What's the Problem?

Notes from SLCC Management In Action conference workshop June 2022

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July 2022

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A report by Ian Morris FSLCC

4th July 2022

I had the honour of presenting a 'What's the Problem' workshop as part of the second day at the SLCC Management In Action conference (MIA) in Kenilworth on Friday 10th June 2022.

The workshop was intended to update colleagues on progress made at the 7th April 'Supporting Local Council Clerks' workshop in London and to test the 'problem statements' that emerged from that event

This report provides a summary of the output from the MIA workshop and is intended to feed into ongoing work on this subject in coming months as we look to make progress on the top 3 or 4 problem statements as identified by colleagues at MIA.

Figure 1: working well together in the 7th April London workshop

Figure 2: the author of this report paying avid interest to a workshop presentation on day 1 of MIA on 9th June

Methodology.

The 7th April London workshop and the follow-up session at MIA on 9th June were intended to deliver the 'empathise' and 'define' stages of the 'Stanford Design Process' - a creative design methodology that is particularly suited to coming up with innovative solutions to 'wicked problems'. You can read more about the methodology in my blog here: https://bit.ly/37LP9qx

Reflection on the output from the two events.

My blog about the 7th April workshop can be viewed here: https://bit.ly/3yF37ox and the notes from the workshop activities can be viewed here: https://bit.ly/3NIA5sm

That 7th April workshop identified a 'long-list' of 9 'problem statements' that relate to the working lives of Chief Officers/Clerks of larger Local Councils. Colleagues at that initial workshop agreed that we should test these problem statements with a wider audience of senior colleagues from our sector, which we did via my blog and also at the MIA conference. We have now shortlisted this down to four leading problem statements that we'll take forward as a group of senior practitioners over the coming months.

The two events also identified two broad personality archetypes/personas with quite different approaches/attitudes to some of the key ways that we work, such as in-person or remote meetings, use of new technology, appetite for change, etc. We need to make sure that we continue to recognise, respect and celebrate this diversity of personality types as we move forward with this work.

Next steps

This report and the linked blog will be used as a 'call to arms' for senior colleagues in the sector to step forward and either lead or get directly involved in work to take the shortlisted problem statements forward.

This will be achieved through virtual and/or face-to-face sessions will be held to continue through the Stanford Design process through 'Ideation' and the 'Prototyping' of potential solutions.

Notes from the 9th June workshop activities.

The first participation exercise from the 'What's the Problem' workshop was an individual exercise based on the personality personas identified in my blog here and illustrated below:
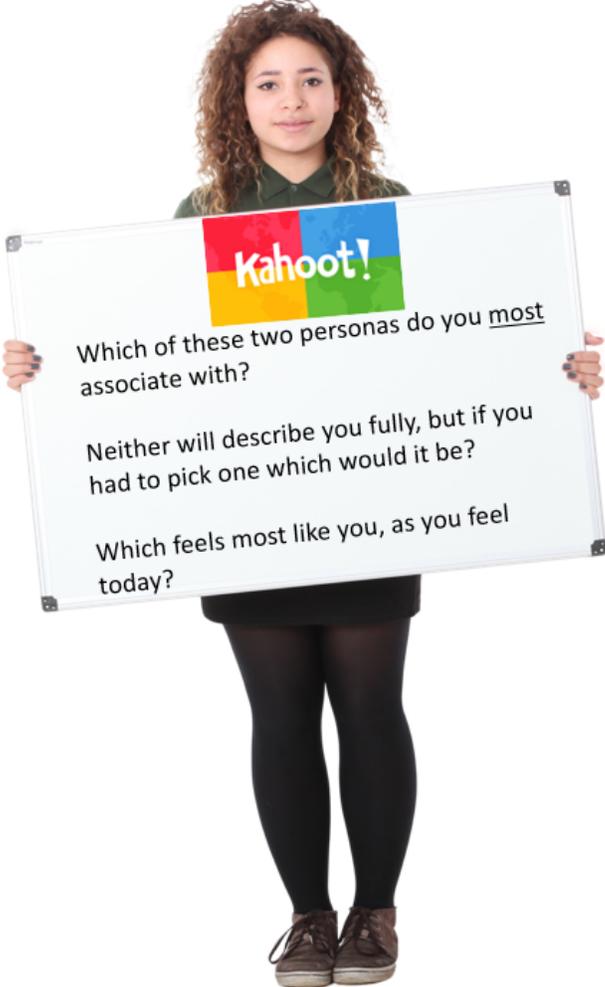
Persona 2:
More outgoing;
More likely to be described as others as curious;
enjoys new technology;
values new experiences;
often more interested in the journey than the destination;
enjoys change;
enjoys open discussions and challenging/being challenged.

Persona 1:
More reserved;
Tends to be wary of new technology;
task-orientated;
often more interested in the destination than the journey;
prefers set routines;
less comfortable openly challenging people and being openly challenged.

Which of these two personas do you most associate with?

Neither will describe you fully, but if you had to pick one which would it be?

Which feels most like you, as you feel today?

