

# Roundtable.

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The future of resourcing  
work at Local Authorities  
with AI and Automation



# Our Panel of experts

Discuss the impact of Intelligent Automation on Local Authorities in the context of their own deployments and experiences



## Hazel Shaw.

Head of Customer Access,  
Barnsley Council



Hazel has spent over 30 years with Barnsley Council in operational and Customer Service roles, and has recently been appointed as Head of Service, focusing on Customer Access. Within this role, Hazel is leading the deployment of Intelligent Automation into the organisation.

# Faith La Grange.

Director of Local & Regional Government, Microsoft



Faith, Director of Local Government at Microsoft, has a long and demonstrated history of working in the Technology and Services Industry, and over 20 years of Local Government focus. At Microsoft, Faith's efforts centre on helping Local Authorities derive value for their staff and communities through technology.

# Richard Edmunds.

Corporate Director of Education and Corporate Services, Caerphilly Council



Richard Edmunds has over 20 years of experience in Senior Leadership positions at Welsh Regional Councils. Within this time, he has focused on a variety of transformation projects, the most recent of which is the implementation of Virtual Workers into Caerphilly Council.

# Question 1.

The government promises that we've arrived the end of austerity, nonetheless pressure on Local Governments is extreme. How do you foresee Intelligent Automation alleviating this strain?



**Hazel Shaw:** It remains to be seen whether the government's promise to end austerity will follow through, nonetheless pressure on Local Government does continue. With our resources already stretched, the challenge is to do more with our human resources to ensure we are responding to our customers' needs; specifically regarding increased pressures as a result of an ageing population. By deploying Intelligent Automation to take care of the tough to deliver yet simple transactional processes, we can free up our employees' time. That time can then be used to support those who have complex inquiries or need more help to access our services, ensuring everyone that no one is excluded. It's as simple as that.

**Faith La Grange:** I think while austerity may be coming to an end, there's no doubt that local authorities have been under severe budgetary strain for a very, very long time. Now, even if there was a pot of money to suddenly go into local authorities to relieve this strain, it would take a significant amount of time to come back from that. In addition to this, the world is changing, and the reality is that a huge amount of the pressure on local authorities is actually down to an increasing demand for their services. If you take adult social care as an example, we have an ageing population, and this demographic require an increased level and number of services, for which local authorities' budgets can't continue to stretch

to meet demand. And this is where we see an opportunity to look at technology and see how we can meet that demand and move into a preventative state rather than responding to issues only once they've occurred. This is where I see a real opportunity for intelligent automation to be introduced as part of that shift in activity.

**Richard Edmunds:** Speaking from a Welsh Local Government perspective, we continue to see diminishing budgets and contracting workforces and are still required to make multimillion pounds worth of savings year on year. Until budgets begin to grow again, we will remain under mounting pressure to maintain services, improve quality and reduce costs significantly at the same time. The vast majority of our budget is expended on staffing, and on that basis, when you are required to make savings that run into the tens of millions, it's inevitable that human resources will reduce because we simply do not have the requisite budget to keep doing things the way they have always been done. I think Intelligent Automation holds the potential to mitigate the impact of our reducing workforce while maintaining the breadth and quality of service we currently provide to our residents.

**Hazel Shaw:** One of our biggest issues is the landscape of legacy applications we're working within. The lack of technology integration not only creates a lot of work for us, but is also a real barrier to progression, change and improvement. This, coupled with the amount of time and effort associated with designing, developing and implementing a technology integration of all of these different systems is cost prohibitive: we can't achieve it. But with Intelligent Automation, we have a real, viable alternative: and that is so, so powerful to us because legacy infrastructure was one of our biggest issues. Now we can work to realize some efficiencies, which in turn will help us to improve our services in the long game.

# Question 2.

How do you foresee Intelligent Automation reshaping the ways in which Local Governments resource work?



**Hazel Shaw:** In the long term, we absolutely see Intelligent Automation reshaping the way we resource work. The ability for us to automate repetitive tasks and add value to our processes means that we're looking to human skills like empathy, understanding, awareness, and creating and developing mutual trust to support people. It's those irreplaceable tactile skills that I think by virtue of this capability will be focused more on. It's these sorts of skills that we look for in our people and will be able to place greater reliance on as we go forward as we minimise the time our staff spend on transactional in nature, day to day tasks. The years of austerity in some ways has meant that the human interaction we're capable of having with people has been reduced, and that's not right. So Automation is a real opportunity to recover some of this to really place ourselves in the position to interact with the community on a much more personal and human level.

