



# Why Digitalization is NOT on the Local Political Agenda

## - Findings From Danish Local Governments

Kenneth Kristensen<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

Digitalization is at the very centre of recent development of local government processes, services to citizens, and even democracy. Nevertheless, digitalization is almost absent from the local political agenda in the most likely case of Danish local governments, which constitutes a democratic problem because important priorities are then taken outside of the local political system. Existing quantitative research on setting policy agendas fail to explain why digitalization is not on the local political agenda. A qualitative approach is applied and exclusive insights from interviewed mayors and CEOs are presented. Four main barriers are identified blocking digitalization from the local political agenda: Political role perception, lack of interest, lack of insight, and risks. Further the need of policy entrepreneurs and problem recognition are suggested as additional explanations to why digitalization is not on the local political agenda.

### Keywords:

local government;  
city council;  
mayor;  
CEO;  
policy agenda;  
digitalization

### Practical Relevance

- The lack of digitalization on the local political agenda poses a democratic problem.
- The four main barriers blocking digitalization from the local political agenda are political role perception, lack of interest, lack of insight and risks.
- To overcome the barriers it is found particularly important to take point of departure in practical welfare tasks and that the executive management performs the role as policy entrepreneur.
- It is also found important to gain citizen support and build political consensus on digitalization.

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<sup>1</sup>[Kenneth Kristensen](#) is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark. His research focuses on top leadership of digitalization in the public sector. Kenneth Kristensen has previously held executive management positions in four Danish municipalities.

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## Introduction

Waves of digitalization roll over the public sector, and a vast research field on e-government has been conceptualized as the use of information technologies in government for the provision of public services, the improvement of managerial effectiveness, and the promotion of democratic values and mechanisms (Gil-García and Pardo 2005). Inspired by the definition of Mergel, Edelmann and Haug (Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug 2019) digitalization is in this study broadly defined as the shift from analogue to digital data, processes, and services. This definition is used because unclarity of the concept of digitalization exists among both researchers and practitioners (Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug 2019; Wirtz 2022) and a broad and simple definition facilitates communication with a wide set of interview respondents.

Digitalization was at one stage in the Digital Era Governance literature expected “to completely embrace and imbed electronical delivery at the heart of the government business model, whenever possible” (Margetts and Dunleavy 2013, 6). The e-government literature offers insight into public digitalization, but

our theoretical understanding of technology in the public sector is still very limited (Meijer, Bolivar, and Gil-Garcia 2018; McCarthy, Sammon, and Alhassan 2021). The policy agenda literature describes how political agendas are formed. Nevertheless, the combination of digitalization and the local political agenda seems understudied, which is supported by a search on Web of Science finding no relevant articles. This article contributes to the policy agenda literature with first hand empirical evidence to fill the gap of understanding why digitalization is not on the local political agenda.

Digitalization is a technical matter, and politicians will not typically take part in the choice of technology or daily management of digital solutions which are run by digital managers. However, digitalization also involves decisions with clear political or public value aspects, which cannot entirely be delegated to for instance the Chief Information Officer (CIO) (Andrews 2019; Bygstad, Lanestedt, and Iden 2019; Schou and Hjelholt 2018). Examples of relevant political decisions are prioritizing resources to large digital projects e.g., self-driving public buses, format of service delivery e.g., feeding robots instead of human helpers to disabled citizens and assessing ethical dilemmas e.g., algorithms to detect socially vulnerable children. These tasks would in most liberal democracies be expected to be nested at the core of the political realm. Besides, digital services for citizens come with the price of a digital divide between citizens with or without digital capabilities, limiting access to public services and participation in democratic processes for vulnerable citizens (United Nations 2022). Hence, politicians have a very important democratic role in digitalization, for instance to set goals, make financial and ethical priorities, and ensure citizens' access to services and democracy.

Digitalization has spread far in many countries and national policies, strategies and regulation have been outlined (United Nations 2022; Schou and Hjelholt 2018; Fleron, Pries-Heje, and Baskerville 2022). However, this does not imply that digitalization has been implemented locally (Fleron, Pries-Heje, and Baskerville 2022) nor that it has entered the local government political agenda. Some questions e.g., personal data protection are in Europe regulated internationally by the European Union, other strategies are nationally outlined in Denmark (Schou and Hjelholt 2018), but according to the Danish Constitution and the Local Government Act in Denmark a very significant degree of local self-government is delegated to local governments in Denmark (Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior 2019, 2014). This implies that local governments in Denmark have both wide competences and obligations to decide on if, how, and why to apply digital technologies.

