

SUTHERLAND
SHIRE COUNCIL

DIGITAL REPORT
2020



How Sutherland Shire Council met the challenge of COVID-19

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HOW SUTHERLAND SHIRE COUNCIL MET THE CHALLENGE OF COVID-19



Simona Dimovski, CIO at Sutherland Shire Council, discusses a two-year technology transformation that was achieved in two weeks COVID time, and how this was made possible with the support of its digital ecosystem

The future is always untold for all of us. And, in this instance, what was in store for Sutherland Shire's new Chief Information Officer was nowhere in her 30/60/90 day plan. Last November, nobody outside of China had any inkling of what mother nature had in store for the world, in the form of a pandemic that would disrupt lives and the economy of every country. But, when Simona Dimovski took up the post of Chief Information Officer at Sutherland Shire Council (SSC), COVID-19 was third in line after a couple of other natural disasters to afflict New South Wales. In November 2019, the world's attention focused on the bushfires that raged through southern Australia. Sydney itself was threatened, and fires started close to home. Until mid-January when the rains came, the fires remained a cause for concern. However, early in February the area experienced its heaviest rainfall in 30 years. People had to be evacuated and, by 18 February, wind gusts reached 161kph causing widespread chaos and electrical outages.



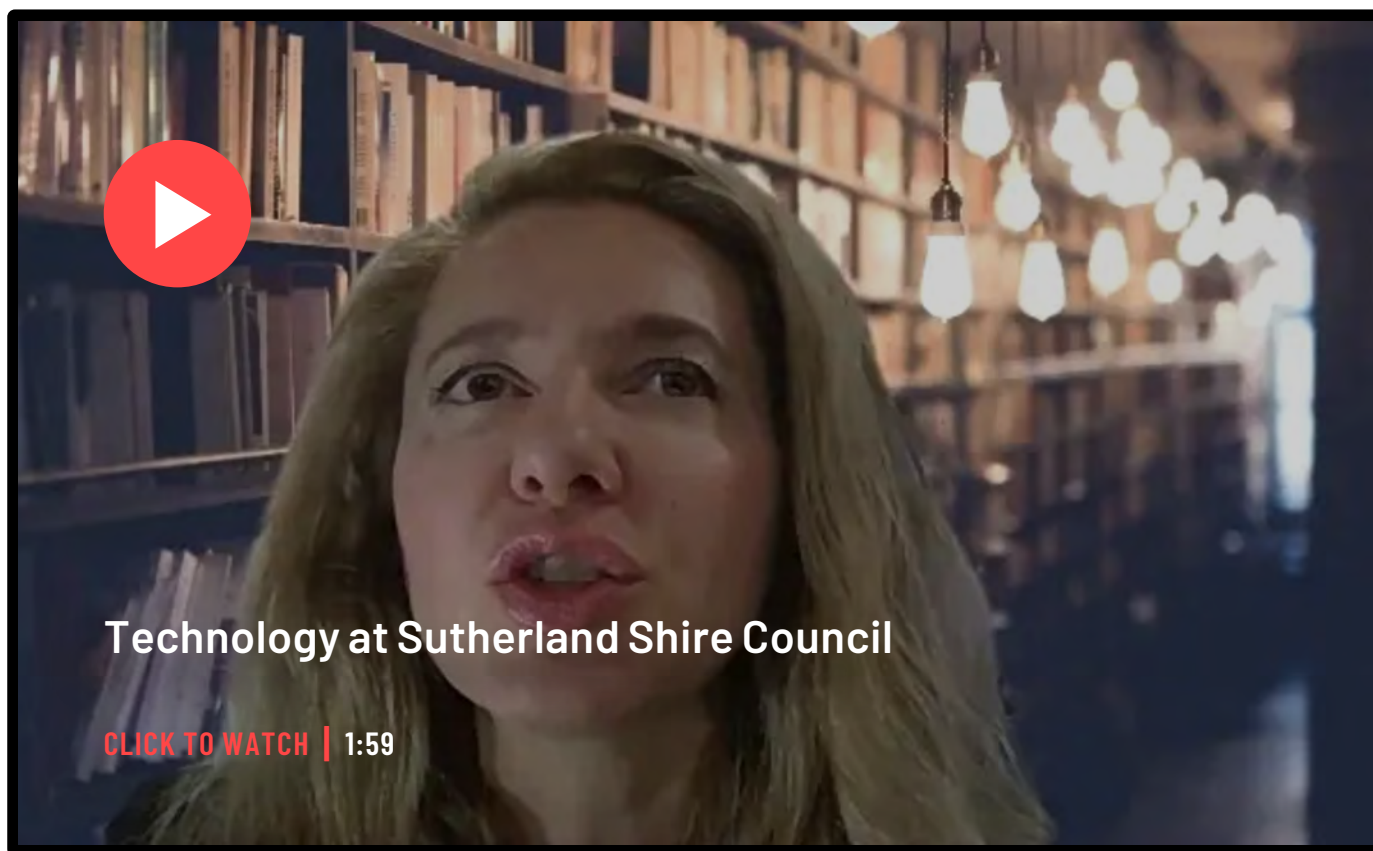


“After 19 years in aviation, financial, and latterly the utilities industry, I found that the services SSC provides were very different – but many of the services IT provides to the organisation are similar”