Also in terms of developing automations because the overall interface of the [Thoughtonomy] platform is very user-friendly, we have the ability for a non-IT person with a non-IT background to actively design, build, deploy and manage automations on a regular basis. This allows us to avoid the IT bottleneck we've seen in the past. We're already seeing this within the NHS, and it just fills me with absolute awe that we could do that.

**Richard Edmunds:** Many Council resources are deployed at the front line providing face to face service, and in many ways it is these services that Intelligent Automation must protect. Using the technology to automate and streamline many repetitive back office support tasks as well as to provide front line workers with the tools to operate as multi-disciplinary customer advocates, has the potential to maximise the human resources available in the areas they are most required. I definitely think this will be a direction of travel for us; moving towards a position where as much work as possible is streamlined and automated in the back office allowing us to increase the focus of our human resources into the contact and moments that really matter.

**Faith La Grange:** I think anywhere where there is a requirement to have the real skills of the people working in local government out there with the citizen, then intelligent automation can assist. If you think about social workers, they do not go into social work to fill out forms, to do a load of administration, to manage things that could be managed on a computer or by a system. Social workers go into these roles to make a difference to people and do the front line work they're passionate about. So anywhere where there is an opportunity to take some of the laborious manual work that consumes the time

they could be out there in the community, Intelligent Automation can be at play.

**Richard Edmunds:** Our organization [Caerphilly Council] is currently going through a significant transformation programme and designing a new operating model; a big focus of which is around designing a workforce that will be fit for the future. It is now more than conceivable that this will be a blended workforce that combines the skill, insight and capabilities of our human workforce with the support of virtual workers. As part of this, we need a workforce that is equipped with the relevant skills to work alongside the Virtual Workers with clearly demarcated, yet supporting roles and tasks. Ultimately we will need to develop a workforce that is much more technically gifted and digitally capable than perhaps it has been traditionally. I think we're in a position where those digital skills have got to be high order and we've got to invest heavily in creating the right mix.

# Question 3.

The average council has on average 43 services that they deliver to citizens on a regular basis. Will IA allow them to expand that number or change the level of service they're able to provide within them?



**Hazel Shaw:** As Local Authorities, we're doing all the same things. If I shared a list of our top 10 services with another Local Authority, their top 10 list would look very similar, and this means that there are opportunities across the board. As I mentioned earlier, Intelligent Automation gives us the opportunity to deliver more people focused services and enhance those that are already in place. A great example of this circles back to my point of supporting an ageing population. There is a sizeable portion of our customers who are excluded digitally and with the increasing drive to online and digital services, there is growing concern that they might lose their ability to access services and information. It is absolutely critical that this does not happen. By freeing up our human resources to reach out to those groups within our communities, we can make sure that we are offering an alternative route to services.

There is also the opportunity to share these processes and learnings with other councils. By building that community, we open the door to being able to ask questions surrounding best practices, or how they overcame a certain obstacle and to give over the details of the processes that have meant we've been able to extend our services. What I'm most keen to look at is the opportunity to standardize and ensure we're delivering consistently. And that's something that I think the technology enables us to do - certainly

in terms of those often used. For example requesting a new bin, reporting a missed bin collection or booking an event: any of those very simple transactional activities, bound by business rules can be automated.

**Richard Edmunds:** My main challenge is to maintain the breadth of services that we deliver at present while reducing the costs and improving the quality and customer experience along the way. I believe that Intelligent Automation gives us a real chance of being able to do that and if we can achieve the stated objectives then that would be a significant result in my opinion.

That said, as part of our transformation program the council is looking to become more commercial. That could mean selling the services we currently provide to other local authorities as well as other public, private and third sector organisations. If IA delivers on its promise then it has the potential to create surplus capacity that could then be deployed on a more commercial footing.

Ultimately IA provides the opportunity for us to do what we do now, better, and to also do things for other organisations while generating income streams and revenue in ways that we have not been able to historically.