Despite the democratic relevance, it is easy to get the impression that local councillors in Denmark rarely engage in digitalization. The Danish municipality of Gladsaxe is an illustrative example. This municipality is among the digital frontrunners in Denmark (Kristensen 2022), which in 2022, 2020, and 2018 was ranked the most digitalized public sector in the world (United Nations 2020, 2022). However, even in Gladsaxe the issue of digitalization is rarely politically discussed (Kristensen 2022). The Finance Committee in Gladsaxe Municipality is responsible for digital solutions. Based on a full review of records from the Finance Committee meetings in 2021, the committee had a total of 345 agenda issues of which four had digitalization as a main theme, 16 had digitalization as an aspect, and 325 had no mentioning of digitalization at all (Gladsaxe Municipality 2022). This indicates a low presence of digitalization at the local political agenda, which is an observation broadly confirmed by the high level interview respondents of this research study representing 14 different Danish local governments and the validation committee of this study representing other 11 local governments.

The low level of political engagement in digitalization is puzzling given the democratic importance of the issue. Hence, this article will pursue the research question: *Why is digitalization NOT on the local political agenda?*

The research question will be investigated in the context of Danish local governments. Besides Denmark being a public sector digital frontrunner, Danish local governments have a century long historical record of elected local councils, who are responsible for the vast majority of welfare tasks and 48% of the total Danish public expenditures in 2020 (Statistics Denmark 2021). Consequently, local governments in Denmark are one of the main decision makers on public investments in digitalisation, which have implications for local government employees, services to citizens, and even democracy.

Flyvbjerg argues that selecting the most likely cases allow for the argument “If it is valid for this case, then it is valid for all (or many) cases” (Flyvbjerg 2006, 230-231). Despite a low presence of digitalization (in absolute terms) on the local political agenda in Denmark, the Danish local governments should be regarded as a case, where it is most likely (in relative terms) to find digitalization on the local political agenda. Danish local governments are worldwide frontrunners in public digitalization, have a high degree of local self-government and use many resources on digital technologies. This ought to make digitalization especially critical at local political agendas in Denmark. Other countries not possessing these characteristics would be expected to have a lower presence of digitalization at the local political agenda than Denmark. Hence, following the argument of Flyvbjerg on most likely cases, the barriers identified for digitalisation to access the agenda in Danish local governments are likely to be found also in many other countries.

This article first summarizes existing research on setting policy agendas focusing on Kingdon’s streams model (Kingdon 2011) and factors explaining agenda stability and change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen 2018; Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022) etc. Secondly, the method section outlines the steps and choices taken in the qualitative research approach, data collection, data analysis, and validation of results. Thirdly, rich empirical details and quotes are offered to sustain the findings on the main barriers of digitalization on the local political agenda. Fourthly, the findings are discussed against existing policy agenda theory and other relevant theory. Finally, conclusions and contributions are summarized.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This section first defines the term “agenda” and then outlines different theoretical perspectives on setting the policy agenda offering clues to possible answers to the research question. Lastly, the use of theoretical perspectives in this paper are presented.

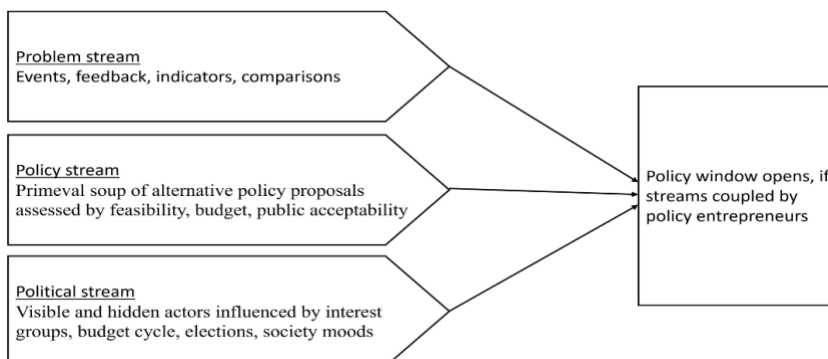
Agenda is understood as “a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point of time” (Dearing, Rogers, and Rogers 1996, 2). This could be the agenda of a city council meeting, where the hierarchy of importance is crucial, because there is a certain limit to how many issues can be dealt with at one meeting. The rich policy agenda literature researches the competitive process and the factors influencing which issues arrive at the policy agenda. This is important because:

Attention is the scarcest currency in politics and the most in demand [...] The consequence is that the prioritization of which problems to address and which to ignore is as important or more than the questions of which decisions to make once the agenda is set. (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022, 1).

## Perspectives on agenda setting

From one perspective Kingdon’s seminal “streams model” in Figure 1 outlines problems, politics, and policy proposals as three streams in the agenda setting process (Kingdon 2011).

*Figure 1. Kingdon’s streams model*



Source: Illustration of Kingdon’s streams model (Kingdon 2011).

The problem stream concerns the recognition and definition of problems arising from events, feedback, indicators, comparisons, etc. The political stream is formed by “visible” political actors and “hidden” government bureaucrats, consultants, researchers, etc. bargaining for attention to their pet issues, and influenced by interest groups, budget cycle, elections, and moods in society. The policy stream offers alternative policy proposals from a “primeval soup” of solutions, which are assessed by criteria such as technical feasibility, budget constraints, and public value acceptability. When these three streams are coupled, a window of opportunity opens for policy entrepreneurs to set the policy agenda (Kingdon 1993, 2011). From this perspective the issue of digitalization is in competition with other issues to get at the local political agenda. To succeed, digitalization needs to address widely acknowledged problems, present feasible policy solutions, achieve political backing as well as having policy entrepreneurs to couple the streams and seize the opportunity of an open policy window.