Simona Dimovski,
Chief Information Officer,
Sutherland Shire Council (SSC)

In her previous work as ICT Project Service Manager at Ausgrid, Dimovski would have had her work cut out helping keep power supplies going, but her first two months at SSC, dealing with the same problems from a totally different perspective were certainly challenging – and COVID-19 had not even started. Yet it was the diversity of the challenge posed by local government that attracted her. “After 19 years in aviation, financial, and latterly the utilities industry, I found that the services SSC provided were very different





– but many of the services IT provided to the organisation are similar. Maybe 80% of what we do can be applied across multiple industries,” Dimovski explains. Indeed, with more than 30 semi-autonomous business units, from leisure centres to libraries, children’s services to environmental and of course business services that is just as well, she notes.

Technology is not the day job of most people in the council. “Our people embrace technology that will enable them to work lean,” says Dimovski. “When it comes to servicing

our community, technology is something we do in the background, it has to be an enabler for productivity and in some cases we didn’t get that 100% right. There was a lot to do. A good deal of legacy IT infrastructure is on-premise, located at the Council’s own data centre; it even has its own telephone exchange. One of the first things I did was to stock-take – reviewing the IT strategy, governance, architecture, the infrastructure, the IT operations and enhancements, as well as the projects. A backlog of the latter had built up – more than 170

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Supporting accelerated project delivery

PM-Partners have worked with local councils for 25 years, helping them deliver projects faster, better and with less risk. Their intimate knowledge of government organisations, structures and functions enables them to provide fit-for-purpose solutions that benefit cross-functional teams – as well as the greater community.

Sutherland Shire Council provides a broad service offering to their community. Delivering this requires multiple business units to collaborate to avoid a siloed structure which can present challenges such as inefficient operations and disconnected cross-functional teams.

Even before the pandemic, Simona Dimovski, Manager of Information Management and Technology at Sutherland Shire Council, recognised the need to mobilise teams faster, implement change management and roll out new collaboration tools in order to build a high-functioning, results-orientated team.

Engaging project management and business agility experts

What differentiates PM-Partners from other consultancies is their partnership approach. They listen, assess and develop a tailored solution that best achieves the organisation's objectives.

When Sutherland Shire Council engaged their services in November 2019, they were unaware of the momentous changes ahead. But by having agile foundations ingrained in their organisations, they could accelerate in three weeks what would previously have taken six months.



Watch **Simona Dimovski** from Sutherland Shire Council discuss the challenges they faced amid the global pandemic and how their strong focus on agile mindsets enabled them to pivot.