**Faith La Grange:** I think this is a very interesting question, and to be honest, I don't know that we want to push more services on to local authorities. I think local authorities already provide a pretty comprehensive service to the community. Of course, it depends on the size, shape and location of the local authority, but the reality is that they're doing everything from worrying about bin collections to looking after the most vulnerable people in our society. I think what intelligent automation provides is the opportunity to help them to realign some of the work involved in delivering those services. And that circles back to my first point around where local authorities can spend their time in terms of looking at prevention. Where can the people working in local authorities spend their time out with citizens delivering these services and doing the bit of the job that they are trained for and passionate about, in the assurance that Intelligent Automation is taking the back office burden and giving them more time to spend with citizens.

# Question 4.

What are the key considerations leaders should be taking in regard to their existing human workforces?



**Hazel Shaw:** So, the first thing for me is knowledge. Ask your workforce about their daily tasks and find out about the things that are repetitive, time consuming and ultimately stop them from adding value elsewhere. On top of that, encourage them to engage with identifying use cases and to design and create the automation. A big part of it is making sure the technology is perceived as helping them rather than replacing them, and to achieve that include people at the beginning. The knock-on effect is that it provides you with advocates who will champion the use cases they developed with you. The crux is helping colleagues to understand and demonstrate that these Virtual Workers will become part of their tool set in the same way they use One Note or emails to help them do their jobs more efficiently.

**Richard Edmunds:** I find this question a really intriguing one; and I guess that's because we're just beginning our Intelligent Automation journey. Obviously, the technology needs to be introduced delicately and sensitively and it must be developed 'with' the collective support of management and staff.

I am a firm believer in building that support through "show and tell" and being open and transparent about the potential of technology to make people's

jobs easier. One of the conversations we had early on was with our management network and it followed a demonstration of the Thoughtonomy platform. It was part of an innovation workshop and it was designed to show 'the art of the possible'.

It clearly inspired. Being able to ask "what could you do with technology like that?" and explain that it was something that the Council had invested in was fantastic. It was that meeting that really got things up and running and meant that the technology wasn't perceived as a threat, but as a tool to make jobs more fulfilling and reduce frustration.

**Hazel Shaw:** We're in the early stages of our journey and it's important we take managers and staff along with us. Ensuring their understanding of the opportunities offered through RPA is key to securing their engagement. As we walked through the early sessions where Thoughtonomy came and demonstrated the platform, they very quickly saw how this technology could vastly improve their working day and the outcomes they're able to deliver. In this way, we were able to nurture them from the early stages and encourage them not to see it as a threat. Now they're all chomping at the bit! Thanks to this, we now view Intelligent Automation as one of our enterprise applications: It's part of our digital toolkit despite being in the early stages of adoption. We definitely

recognise the important role a centre of excellence plays. It's something we're working on developing now to provide structure governance, accountability, ways of working in adoption of best practice, insurance, standardisation and so on. But it's also important for training and ongoing support to ensure that we're still supporting our superusers.

**Faith La Grange:** It's really important in any change program for the leaders to be taking their people on a journey. Intelligent Automation or any big technology change will only work if it's introduced to the organisation in the right way and if there is an organisational culture change programme underway. You only see the benefits if the process and the culture changes simultaneously. And as we have seen in the past, anything talking about virtual workers or automation can raise concerns of robots taking over and taking people's jobs, which I firmly believe shouldn't be the case. Staff need to be supported and reassured that their skills are valuable and will continue to be valued. Furthermore, those skills can start to be developed and put to wider use, by utilizing the virtual workers as an opportunity to free up time and space. So it's about taking the organization on a journey and thinking about the people impact of the technological changes you are introducing and ensuring that you're covering that off.

# Question 5.

What would you say to other leaders in the Public Sector considering introducing a Virtual Workforce into their organisation?