From another perspective, stability and change of issues at the policy agenda are explained through longitudinal studies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen 2018). According to the punctuated equilibrium theory, policy agendas are generally found stable with slow and incremental changes disrupted by larger bursts of change, which are triggered by changes in institutions, attention, and bounded rationality by decision makers (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2012).

The “politics matters” literature has studied the political parties’ influence on the executive policy agendas across country settings with no evidence that party colours of government systematically affects the policy agenda (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Mortensen 2011), but that the opposition is more free to set new agendas than the government in the Danish Parliament (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). However, Mortensen, Loftis and Seeberg find empirical evidence that the policy agendas over time respond to the changes in public problems such as the rise of the climate issue (Mortensen 2011).

In one of few studies specifically focused at the local government level Breeman, Scholten and Timmermans find that although the national level sets the institutional conditions, the “local factors” are of great importance to which issues enter the policy agendas in Dutch municipalities (Breeman, Scholten, and Timmermans 2015). Baekgaard, Mortensen and Seeberg find that “bureaucracy matters” to the political agenda setting in Danish municipalities due to the professionalization of the bureaucracy in western political systems (Baekgaard, Mortensen, and Bech Seeberg 2018). This latter study draws on a large longitudinal data set covering the city council agendas of all 98 Danish municipalities 2007-2016, which is also the basis for the examination of four types of explanatory variables: Institutions, problems, elections, and actors (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022). It is found that the attention to a specific issue of local politicians in Danish municipalities are influenced by jurisdiction size, societal problems, competition in council, and committee structure, but that there is no systematic effect of parties, the mayors, or the city managers on the policy agenda (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022). This may be a bit surprising given the importance attributed to key decision makers by Kingdon among others.

### **Use of theoretical perspectives**

This study applies an essentially inductive but theoretically informed research approach, as also inductive approaches are based on prior theories and assumptions (Miles and Huberman 1994). This implies that the empirical findings are the starting point, whereas theory is used to discuss and explain the findings.

Various theoretical perspectives are applied. Kingdon’s streams model (Kingdon 2011) is used as a lens to understand the empirical findings in an actor-oriented process perspective. The literature on agenda stability and change formulated by Baumgartner and Jones (Jones and Baumgartner 2012; Baumgartner and Jones 1993) contributes with an outline of key factors influencing the policy agenda. Mortensen, Loftis and Seeberg (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022) contribute with the finding that especially structural factors are important in a Danish local government context. Hence, this study applies both a structural and an actor-oriented process perspective because both lenses are found useful to explain different parts of the empirical findings.

The vast majority of the agenda literature is founded in the tradition of comparative, data rich, quantitative research with very few examples of case studies (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022). This constitute a challenge, because the conditionality and complexity of the agenda setting process is so high that “no generalization is possible” (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 113). Regardless of the position to this methodological critique, it highlights the need for more qualitative empirical research to supplement the quantitative findings with more context, colours, and perceptions of real-life witnesses. This study contributes with qualitative empirical findings on why the exact issue of digitalization is not on the political agenda in Danish local governments.

## **Data and Methods**

It is relevant to apply an inductive and qualitative approach when little is known in academic research about the specific research question (Miles and Huberman 1994). The voices and experiences of the key actors are therefore used as a starting point of this inductive but theoretically informed research study.

In Denmark the division of tasks between politicians and administration is very blurred (Andersen et al. 2019; Storgaard and Hansen 2021). According to the Local Government Act and practices in Denmark, the agendas of meetings in the city councils and committees are proposed by the administrative organization after having received agenda issues from elected councillors, and after consultation with the mayor or respective committee chairman (Ministry of Economy and Interior and Local Government Denmark 2017). This process of agenda setting is not public. Hence, this study is based on qualitative interviews with a sample of mayors and CEOs providing an exclusive insight into the themes and factors influencing the agenda setting of digitalization and a comparison of political and administrative perspectives.

### **Selection of respondents**

Denmark has 98 local governments with the same legal tasks but of very different size and capacity. As local society problems matter (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022), it was chosen to stratify for geographical representation by interviewing one local government mayor and one local government CEO from municipalities located in each of the five Danish regions.

The respondents were not selected randomly but with the aim to benefit from respondents with maximum insight. Danish local government CEOs have formed a national association (KOMDIR). First, the chairmen of the five regional branches of KOMDIR were approached, because these chairmen were expected to have the best overview of the status of local governments within their respective region in addition to knowledge on their own local government. Three of the chairmen accepted interviews and two suggested another board member of the regional KOMDIR branch, who were also CEOs of local governments. Secondly, using the snowballing method (Miles and Huberman 1994), the five local government CEOs were asked to suggest a local government mayor within their region for interviewing. The suggested mayor should be from a different local government and likely to have viewpoints on digitalization. Third, following the first interviews with CEOs, four other local government CEOs offered themselves for interviews, and they were included in the sample to further saturate findings and conclusions. In total, the interview sample consisted of five mayors and nine CEOs from 14 local governments distributed all over the country with between approximately 21.000 and 69.000 inhabitants, and each with their unique composition of local societal problems, degree of political competition, and committee structures previously mentioned as the factors influencing the local policy agenda (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022).

