

Councils invited to apply for digital funding to boost services

Councils looking to improve public services through innovative uses of digital technology can apply for funding from today (19 August 2019), Local Government Minister Luke Hall MP has announced.

Grants of up to £350,000 will be invested in projects from the government's Local Digital Fund.

Projects bidding for the Fund of up to £7.5 million must be shared by councils working together to explore how digital technology can improve public services for residents in innovative ways.

Ideas could range from making people's lives easier with more efficient, online ways to pay for services or get help, to embracing tech to support vulnerable people or making bin collections, social housing repairs and taxi licensing services more efficient.

Minister for Local Government, Luke Hall MP, said:

Digital technology is transforming our lives. From smart tech at home to apps on our phones, it's helping us to stay connected and making things easier.

Councils are on the front line of exploring how we can harness technology to improve services while saving taxpayers' money.

Today we're opening up the next round of applications for the Local Digital Fund. I would encourage all councils with innovative ideas that focus on residents' needs to apply.

Sixteen projects were awarded grants of up to £100,000 last year, with 57 councils working in teams to shape new digital services and explore the potential of modern technology.

Projects included exploring how virtual assistants like Amazon's Alexa can improve the lives of people in need of care, improving online tools for reporting social home repairs, and using data analytics and artificial intelligence to produce education plans for children with special needs.

Other areas of research included giving frontline social workers better access to information to make crucial decisions and improving software used by council planning departments.

For the projects, lead councils across the country partner with at least 2 other councils to share knowledge and ideas. This collaborative approach is a key pillar of the government's Local Digital Declaration, launched last year,

to coordinate public bodies seeking digital solutions.

The Fund is also being invested in digital skills and digital leadership training for council staff.

See more information on the Local Digital Fund, projects previously funded and how to apply: <https://localdigital.gov.uk/fund/applying-to-the-local-digital-fund/>

Only councils in England are eligible to lead on applications; councils in other parts of the UK are still eligible to partner on applications.

Applications to the Local Digital Fund close on 16 September 2019.

Projects that previously received funding were to:

- Investigate how the use of virtual assistants or chatbots, such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri, could improve the provision of care for people in need. Birmingham City Council and 2 partners were awarded £69,300 for the project.
- Look at how the government's free online payment service for government and public sector organisations – GOV.UK Pay – can be used better across councils. North East Lincolnshire Council and 4 partners were awarded £52,103 for this project.
- Discover a better way for people in socially rented homes to report housing repairs online. The London Borough of Southwark and 3 partners were awarded £80,000.
- Research how analytics and artificial intelligence can help the writing of education, care and health plans – currently a complex and time-intensive process – for children with special educational needs. Ealing Council and 2 partners were awarded £99,000.
- Unlock a transformation of town planning by working to understand problems with software and by encouraging more small and medium enterprises to support innovation. The London Borough of Southwark and 3 partners were awarded £78,000.
- Improve decision making in council's children's services departments by improving inefficient and costly processes. Greater Manchester Combined Authority and 3 partners were awarded £80,000.
- Understand the best way to enable people moving into an area to have to only contact the council once to set up all services – such as council tax, bin collections, and benefits. Sunderland City Council and 4 partners were awarded £77,000.
- Help frontline children's services workers access the information they need to assess what support to offer and judge safeguarding risk by building a prototype to view the information easily. Stockport Local Authority and 3 partners were awarded £100,000.
- Provide better and more up-to-date information for planning departments by improving data collection. Greater London Authority and 4 partners were awarded £100,000.
- Look at how registration data for births, deaths and marriages can be securely and ethically shared to improve services and reduce costs. Worcestershire County Council and 14 partners were awarded £57,500.

- Fix complexity in taxi licensing applications, saving time, reducing costs and improving public safety. Gateshead Council and 2 partners were awarded £75,865.
- Ask whether chatbots and artificial intelligence can improve the design of public services, and look at the possibility of creating a place for councils to share solutions for using such technology. Oxford City Council and 12 partners were awarded £80,000.
- Discover how local directories in councils, health bodies, police forces and the voluntary sector can be better coordinated. Adur and Worthing Council and 2 partners were awarded £78,400.
- Develop a prototype system for managing Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests that makes it quicker and easier for enquirers as well as staff. The London Borough of Hackney and 3 partners were awarded £80,246.
- Simplify the process of doing data protection impact assessments, which are a requirement in some work, by using digital and sharing the method across the country. Greater Manchester Combined Authority and 10 partners were awarded £74,900.
- Create a way of gathering information on problems and successes of waste collection services to solve local problems, educate, enforce, and improve customer satisfaction and efficiency. North East Lincolnshire Council and 1 partner were awarded £69,178.