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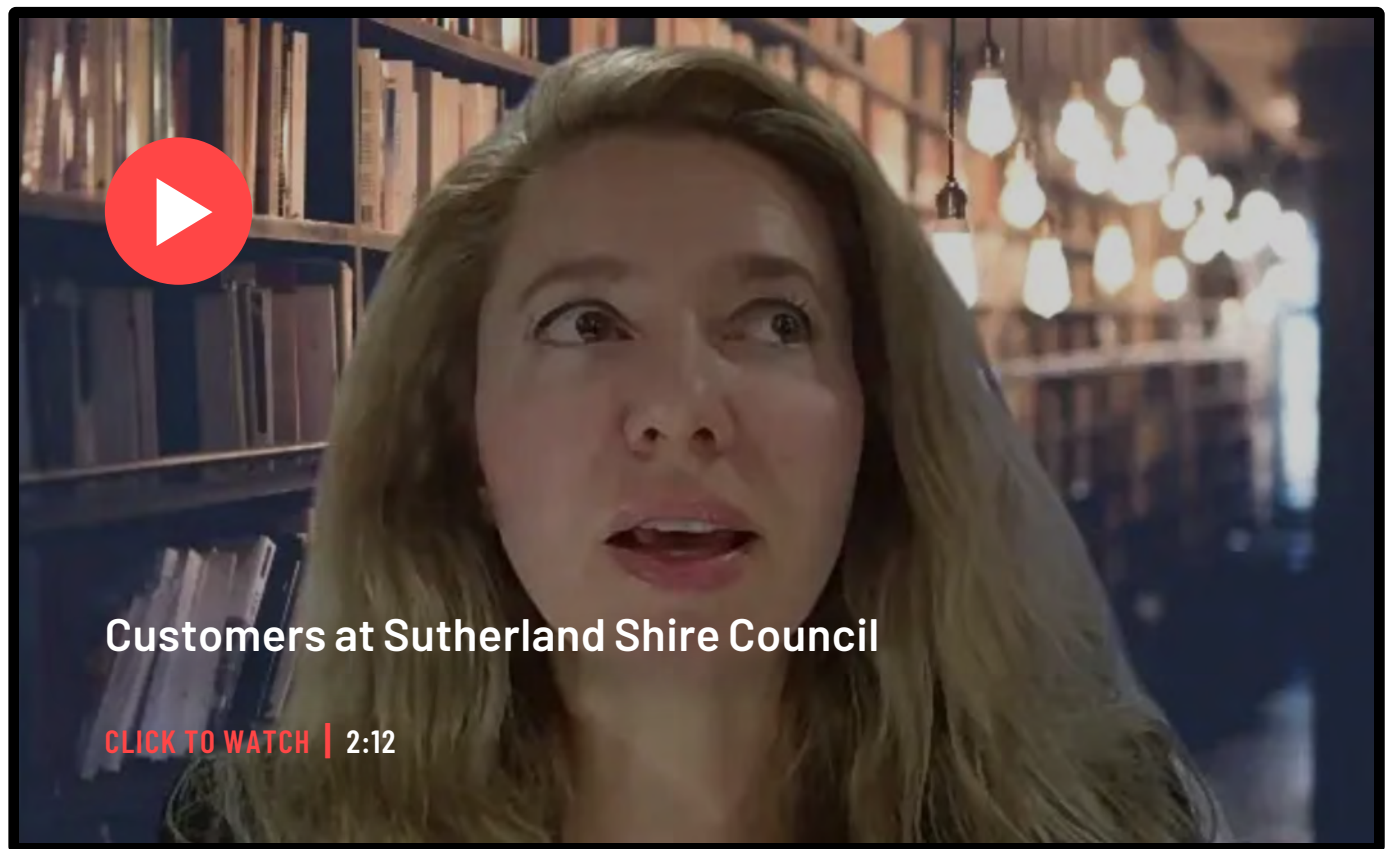
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Simona Dimovski,
Chief Information Officer,
Sutherland Shire Council (SSC)

that would be classified in the realm of small to extra large projects, spanning between 20 days and over 18 months to complete.”

To unravel all this called for the long-overdue evolution of IT to be set in motion. To achieve this, Dimovski and her team built a model of demand and capacity which pointed to implementation timeframes that would take over two years to complete, at best. But then the most unexpected turn of events occurred. The arrival of the Coronavirus in March, with the

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consequent and sudden shift to home working for the vast majority of staff mandated an accelerated approach to delivering mobile working solutions.

“We had to move at lightning speed, ready to respond almost instantly to directives from the federal and NSW state governments,” Dimovski explains. “We had to ensure that the whole business was working remotely, implementing Microsoft Teams and getting people used to that. Virtual council meetings had to be set up. We deployed every member of the IT

team to the rest of the business, getting them together in daily huddles to see how the master plan we put in place might need to be modified as new guidelines came through.”

As well as collaboration tools, Dimovski implemented a VPN so that the whole organisation could log in remotely, adding dual-factor authentication. Remote working was a new concept for a large population, and at all levels of the organisation and the community. IT team members were available to set up the hardware

EXECUTIVE PROFILE:



Simona Dimovski

Title: CIO

Company: Sutherland Shire Council

Industry: Local Government

Location: Sutherland

Simona Dimovski is a strategic leader with extensive knowledge of how technology enables business value and growth. Her expertise has been gained over 20 years of enabling portfolios and delivery across technology and business functions.

She has a proven track record of streamlining processes, reducing costs for the organisation, and enabling the successful delivery of large-scale transformation programs.

A strategic thinker with a passion for what she does and seeing things through to completion, Simona leads from the front, engaging and energising strategic partners and stakeholders as well as the wider business in supporting high impact, dynamic solutions to deliver business value.

Integral in aligning portfolios to the strategic objectives of the organisation, her focus is on continuous improvement and empowering businesses to reach their full potential, encouraging innovative thinking enabling best practice through the use of technology. She is a people leader with a growth mindset, priding herself on providing a coaching approach to ensure the team and the individual achieve their full potential.