### **Data collection and analysis**

The 14 interviews were semi-structured, and all conducted online during 2021 due to the Covid lockdown, see appendix 1. The respondents were beforehand introduced to the purpose, themes, and use of data from the interviews in writing. This was repeated in the oral introduction of the interview, which also aimed to establish a confidential inter-personal relation challenged by the necessity of the online format. Apart from the introduction, the interview guide consisted of

three topics 1) status and extension of political engagement in digitalization, 2) experienced or perceived barriers (and drivers) to digitalization on the local political agenda, 3) differences to other issues. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed. Key words and statements were thoroughly noted and immediately after the interview summarized in memos. The software tool Nvivo 1.6.1. was used to structure and keep overview of transcriptions, memos, and the coding process.

The transcriptions were systematically coded with support from the memos and using open and inductive thematic coding and applying Boyatzis principles for good codes (Boyatzis 1998). The data analysis was done through an iterative process of data collection, reduction, display, and conclusions as suggested by Miles and Huberman (Miles and Huberman 1994). Searching for themes and patterns, 11 initial theme codes were identified and reduced to four theme codes outlined in the final coding scheme, see appendix 2.

To validate the preliminary and draft findings, these were twice presented at workshops for comments from a committee established by Local Government Denmark (LGDK - the National Association of Local Governments in Denmark) composed by LGDK experts, local government directors, and CIOs from 11 local governments not having participated in the interviews. In general, this committee assessed the draft findings plausible, and contributed with comments on especially a strengthened focus on the (lack of) support from the executive management, not highlighted so much in the first draft.

Furthermore, the draft findings were presented for local government practitioners at a series of closed sessions. Comments were included in the iterative process of analysing and transforming the qualitative data to results. In summary, this research project is based on empirical insights from high-level representatives from a total of 25 out of 98 local governments and LGDK as well as a range of other practitioners.

## Results

In this section the empirical results are presented. First, the barriers are identified, and their mutual influence outlined. Next, empirical responses to whether digitalization is different from other issues are presented. Finally, similarities and differences between the responses from mayors and CEOs are examined.

The interviewed mayors and the CEOs broadly confirmed the very low presence of digitalization on the local political agenda. However, the interviews showed expected differences between the local governments, where some had more political engagement in digitalization than others.

The interviews demonstrated four key barriers offering explanations of why digitalization is not on the local political agenda: Political role perception, lack of interest, lack of insight, and risks. As spelled out and exemplified in further details below, the barriers are about politicians and to some degree administration staff not perceiving the political level to have a role in digitalization, the councillors lacking interest and insight in the issue. Further, digitalization is also perceived to involve risks for the political level.

### Identified barriers

#### *Political role perception*

Several respondents reflect on perceptions of the political role as a reason why digitalization is not on the local political agenda. Especially the group of mayors hold the principle that politicians should focus on visions and strategies and abstain from technical aspects and implementation.

It is not a political task to consider using infrared cameras or sensor floors in the elderly centres. That we should leave to administration and maybe later have a dialogue with the citizen and their relatives, but we should as laymen local politicians not paralyze the organization by entering the professional space (Mayor A).

We run 48 kindergartens, so you have to relate [to them] a bit like national politicians, that is general and not go too much into detail, although what the city council wishes to be politics, that is politics (Mayor B).

The above approach leads to digitalization being mostly at the administrative agenda and only entering the political agenda on specific occasions like “budget negotiations” (CEO A), a “scandal of data leak” (CEO D), “cases of citizens having problems with digitalization” (CEO E), etc., or in local governments where digitalization is part of a larger political vision or strategy for example to attract businesses, jobs, and inhabitants.

We have seen [digitalization] as a possibility to drive the municipality into a new age. When we made our digitalization strategy, we tried to send a message to the surroundings that we are a municipality that will be visionary in this field (Mayor C).

Some of the CEOs also recognize that the administration sometimes holds digitalization back from the political agenda because it is perceived as administrative territory. Among the arguments are “politicians set goals, professionals outline a strategy to achieve the goals” (CEO A) and “digitalization contains no political ideology” (CEO B). However, one CEO critically reflects:

We should not be scared that something is political, which we sometimes get wrong administratively. We are simply waiting until [we recognize] - oh, this was the political part. We should let the politicians decide what is political (CEO C).

### *Lack of interest*

Mayors and CEOs agree that there is a very limited general interest from local politicians in digitalization. The exception being politicians with a civil job within the digital sector (Mayor A).

I experience politicians as being absolutely uninterested in initiation and results of digital processes. They are interested in digitalization during budget negotiations because digital projects always provide the cost-free money [reductions] (CEO F).

