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Unlocking Digital Excellence: Local Government Pilot Programme Evaluation

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Executive Summary

The Local Government Association (LGA), with its commissioned partner Apolitical, delivered the Unlocking Digital Excellence pilot programme to more than 50 senior local government managers from councils across England between December 2024 and March 2025. The pilot was designed to strengthen the digital capabilities of senior managers, enabling them to apply digital principles and lead teams in delivering data-driven, AI-enabled, and user-centered services.

Participants engaged in a blend of online and in-person learning, including core and elective courses, masterclasses, events, and a community of practice. Feedback from 57 participants showed strong satisfaction, with an average recommendation rating Value for Time score of 8.1 and a one-point increase in self-assessed competency against course-level outcomes, reflecting measurable growth in confidence. These outcomes measure favorably with sector benchmarks for adult learning (e.g. a [2022 *Frontiers in Education* study](#) found a mean satisfaction rating of 2.39 out of 6 across courses on the MOOC platform Coursera).

Feedback from participants indicates the programme delivered significant value for learners. Learners rated content relevance, value for time, and likelihood to recommend at an average of 8.1 out of 10. Beyond satisfaction metrics, the programme sparked deeper behavioural and mindset shifts as evidenced by the qualitative data captured in this report. Participants consistently challenged the myth that digital leadership is only for technical specialists. Many reflected on the importance of thinking systemically, seeing digital not as a siloed initiative but as something requiring joined-up action across the entire local government ecosystem.

There is clear potential to scale the programme across local government, particularly among senior managers, to support long-term culture change and sector-wide capacity building. By reframing digital not just as a technical priority but as a leadership imperative, the programme lays the foundation for all individuals to feel confident to contribute towards digital priorities across local government.

Introduction

Purpose of the Pilot

The [Local Government Association](#) (LGA), with its commissioned partner [Apolitical](#), delivered a pilot training programme, Unlocking Digital Excellence, to support councils on their digital transformation journey.

Apolitical is a global network and learning platform for government used by more than 250,000 public servants across 160 countries to share best practices, and to access critical training and tools for successful 21st century governments.

The pilot aimed to build the confidence, mindset, and vocabulary of senior local government managers who do not work in digital roles, so that they can more effectively lead digital change within their services. As part of the LGA's Cyber, Digital and Technology Programme funded by the Ministry for Housing and Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the pilot responded to a sector-wide need for digital upskilling among senior managers who sit outside of traditional digital roles.

Overview of the Pilot

Apolitical, the global network and learning platform for government, in partnership with the LGA, delivered a pilot programme called Unlocking Digital Excellence to more than 50 senior local government managers from councils across England, selected from over 170 applicants, between December 2024 and March 2025.

The programme aimed to enhance the skills and knowledge of senior local government managers, enabling them to implement digital principles and lead teams effectively in delivering data-driven, AI-powered, and user-centric solutions.

Specifically, it aimed to help senior managers:

- Build confidence in leading and contributing to strategic conversations and decisions around the adoption and application of digital approaches, balancing risk with opportunity.

- Deepen their understanding of how culture, practices, and processes can foster environments where digital teams and initiatives thrive.
- Strengthen their professional networks through a supportive peer community, enabling shared problem-solving and collaboration across councils.

The pilot programme is an adaptation of the '[Digital Excellence Programme](#)', an online learning programme created specifically to upskill Senior Civil Servants (SCS) in the UK central government with digital, data and technology skills.

The '[Digital Excellence Programme](#)' was commissioned by the Central Digital and Data Office (CDDO) and Government Skills (GS) in 2022, and has steadily expanded its reach since its launch in 2023, with more than 3,000 senior leaders to date. The programme is designed and delivered by Apolitical, in partnership with London School of Economics (LSE) and EY.

Summary of the Programme

As part of the adapted programme pilot delivered in collaboration with the LGA, two courses on building digital and data cultures were updated using local authority case studies, insights and prompt questions to better reflect the local government context.