For more info on how we reached these persona profiles see Ian's blog
It takes all sorts! Thoughts on the diversity of personalities in Local Council leadership... at: https://iamianmiam.uk

Figure 3: a copy of the slide used during the 9th June MIA presentation asking colleagues to choose a preferred persona

Workshop participants used the Kahoot! Polling tool to vote for which of the two persona types they felt best represented their personality type. The results provide interesting food for thought:

Which of the two personas do you most associate with?

Persona 1
41%

Persona 2
59%
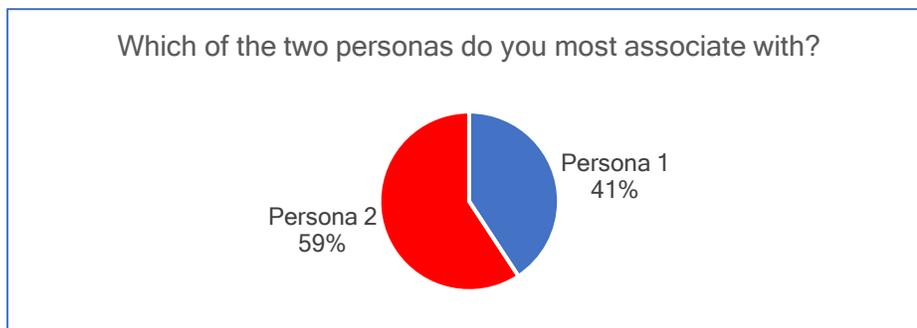
We are most certainly not a homogeneous flock of clone Clerks!

Which of the problem statements do you think are most important?

The second participation opportunity was a group exercise with tables of 5 or 6 colleagues discussing the 9 problems statements. Colleagues had took around 20 minutes to talk through their thoughts and feelings about the problem statements that had emerged from the 7th April London workshop and to agree a 'top 3' set of problem statements which they then fed back to the room in a roving mic session.

The problem statements discussed were:

	Problem Statement
1	How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?
2	How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?
3	How can we as a sector articulate our needs and wants more effectively so that we know what our solutions are rather than dwelling on the past and perceived problems?
4	How can SLCC better provide personal/professional development skills development for Clerks of Larger Councils in order to increase well-being, effectiveness and community benefit?
5	How can SLCC and NALC help to improve the quality and status of our sector by providing more relevant direct support that better reflects the different requirements of larger councils?
6	How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?
7	How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?
8	How can we enable our Councils to allow sufficient 'slack resources' and staff capacity to take forward good ideas without squashing their ability to innovate, helping to manage expectations and reduce staff stress levels?
9	How can we improve the understanding of the work of larger Town councils amongst smaller parish clerks so that we can support & share valuable resources for the benefit of our residents, visitors, etc?

The results from the table discussions are provided on the next page, with the top 4 problem statements emerging as:

1st	How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?
2nd	How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?
3rd	How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?
4th	How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?

These four problem statements will be shortlisted as priority problems to be addressed by working groups of senior practitioners from our sector.

Figure 4: table summarising ranking scores of problem statements from table group exercise

Rankings by tables	1st (5pts)	2nd (3pts)	3rd (1pt)	total points
How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?	4	0	0	20
How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?	2	1	2	15
How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?	2	1	1	14
How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?	1	1	1	9
How can we enable our Councils to allow sufficient 'slack resources' and staff capacity to take forward good ideas without squashing their ability to innovate, helping to manage expectations and reduce staff stress levels?	0	2	0	6
How can SLCC and NALC help to improve the quality and status of our sector by providing more relevant direct support that better reflects the different requirements of larger councils?	0	1	1	4
How can we as a sector articulate our needs and wants more effectively so that we know what our solutions are rather than dwelling on the past and perceived problems?	0	1	0	3
How can SLCC better provide personal/professional development skills development for Clerks of Larger Councils in order to increase well-being, effectiveness and community benefit?	0	1	0	3
How can we improve the understanding of the work of larger Town councils amongst smaller parish clerks so that we can support & share valuable resources for the benefit of our residents, visitors, etc?	0	0	3	3

It is worth noting here that any practitioner can choose to take action on any of these problem statements if they choose to and many of them are certainly worth solving! The shortlisting process is merely intended to help us to focus our efforts on those problem statements that seem to hold the most value for us personally and collectively.

The non-shortlisted problem statements may well make subjects for future SLCC conference sessions or articles in The Clerk and colleagues are encouraged to consider how they might pick these up in the future.

Where's the value for <u>you</u>? What will <u>you</u> commit yourself to?

The third and final participation exercise was an individual polling activity using the Kahoot! software where colleagues were asked to indicate whether they were personally willing to commit their own time and energy to contribute to solving each of the problem statements.

The results of this individual exercise did broadly mirror the feedback from the previous group exercise in which the problem statements were shortlisted. The problem statements that were prioritised by the groups of colleagues also received the most 'thumbs up' positive confirmation from individual practitioners that they would commit their time and energy, and those with the least priority from the group exercises also received the fewest positive 'thumbs up' responses.

