, we've slowly moved toward a future that feels more human, more hopeful, and more alive. A future where councils don't just survive, they breathe.

The **Living Council** isn't a manual. It's a **Manifesto for Practice**. A declaration that we can reimagine our local government not as a machine of compliance but as a living, learning, adaptive organism rooted in people, place, and purpose.

What you've read here isn't a theory; it's being tested in parts and in practice. Across the UK, pilots are already underway, from AI-native councils and prevention-first strategies to marketplaces for innovation and bold new operating models. These aren't grand experiments; they are quiet revolutions, led by people like you.

If this book sparked ideas, challenged assumptions, or simply made you pause, good. But even better, if it inspired action. Because this future isn't reserved for the visionary few, it's ready for anyone brave enough to try.

I'd love to hear from you. Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, student, councillor, or community leader, let's talk, let's share, and let's build this future together.

After all, a Living Council isn't just a model. It's a movement.