In preparation for the adapted courses, Apolitical ran a user research sprint, guided by LGA contacts. This involved identifying several senior leaders who have been influential in embedding digital and data practices into their councils. Apolitical held 30-minute interviews with five leaders, uncovering their success stories, advice and key learnings from developing digital and data cultures within local government.

Apolitical also conducted desk research and compiled 15 case studies showcasing leading digital and data projects across various councils. These examples represented a wide range of council sizes and locations.

Strategically placed 'Local Government Voices' textboxes integrated, impactful quotes from these senior leader interviews throughout the course.

Learners could choose AI and user-centered culture courses as electives. Overall, learners gained access to:

- an adapted version of the Digital Excellence Programme (four courses in total).
- three online events hosted by Apolitical – designed in partnership with the LGA with expert speakers from the UK.
- a private peer learning Community of Practice.
- an exclusive in-person roundtable event (with options for Manchester and London) hosted by Digital Excellence Programme Partners LSE and EY.
- a contextualised article, setting the scene for leading digital transformation in local government.
- access to Apolitical Digital and Data Skills Diagnostic.

Evaluation Approach

In agreement with the LGA, Apolitical adopted a comprehensive approach to Evaluation. The Kirkpatrick model is a tool widely used in and outside government to evaluate and analyse the effectiveness of a learning intervention. The four levels of the model are: Reaction, Learning, Behaviour, and Results. For the pilot, these levels were used as follows:

- **Reaction:** Measured learners' initial responses through Value for Time and Net Promoter Score.
- **Learning:** Tracked self-rated competency (1 to 5 scale) against course objectives at the start and end of the course.
- **Behaviour:** Assessed perceived changes in daily work through post-course survey responses and follow-up interviews.
- **Results:** No long-term impact claims were made due to the short timeframe; future follow-up surveys (e.g. at 6 or 12 months) are recommended.

These levels informed the key evaluation questions:

1. How did learners respond to the training?
2. How much did the learners learn from the training?

3. Have the learners applied what they learned from the training?
4. What insights did we gain from designing and delivering this pilot?

The data collection methods for the workshop included:

1. Baseline survey (x1) (completed prior to the programme)
2. Short post-course survey at the end of each course (x4)
3. Longer, holistic endline survey following the capstone event (x1)
4. One-on-one qualitative interviews

Pilot Results

Key Results for Reaction

Learners' reactions were assessed across all four courses using three key metrics: Content Relevance, Value for Time (VfT), Recommendation Rating, and course features ratings with a total of 57 responses received.

Content relevance

To measure content relevance, participants were asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how relevant was the content to your work duties?" The average score was **8.1** out of 10, indicating strong alignment with learners' professional responsibilities and needs.

Value for Time

For VfT, learners responded to the question, "On a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent was this course a valuable use of your time?" This also received an average rating of **8.1** out of 10, suggesting that participants thought the programme was highly worthwhile – particularly important for busy senior managers balancing competing priorities.

When broken down by event, the VfT scores were:

- **7.6** for the capstone event
- **7.9** for the online masterclass
- **8.8** and **9.3** for the two in-person events

These figures point to the importance of in-person and synchronous opportunities to engage, especially for complex, leadership-focused content.

Recommendation rating

To gauge recommendation likelihood, participants were asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this course to a colleague, friend, or family member?" Again, the average score was **8.1** out of 10, reflecting a high level of overall satisfaction and confidence in the programme.

Course features ratings

In addition, participants rated various aspects of the courses on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated insufficiency and 5 signified excellence, as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Course features ratings from Apolitical post-course surveys – average across all four courses (based on 57 responses).

As this section has shown, the programme received consistently strong feedback across all core metrics, which is an encouraging endorsement from senior managers with high expectations and limited time. The consistency of high ratings across diverse course elements reflects a well-designed and well-delivered learning experience, establishing a solid foundation for wider rollout.