We held a thematic meeting for the council about digital efficiency, procurement etc., but nobody paid interest. If you talk about digital tools for dyslexic school children instead, then you see the light in their eyes (Mayor D).

The last quote points towards political interest being stimulated by concrete welfare problems close to the citizens rather than digitalization in abstract terms, which is widely supported by the respondents. “There is a greater interest in our day care institutions, elderly centres, and core welfare tasks than digitalization” (Mayor B). Put bluntly: “There are simply no votes in digitalization. The citizens in general do not wildly demand digital solutions” (CEO B). The unsurprising takeaway here is that the demand or resistance towards digital solutions among citizens is influencing the political interest in digitalization.

Some CEOs acknowledge a responsibility for the lacking political interest in digitalization: “Part of the rejection is because we [the administration] are not very good at making it interesting for them [the politicians]” (CEO G). Other CEOs experience it as possible to stimulate political interest in digitalization: “In my environment, I think there is more and more interest in digitalization, but it may be because we have ourselves been blowing on the embers” (CEO I).

Several CEOs and mayors agree that it is more likely to generate interest from councillors, if digitalization is linked to what difference it makes for the citizen and presented in practical formats like physical demonstrations.

### *Lack of insight*

In general, both mayors and CEOs have limited insight in digitalization.

I think the largest barrier is lack of knowledge. If you are a common councillor, you do not know what it [digitalization] is about, do you? And when you do not know, the easiest is to discuss something else, which we know something about (Mayor E).

If councillors don't really know anything about digitalization, they find the issue difficult to handle on the agenda, and they find it difficult to put on the agenda themselves (Mayor B).

Several respondents point to the relatively high average age of local politicians, 56.4 years (Pedersen et al. 2021), as contributing to the limited insight in digitalization, and they expect

new generations of councillors to have a more intuitive understanding of the issue. Others point to the councillors' personal experience with digital tools from civil jobs and private life to rapidly improve the understanding of the issue.

The CEOs acknowledge a responsibility for providing information to the councillors on digitalization:

There is the ethical, the efficiency, and the service perspective [on digitalization]. To relate to that as councillor requires some training, because it all has developed in just a few years. To offer this insight is a role for the administration (CEO I).

Several CEOs admit having failed on this task, which is explained with themselves also being in the dark:

We have lacked this knowledge about digitalization. I have lacked this knowledge, my top managers lack this knowledge, so we do not help our politicians well enough. When you do not know what you don't know, you cannot take action on anything, can you? (CEO B).

### *Risks*

Despite the potentials of digitalization, digital projects often run into problems and require large investments and risk taking with taxpayer money. A mayor states his choice this way:

We are not first movers in digitalization, because we can spend huge amounts of money on something, and nobody knows if it will have an effect. So why spend a lot of money, which only gives you trouble? (Mayor E).

The risk-benefit ratio only worsens because the politicians only seldomly can show the citizens the benefits of investing in digitalization: There will never be a big press release on a digital solution. Only if it has meant something to the citizens one to one physically and visibly, and the mayor can stand next to something. It is not so cool to stand next to a lot of 0s and 1s (CEO E).

In addition to the general risk aversion, digitalization may reduce the power of experienced, high-ranking politicians and provide a short-cut to influence for newer and lower ranking politicians that have a better grasp on digital means and solutions. This may be a reason why the dominant councillors are hesitant towards digitalization.

What digitalization does, is to redistribute the usual power bases. Just look at social media, which moves the [policy] agenda places that it has never been before. Suddenly, there are some voices which get much more power than previously. The same happens in the city council, where digitalization contains a potential for new actors to enter the arena if they understand this thing better than others (CEO D).

This power base observation is not limited to the political level. CEOs in some cases tend to hold back digitalization, and to some extent the decision power, from the policy agenda, because of the lacking insight of the politicians:

The National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark announced that the politicians should set a strategic direction for digitalization. Then I sat there thinking, they are not able to do that, even if we [administration] deliver a draft which could be discussed. (CEO A).

This same mechanism may be even more clear in the relation between the IT managers and the executive management, including the CEO. The IT managers find the knowledge of the CEO too limited to involve the top level in complex digital matters, because it may lead to changed or irrational priorities as seen from the IT-manager. A frustrated CEO explains:

I am a little worried about what happens on my shift if the organization moves in the right direction with digitalization, takes necessary steps, is sufficiently ambitious, or it just goes limping forward. I am met by an organization which has a huge need to reassure me that it goes really well. I am still not convinced, but I have many other things to do, so the subject has been ... let's say paused (CEO B).

### **Mutual influence of barriers**

The four barriers described above are each limiting the access of digitalization to the local political agenda. However, the four barriers are also mutually enforcing each other in several ways.



Firstly, the political role perception of digitalization being administrative territory limits what politicians pay interest to and which insights they consider relevant. Secondly, lack of political insight into digitalization hampers interest and vice versa:

Interest in digital initiatives is connected to knowledge, so I would encourage excursions or something, where we meet and get some insight (Mayor B).