In terms of the 'top 4' problem statements the individual votes were as follows:

|	I am willing to commit my time and energy to resolve this problem...	👍	👎
1	**How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?**	26	9
2	**How can larger Local Councils better promote our work to increase our perceived value to principal authorities and enable more devolution of resources/services?**	29	7
3	**How can we get access to Central Government funding on a task and finish basis to deliver the best value for money for our community?**	25	11
4	**How can I stop Councillor micro-management of staff to improve staff morale and reduce sickness absence?**	20	17

Next Steps: taking the priority problem statements forward

This report will be shared with colleagues who attended MIA and the wider SLCC population via my blog site and, hopefully, a article in a future edition of The Clerk (TBC).

I have committed to leading on the '**How can we break free from the restrictions imposed by legislation that is at least 50yrs old and well past its useful working life?'** problem statement and have already made some early connections with colleagues around this topic. I will be sending out a further call to action on this topic at the end of July 2022 with a view to holding a number of virtual meetings as well as at least one physical workshop/meeting before the SLCC National Conference in November 2022.

We will continue to use the Stanford Design Process methodology, as we move into the Ideation and Prototyping phases where we brainstorm radical ideas, get creative on potential solutions, and try things out! How would we re-write the legislation? What would a Council meeting look, feel and sound like in a future where the archaic LGA '72 is a thing of the past?

Figure 5: the ideation and prototyping stages of the Stanford Design Process
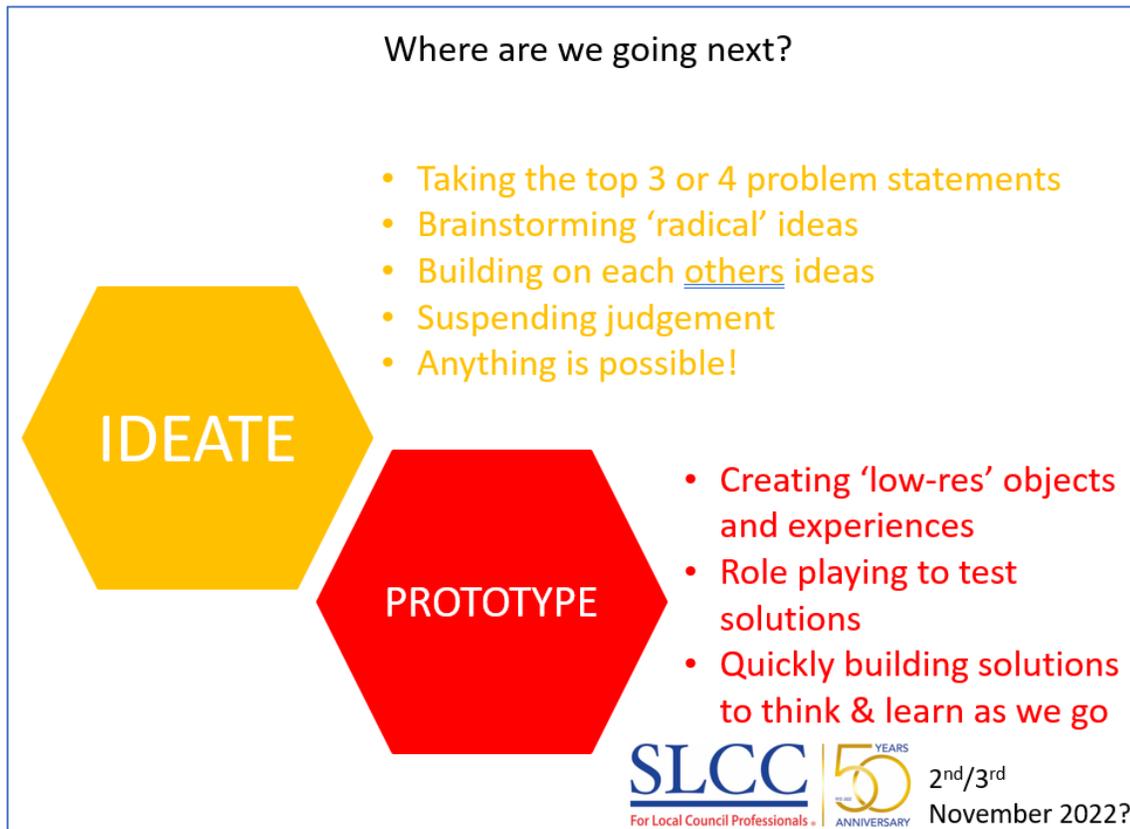
As to the other 3 priority problem statements…well..that's up to you, Dear Reader! Twenty or more colleagues who attended MIA expressed their personal commitment to contributing to taking these problem statements forward and this would suggest that dozens, probably hundreds more colleagues nationally have an interest in seeing these problems resolved.

So, please come forward. Step up. Make yourself known. I am happy to act as a support for any colleague(s) who wish to lead on one of the other priority statements, particularly in relation to the methodology that I'm recommending that we use.

If you do have an inkling that you would like to lead on one of the other problem statements please do get in touch for a 'no obligation' chat about it!

And please, make yourself a cup of whatever takes your fancy and take the time to read and interact with my blogs on this subject.

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