Qualitative Insights

Participants were asked what key takeaways they could share (via one-on-one interviews). Three key trends emerged:

- **Leadership and culture are inseparable from digital, data, and AI.** Many participants came away with a renewed understanding that conversations about digital aren't just about tech. They're fundamentally about people. The programme underscored how deeply leadership behaviours and organisational culture shape, and are shaped by, digital, data, and AI efforts.
- **Systemic thinking isn't optional; it's essential.** A strong theme was the need to think beyond individual teams or organisations. Participants reflected on the programme as a reminder that real digital, data, and AI progress demands a collective, joined-up approach across the whole local government system.
- **Digital, data, and AI belong to everyone.** The programme helped dispel the myth that digital, data, and AI are just for the tech-savvy. Participants found it empowering to see how these themes can, and should, be embraced by non-technical colleagues, reinforcing that inclusion is key to digital progress.

Key Results for Behaviour

To assess behavioural changes, two primary methods were used: an effectiveness rating (quantitative) and testimonials (qualitative). Both methods reflect participants' perceptions of how their future behaviour would change, which implies that results should be taken with caution.

To measure the overall effectiveness of the course, participants were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent they feel they are more effective at their job as a result of the course. In total, 57 responses were received across the four courses, and an average of **7.4** out of 10 were calculated for all four courses.

Participants were invited to provide descriptions of how they will apply what they have learned. In terms of examples of what participants have learnt, participants mentioned:

- **Challenging the “tech expert” myth.** The Building a Digital Culture in Government course helped dismantle the common assumption that digital leadership is only for technical specialists.

Learner quote: “It has helped me **dismiss the myth** I had created for myself that **I needed to be a tech specialist to be a digital leader**. It has confirmed that I am on the right path, [and] I have the right mindset. I wasn’t aware of all the resources available. That has been useful for future use. It has made me think about how I can **further create a culture of innovation**. One way I am going to do this is by **embedding agile business case development**.”

- **Sparking new questions.** Rather than offering a fixed playbook, the Building a Digital Culture in Government course encouraged learners to ask better, more strategic questions. It gave space to explore the tensions and opportunities that come with leading digital and data change in complex environments.

Learner quote: “**Extremely thought-provoking** – challenges the way we as a council operate our business change model and encourages me to challenge the dominant traditional financial culture that slows down and stops digital and non-digital change.”

- **Learning that cascades.** Participants from the Building a Data Culture in Government course aren't keeping their insights to themselves. Many are actively sharing and embedding what they've learned with their teams.

Learner quote: "The course has been really interesting and helped to develop my thinking on elements such as data standards, data sharing and how **I can develop my team.**"

- **Growing confidence in action.** Learners in the Building AI Confidence in Government course are already applying what they've learned, experimenting with generative AI tools in everyday tasks, testing what's possible, and building confidence through hands-on experience.

Learner quote: "I'm **more confident to use AI** to help **summarise documents, capture actions** from meeting transcripts, and for **drafting initial templates.**"

- **Spotting opportunities through a user-centered lens.** Learners from the Building a User-Centered Culture in Government course shared that they see their work differently. They're identifying more opportunities to apply user-centered design.

Learner quote: "I can look out for user experience as we go through **implementation of a new ERP system** next month."

Key Results for Learning

To assess how much participants learned from the workshops, a two-part approach was employed. First, participants were asked to complete a baseline survey where they rated their proficiency in relation to the learning objectives for each course and the programme's objectives on a scale of 1 to 5. Then, after completing the courses, they were asked to fill out an endline survey, where they re-evaluated their competencies. This allowed us to estimate a subjective measurement of learning gain. Second, insights were gathered on their learning through qualitative questions, inquiring about their key takeaways.