Thirdly, lack of interest from politicians and direct benefits for the citizens increase the perception of the political risks:

When we can demonstrate to our politicians that digitalization actually can increase the dignity of the citizens in the municipal service, then the politicians strongly support it, because they find the argument for [taking the risk with] digitalization (CEO E).

Fourthly, lacking insight increases the perception of risk connected to digitalization, which must be mitigated before proceeding:

There is a starting point, some call it awareness, where you explore and gain insight in the potential [of digitalization] before scaling up. This way you remove part of “the dangerous” aspects (CEO H).

### **Is digitalization different?**

It may well be argued that the barriers for digitalization to the local political agenda are not different from other issues, and some respondents initially support this statement. However, at second thought most of the mayors and CEOs arrive at the conclusion that digitalization has inherent characteristics affecting the size and importance of the barriers. These characteristics are not exclusive but rather distinct for digitalization compared to other issues and especially related to the “insight” and “risks” barriers. Digitalization is highly complex (CEO G), a very fast and strong “power tool” (CEO I), involves uncertainty (mayor E), subject to public reactions (mayor A). The essence is well summarized in this quote:

The key difference is that none of us are digital natives, and none of us have a clue about the direction of technology in three to five years. The difference to other change projects is that if you discuss a classical issue like the structure of primary schools, we will administratively and politically have a sense of causal-effect and the public reactions (CEO C).

### **Mayors and CEOs**

Although not all respondents articulate their experience with the same words, there is across the group of mayors and the group of CEOs a striking unambiguity about the four barriers for digitalization to arrive at the local political agenda. One reason may be the Danish context, where, as previously stated, the division of tasks is blurred, and the agenda of the city council is proposed by the CEO after consultation with the mayor. Hence, a calibration of perceptions between the two functions is likely even across the researched municipalities.

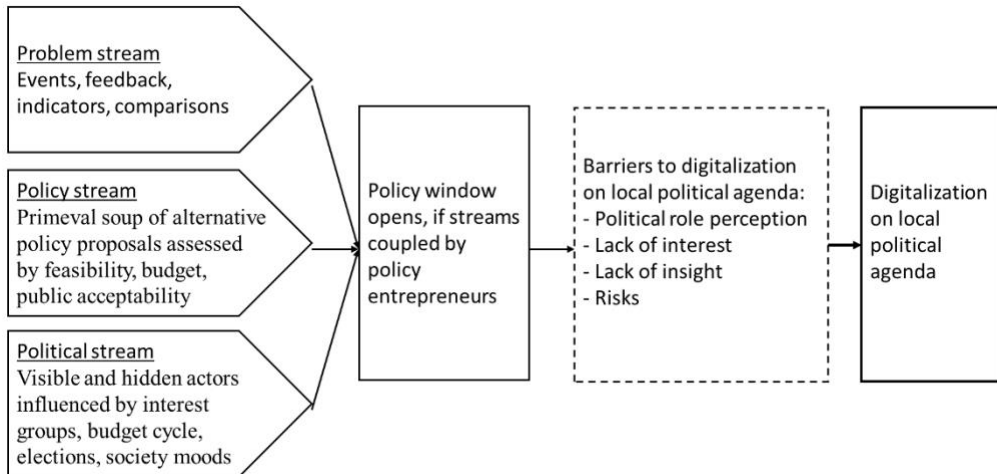
The only exception is the perception of the political role in digitalization, where there is an interesting tendency that the group of CEOs assign a larger role in digitalization to councillors than the group of mayors do. The data are not clear about the causes of this finding, but it may be due to exactly the perceived risks, which make the mayors more hesitant than the CEOs towards accepting an active role for councillors in digitalization.

## **Discussion**

This section first summarizes the findings in a model, which structures the remaining section. Then the identified four barriers are discussed against prior research of notably Kingdon, Jones and Baumgartner, and Mortensen. Are the findings surprising or not? Further, the need of policy entrepreneurs and problem recognition derived from Kingdon’s model and confirmed by empirical findings are discussed in two subsections.

The four identified barriers are summarized in the dotted box of Figure 2, which is an extension of Kingdon’s streams model (Kingdon 2011). This model is applied because it offers a general and relevant explanation to why some issues arrive at the agenda and others not.

Figure 2. Barriers to digitalization on the local political agenda



Source: Own extension of Kingdon's streams model (Kingdon 2011)

Figure 2 implies that for digitalization to arrive as an issue on the local political agenda, the three streams must be coupled and the policy window, open for limited time, must be taken advantage of. Whether the policy window is taken advantage of depends on the presence and ability of policy entrepreneurs to couple the streams and promote the issue. On top of these general preconditions of the streams model, the identified barriers for digitalization must also be overcome as specific preconditions to access the local political agenda. Overcoming both the general and the specific preconditions are difficult, which may explain why digitalization is rarely entering the local political agenda.