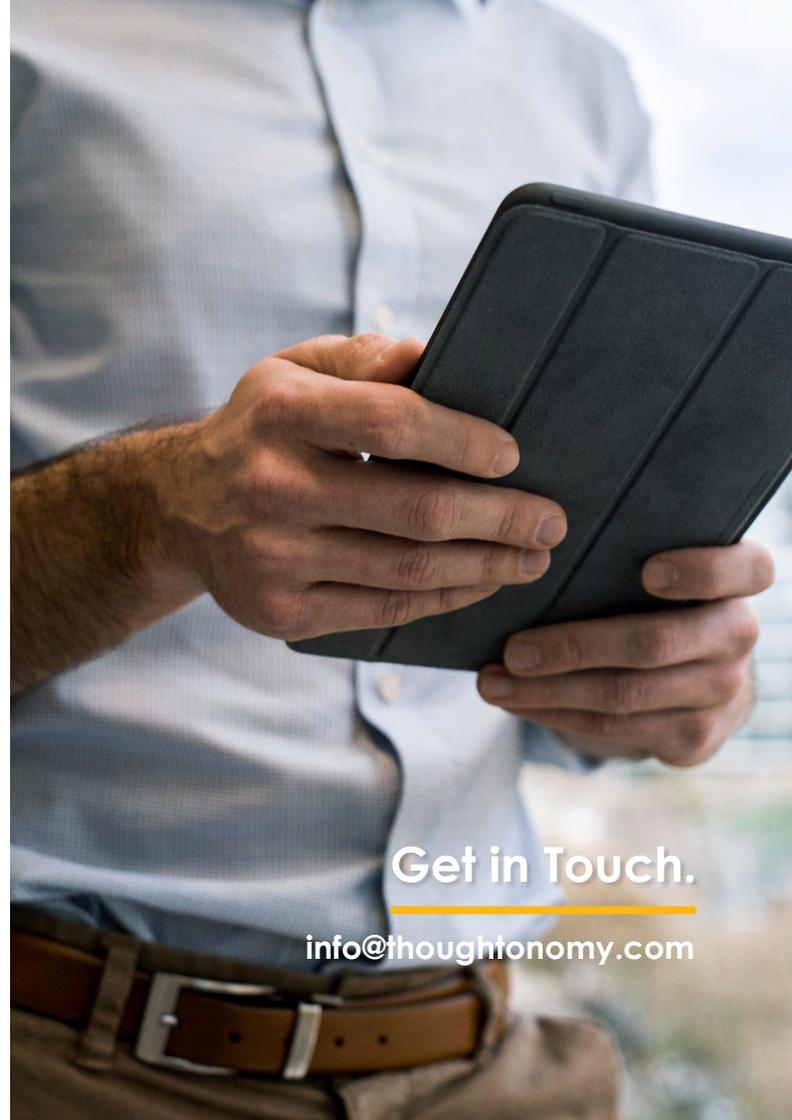
**Richard Edmunds:** I have a couple of things I think others looking to deploy automation should consider that immediately spring to mind. The first is having the senior leadership buy in; both at a political level and officer level engaged is a must. It would be impossible to run a whole organisation change programme of this nature without the mandate from the top. At Caerphilly, we've put a lot of effort into making sure our cabinet and our management team are completely signed up to this. We also encourage other leaders to come and see the technology working for themselves.

Another thing that stood out to us is not to get too hung up on automating massive processes that have multiple inputs and will involve significant change. Initially go for those quick wins to get some smaller processes up and running so that people can start to see the benefits as quickly as possible. That in itself allows momentum to be built.

**Faith La Grange:** I think the biggest thing is to speak to other organizations that have done it; whether it is specifically within the local authority arena or whether it's within other areas of public sector or even the private sector. There are lessons to be learned from any successful introduction, so don't be afraid of investigating it and looking into it. And crucially, it needs to be part of a change program that is being

sensitively handled within the organization.

**Hazel Shaw:** One of the main things I've learned throughout this process and from meeting other industry peers like Darren Atkins [from East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Trust] is not to underestimate how time consuming and how much effort is involved in undertaking simple tasks because of the cumulative impact of the volumes that you're dealing with. Across the Public Sector, our processes aren't remarkably different: the NHS have their patients; we have our customers, and there is a lot to learn from the work ESNEFT have done. I personally have been blown away with his description of what they've been able to achieve just by himself and a normal tech team, and at how quickly they've been able to build automations that are having such a big impact.



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Thoughtonomy, a Blue Prism company, delivers an artificial intelligence (AI) driven intelligent automation platform that enables organizations and the people they employ to do more and achieve more. A leading provider of intelligent, cloud-based automation, the company's award-winning Software as a Service (SaaS) platform gives companies access to a pool of cloud based intelligent digital workers that can perform the repetitive, time-intensive tasks that slow people down. By integrating this digital workforce with their human teams, companies can accelerate growth and achieve a step change in efficiency. Thoughtonomy has grown at a rapid rate since being founded in 2013, with more than 200 customers using its platform in 29 countries spread across four continents. In 2019, Blue Prism acquired Thoughtonomy, to add the SaaS offering into its wider Connected-RPA portfolio. Visit [www.thoughtonomy.com](http://www.thoughtonomy.com) to learn more.

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