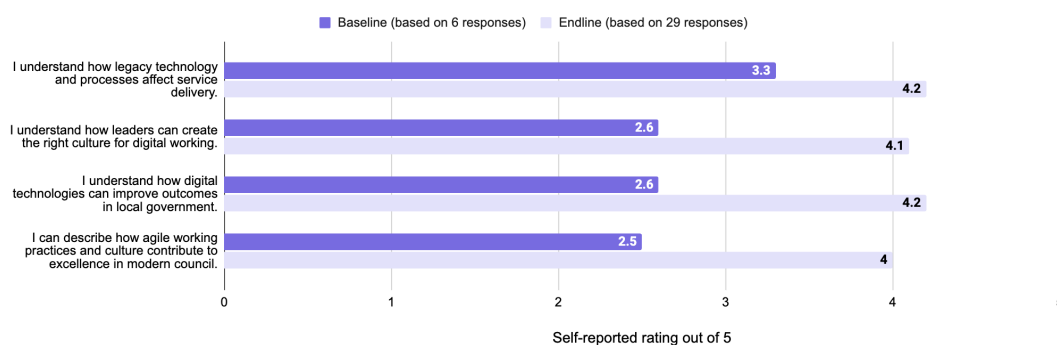
The survey results indicate that while participants reported increased confidence in the topics covered, their perceived learning gains were more modest. This distinction

may reflect the nature of the programme and the specific focus of its content, underscoring the importance of using both subjective and objective measures in future evaluations.

For each course, learners were asked to rate themselves against the course-level outcomes on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates they are novices in that area and 5 indicates they are experts, as shown in figures 2 to 5. (Given the difference in sample sizes between baseline and endline responses, the scores reflect aggregate data, providing a group-level view rather than tracking individual progress over time).

Participants reported consistent increases in confidence across all digital-related learning outcomes, with the largest gains in digital leadership and agile working (see Figure 2). This suggests the course helped senior managers feel more confident to drive digital change through culture, not just technology.

Figure 2: Confidence across digital-related learning outcomes



Participants confidence grew across all four data-related outcomes, particularly fostering data-curious teams and navigating data ethics (see Figure 3). This reflects the course's effectiveness at building confidence to lead strategic, inclusive data work.

Participants reported the largest confidence gains for AI-related learning outcomes, out of all four courses – especially in recognising AI risks and benefits and identifying how generative AI can support public service (see Figure 4). The course helped senior managers feel more confident to explore AI responsibly in a local government context.

Figure 3: Confidence across data-related learning outcomes

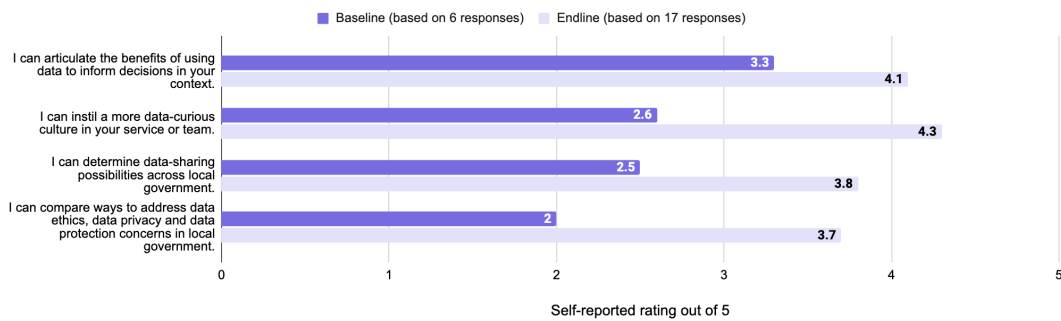
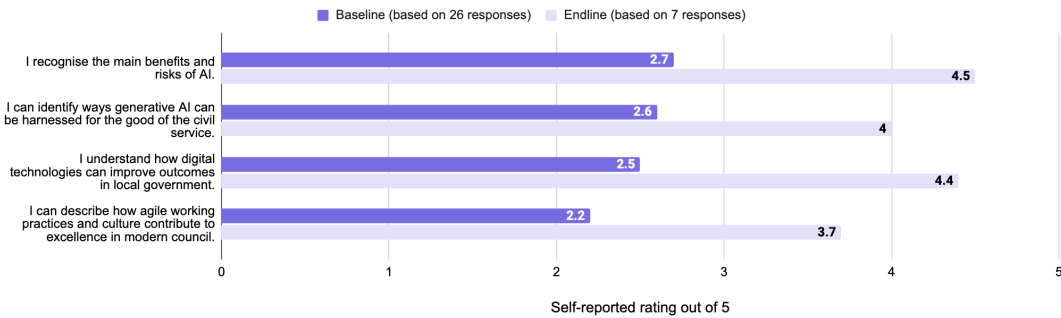
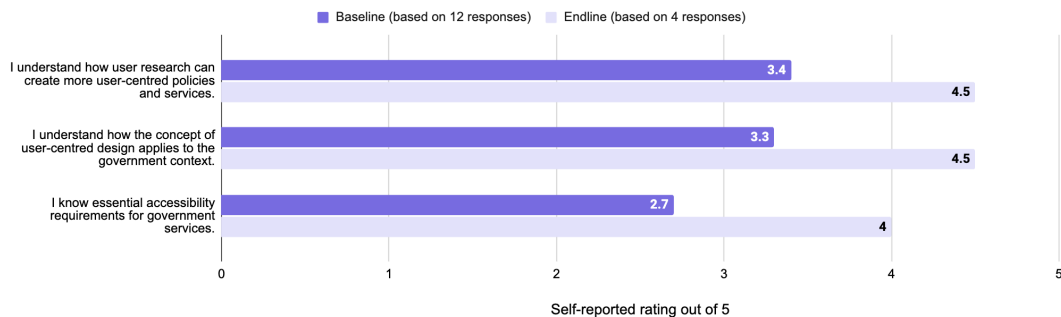