### The four barriers in the light of prior research

There is no recipe for the local political role in relation to the administration (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981; Svava 1999; Mouritzen and Svava 2002). It is therefore a bit surprising that especially the mayors regard digitalization as administrative territory and express a perception of the political role in digitalization resembling a classical Weberian hierarchy with politicians setting goals and not interfering with the strategies and means to fulfil the goals. This may be due to an effort trying to uphold a certain division of tasks, stating the accepted "right thing to say", personal preferences, jurisdiction size, or acknowledging one's own shortcomings as laymen with limited interest and insight into digitalization. However, politicians may also hold the principle of the political role as an argument for delegating the responsibility for digitalization to the administration as a "blame avoidance" tactic known from the retrenchment literature (Pierson 1994; Starke 2006). If so, digitalization is accepted as a tool for promoting efficiency at an administrative level decided in budgets, but the risk and responsibility is delegated through institutional retrenchment rather than prioritized policy retrenchment (Elmelund-Præstekær and Klitgaard 2012).

It is not surprising that the interest of politicians in digitalization according to the respondents is non-ideological but driven by the interest of the citizens. The motivation for this approach may be to maximize votes (Buchanan and Tollison 1984) or fulfil the democratic ideal of political representation by "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin 1967, 209). Whatever the motivations are for the individual politicians, digitalization is only interesting to politicians if it can solve welfare problems for the citizens, which demonstrates responsiveness to the citizens and provides legitimacy to the democratic governance (Weßels 2007).

Digitalization is new on the local policy agenda and the digital solutions are by the Information Systems literature often described as highly complex systems due to the number and variety of components, interactions, and interdependencies, including the human versus computer relation (Orlikowski 2000; Benbya and McKelvey 2006; Benbya, Davenport, and

Pachidi 2020; Henfridsson et al. 2018). Hence, digital systems are often referred to in terms of a “black box” with limited insight and unpredictable outcome (Guidotti et al. 2018). It is therefore not surprising that the responding mayors and CEOs state that the insight in digitalization of the politicians are generally low but to some extent influenced by civil job and age of politicians. Nor is it surprising that the political insight according to the respondents is highly influenced by the access to information (Jones and Baumgartner 2005) provided by the CEOs and the administrative organization.

Apart from legal and financial challenges, digital projects often suffer from implementation problems due to technological, human, cultural, and a range of other obstacles (Heeks 2002; Goldfinch 2007). The behavioural literature describes risk aversion (Sheffer et al. 2018), loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 2013), negativity bias (Hibbing, Smith, and Alford 2014), and factors for risk-taking (March 1991) in decision making. Hence, it is not surprising that the politicians in general uphold a cautious position towards digitalization. This attitude is further fuelled by the internal power struggle between politicians and to some extent between politicians and the administration, because engaging in digitalization may redistribute power bases. This observation is supported by the finding that party competition increases responsiveness to the public preferences (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), which leads to the suggestion that citizen support, and a low degree of internal competition in the city council are prerequisites for politicians to take the risk of promoting digitalization on the policy agenda.

### **Policy entrepreneurs**

Kingdon points to the need for policy entrepreneurs to promote the issue through the agenda setting process. However, the extensive study of Mortensen, Loftis and Seeberg (Mortensen, Loftis, and Seeberg 2022) found little influence of the actors but mainly structural explanations to the composition of the policy agenda in Danish local governments. The current study on digitalization is not in opposition to the importance of structural factors such as jurisdiction size, committee structures, etc., but adds an additional perspective in the case of digitalization. When the mayors and CEO themselves were asked openly about why the issue of digitalization is not on the agenda, few structural but many actor-oriented explanations were proposed. This suggests the need for an actor-oriented understanding more in line with Kingdon’s key role dedicated to policy entrepreneurs.

Given the key role of the executive management in setting the policy agenda, it is interesting that most of the CEOs admit to having failed to promote digitalization on the policy agenda. This is a bit surprising, because the Danish local government administrative organizations led by the CEOs are highly educated bureaucrats selected by merits, which are proactively engaged in policy formulation on the entire arena (Smith-Udvalget 2015; Andersen et al. 2019; Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew 2020). The CEOs may have had problems finding the right format to make digitalization interesting for the politicians, but the main explanation for this lapse of attention seems to be that the CEOs themselves are having a hard time grasping the meaning and consequences of digitalization. When not in demand by the politicians, the issue has until recently been widely ignored.

The above emphasizes that the executive management (and/or the mayor) must also undertake active roles as policy entrepreneurs, as outlined by Kingdon. The complex and emergent issue of digitalization requires engaged individual frontrunners willing to take risks and promote the issue, which otherwise will not access the local political agenda.

### **Problem recognition**

Kingdon mentions the existence of problems, politics, policy alternatives, and policy entrepreneurs as barriers to the policy agenda, while Mortensen, Loftis and Seeberg find jurisdiction size, societal problems, competition in council, and committee structure as decisive key factors in a Danish local government context. The barrier of problem recognition is an interesting overlap between the contributions of Kingdon and Mortensen, Loftis and Seeberg. This study on digitalization confirms the importance of problem recognition as a barrier to the policy agenda. Many mayors and CEOs do not consider digitalization a problem to be dealt with

by councillors, which constitutes a challenge, because the key actors need to perceive digitalization as a relevant and important problem to discuss in the city council. Otherwise, digitalization will not access the policy agenda.