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and software needed and iron out any problems with flexible working. Softphones were brought in to allow service teams to deal with calls when working remotely. The ‘high-intensity, high-touch’ movement and change management process led by the IT department was completed in less than four weeks, quite an achievement considering that MS Teams implementation was among the queued projects and that, before March, nobody had used it. Dimovski is already predicting that the new normal for SSC

post-COVID-19 will be a hybrid of physical collaboration and remote working. Local government is one of those sectors, like law and real estate perhaps, which had been slower to move up to the digital plane.

She is quick to acknowledge the role played by third parties in this process, in particular PM-Partners, noting that “they came to me with a myriad different solutions and gave us the level of support we needed at that time”. Dimovski is a positive leadership advocate, specifically embracing the

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ideology that the team is the greatest asset she has as a leader. Empowering the team to agility and lean ways of working was paramount for the success that was to be achieved during the accelerated COVID-19 response at the council. “In recent years, my team has not had much opportunity for external training, they were invigorated by the new agile concepts, the fast turnaround time, the delivery of value in increments, the radical transparency and the dissolution of traditional hierarchical structures of working,” she says.

By the time of Dimovski’s arrival at the organisation, SSC had already fixed on a ‘cloud-first’ strategy for

any new implementations, and much progress has been made even during the pandemic exigency. For example, a new booking system and a new project portfolio management (PPM) system currently being built will reside in the cloud, and of course MS Teams is also cloud based. “We are going to reassess all our on-prem software platforms,” she notes. “In the past a full migration had been thought too expensive, but IT’s value proposition going forward won’t be just about the back-office operations, rather it will be about the specialist knowledge we bring to the business as a whole.”

The PMO approach she had previously followed at Ausgrid was something that Dimovski also aimed to pursue at the council. “I wanted to overview every piece of work whether in the pipeline, on hold, in flight or requested so we could work out the sequencing through portfolio prioritisation and partner with our business on what really needed to be done given the resources we had. This level of governance was novel to IT, and a Portfolio governance Committee was born as a result. We knew there



would be a large change management effort to normalise remote working, as many of our organisational stakeholders were not that tech-savvy.” Procurement and configuration of hardware, training, embedding collaboration tools, softphones, the VPN and pinning down dual factor authentication made this look like a two-year programme of work.

But two years was not an option when the virus struck. “We had to think up creative solutions,” Dimovski notes. “So, it was about considering ‘how

could we chunk down what we said we would do in two years when we need it right now?’. We formed a resilience group with the other council managers to revise our disaster recovery and business continuity plan. Within IT a 25-person strong resilience group was established to plan for the new reality. We created a movement, a single unit with a single purpose. Nobody once said ‘this can’t be done!’.”

On the tech side, they upgraded internet links to deal with the expected increase in traffic. Once they had chunked down the tasks of getting Teams, the VPN, licensing and other prioritised IT, it didn’t take too long to get these in place, Dimovski says. “We had to fast track solutions that were needed immediately, making sure the security was in place and fixing issues as they arose.” There were a few hurdles, resolved in very short order, with full cooperation from the end users. In the end, the original two-year programme was actually delivered in three or four weeks.

Preparation for this achievement was however started back in January. Before then, she explains,



the IT teams stuck to working in traditional silos. “Coming into this role, I expected it would be 50% about people and 50% about technology. I quickly realised that being a technology leader is more about the people, than it is about the technology.”

Challenges with interdepartmental communication meant the IT team and their stakeholders were not necessarily getting full value and actions, there were multiple handover points, manual processes and large reliance on key people. As an accredited Agile professional, with an aptitude for Human Centered Design, seasoned in Scrum



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and SaFE experience, Dimovski has worked with Sydney-based PM-Partners to start training Council employees in Agile methodology. “We had already started breaking down the silos and shifting mindsets. By the time COVID-19 arrived PM-Partners had started training our IT resilience group. Everything we are working on, we are running in sprints and adopting Scrum methodology. The whole purpose of this is to create transparency and better decision making



1906
Year founded

1,400
Number of
employees

across the business, be able to deliver value faster to our stakeholders and the community.”

Looking forward, the IT team’s to-do list is growing rather than shrinking. In a hybrid world, with people working remotely as well as in the office, new conferencing facilities will need to be created, meeting rooms upgraded with new hardware and software. The whole workforce has to get used to mobile working and to tools like Microsoft Surface devices – bringing

long-term plans forward. Customers too need to embrace new ‘COVID-19-accelerated’ ways of interacting with the Council in a customer omnichannel approach enabled by an upgraded website and social media.





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