Figure 4: Confidence across AI-related learning outcomes



Participants reported increased confidence across all learning outcomes related to user research, with particularly strong gains in applying user research and understanding user-centered design principles (see Figure 5). The course successfully strengthened senior managers' confidence to embed user needs and accessibility into service design.

Figure 5: Confidence across user research-related learning outcomes



Key Lessons from the Pilot

Lessons Learnt Summary

Overall, the key takeaways from the pilot relate to the positive reception of the Unlocking Digital Excellence programme and ways it might be improved for future iterations. They also highlight the skills, attitudes, and organisational buy-in required for effective training reception, as well as the potential to scale access to the training more broadly.

Some of the key lessons from participant feedback are:

- **Overall relevance for LGA.** The programme was generally perceived as useful and applicable to participants' roles, and the curriculum worked well, with a mix of courses, events (online and in-person), case studies, and online discussion forums.
- **Content and delivery.** Potential improvements suggested by participants include more in-person sessions and/or more time to interact with each other, more interactive aspects/social learning, more case studies, and in particular, more open discussion of setbacks or what hasn't worked (and what lessons were learned).
- **Skills and attitudes.** The programme raised the importance of skills and attitudes, including a desire for broader, systems-level thinking. Participants value this and wanted to see them emphasised in the programme content.
- **Scalability.** As the pilot programme was suitable for a wide range of senior managers, the programme could be scaled for delivery to all local government senior managers to drive culture change and knowledge building across the local government sector.
- **Evaluation.** To better estimate changes in behaviour, it would also be important to follow up with a questionnaire six or twelve months after the training has taken place.

Quotes from Learners

'I was quite reassured by [the programme] because I am in **no way a techie**, and when I first looked at it, my initial worry was that this was going to require a level of

technical knowledge and skills that I don't feel confident in. But what I found – and was quite reassured by – was that the **resources approached it from a strategic leadership angle**, and the **tech was secondary to it.**'

'It was opening up what is happening in the world and why it is important to be digitally informed, but from a point of view of giving you some reassurance as well and some safeguards. Sometimes you worry about things like working in public service: you're worried about how I do this and still ensure that information governance requirements are covered and all of those types of things are covered.'

'I think [the programme] was more about **how it supports your decision-making** because, particularly people in my position, get lots of products being thrown at you. How do you decide which product is going to make a difference for you and your organisation? I think some of the things that have been presented through the two [mandatory] modules are actually really helpful for that because they **started very much from what is it you're trying to do rather than these are the different types of tech that you might want to use.**'



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