Given the challenge of digitalization not being recognized as a political problem, digitalization needs to be reframed as a potential tool to solve significant welfare problems, which are recognized by councillors as their task. An example would be to discuss both analogue and digital solutions to the challenge of a demography with many more elderly citizens in need for health and home care. That is to take point of departure in the welfare problem acknowledged by citizens and politicians instead of the technology. At the same time, this citizen-oriented approach may generate political interest and the needed political support and activate policy entrepreneurs as proposed by Kingdon.

## Conclusion

This study explains why digitalization is not on the agenda despite the issue being at the very centre of recent development of local government processes and services to the citizens. This lack of digitalization on the local political agenda poses a clear democratic problem because important priorities are taken outside of the political system.

With exclusive access to the experience of a high number of mayors and CEOs in Danish local governments, the study concludes that the four main barriers blocking the access of digitalization to the local political agenda are: Political role perception, lack of interest, lack of insight, and risks. Furthermore, the need for policy entrepreneurs and problem recognition suggested by Kingdon are emphasized as preconditions for digitalization to arrive at the local political agenda.

To overcome the barriers in practice, focus may be on the empirically identified factors reducing the barriers: To focus on practical welfare problems of the citizens rather than digitalization itself, to raise digital insight and interest of the CEOs and remaining administrative executive management, to gain citizen support, and to reduce risks and power rivalries by building political consensus on digitalization. These suggestions are a major contribution to practice, where most local governments struggle to find useful approaches.

In a research field with few examples of case studies, this study contributes to the policy agenda literature with a valuable qualitative empirical study at the local government level with identification of key barriers to access the local political agenda. Besides, an extension of Kingdon's seminal streams model is proposed in the case of digitalization and the importance of policy entrepreneurship is supported.

From a democratic point of view, political leadership needs to be regained by setting highly political priorities about finances, citizens services, and ethical dilemmas on the political agenda. As Danish local governments represent the most likely case for digitalization to be on the local political agenda, the identified barriers for digitalization, and clues to overcome these, are likely to also be of value in other contextual settings.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – List of interviews

Note: The approximately 10 minutes introduction was not recorded to establish a confidential inter-personal relation challenged by the necessity of the online format.

Pseudonym	Date	Time - exclusive introduction
Mayor A	8/3 2021	21,17 minutes
Mayor B	10/3 2021	21,16 minutes
Mayor C	3/3 2021	37,41 minutes
Mayor D	11/3 2021	31,04 minutes.
Mayor E	2/3 2021	24,31 minutes
CEO A	2/3 2021	17,08 minutes
CEO B	17/2 2021	17,49 minutes
CEO C	23/2 2021	21,37 minutes
CEO D	4/3 2021	36,16 minutes
CEO E	17/2 2021	29,32 minutes
CEO F	9/3 2021	17,07 minutes
CEO G	25/2 2021	16,06 minutes
CEO H	17/3 2021	17,31 minutes
CEO I	3/3 2021	20,40 minutes

### Appendix 2 – Coding process

In the first column is shown the initial codes. In the second column is shown the final theme codes and coding scheme elaborated through the process described in the method section. Each of the final codes are comprised by the initial codes to the left. Example: The final code “role” is comprised by the initial codes “visions and strategy”, “political relevance” and “not political issue”.

Initial codes	Final theme codes and coding scheme
Vision and strategy	<u>Role</u> . The political role in digitalization as perceived or dedicated to councillors.
Political relevance	Example: “It [digitalization] is too complex. Elderly care has to do with emotions – that we can relate to” (Mayor A).
Not political issue	Exclusion: Viewpoints on digitalization as contributing or limiting local governments to fulfil their tasks.
Citizens	<u>Interest</u> . The interest in digitalization by councillors or groups influencing councillors’ interest.
Executive management	Example: “In my environment, I think there is more and more interest in digitalization, but it may be because we have ourselves been blowing on the embers” (CEO I).
Interest	Exclusion: Councillor’s own willingness to use digital tools, e.g., electronic agendas for council meetings.
Organisation	<u>Insight</u> . The councillors understanding of the concept, tools, and effects of digitalization.
Insecurity	Example: “There is the ethical, the efficiency, and the service perspective [on digitalization]. To relate to that as councillor requires some training, because it all has developed in just a few years. To offer this insight is a role for the administration”. (CEO I).
Insight	Exclusion: General viewpoints on competences and roles of councillors.



Initial codes	Final theme codes and coding scheme
Power	<u>Risks.</u> Political uncertainties and changes embedded in having digitalization on the local political agenda. Example: “It [digitalization] has costed us fortunes, and some of it has never come into practice, so there is a certain fright of digitalization in the council” (Mayor A).
Risks.	Exclusion: General risks of digitalization not related to councillors.