The Digital Channel Shift Programme

An evaluation

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This report presents an evaluation of the Local Government Association (LGA)'s Digital Channel Shift Programme. It summarises the outcomes (financial and non-financial) achieved by the programme, the key messages and lessons learnt, and recommendations for the design of future programmes of support.

The programme has generated over £1.69 million in savings and increased income from 18 funded projects, delivering an average return of £5.64 on every £1 of grant funding. It has also led to significant benefits in terms of better online services for citizen and business customers and more productive and user-friendly ways of working for the councils that participated and their citizens.

1. Foreword

Councils have a long history of harnessing digital tools and technologies to innovate and transform local services to better meet the needs of their communities. But in these continuing times of immense budgetary pressure and increasing demand, the need to safeguard the services people value by encouraging them to adopt lower-cost digital self-service wherever possible has never been greater.

Drawing on a series of detailed case studies – which are available from our website – this report highlights the major benefits that digital channel shift can bring to both councils and the citizens they serve. In particular, our programme has demonstrated the potential of such initiatives to generate both improved services and significant savings.

Savings have come from finding new and innovative ways to deliver services, reducing the number of inappropriate or unsuccessful service requests, cutting down the volume of avoidable phone or face-to-face contact and integrating and automating back-office process. This has led to the participating councils generating efficiencies and increasing income to a total value of more than £1.69 million across the programme with many further financial benefits still to come.

But, perhaps more importantly, as well as delivering financial benefits the projects have delivered better services for customers: more joined-up services, convenient online options, faster delivery and quicker decisions about applications or benefits and better support for vulnerable customers.

Councils and their workforce have benefitted too through building in-house skills, better joined-up working and improved data accuracy enabling them to work more effectively and efficiently – all improving staff morale and releasing capacity.

Not all of this has been easy and the report contains a great deal of practical learning about the need to involve both service users and staff in designing services, to engage the whole organisation and its partners in the transformation journey that channel shift involves, and to focus on culture and processes – not just technology. We must ensure the right resources are in place to bring digital programmes to a successful conclusion and to meet any technical challenges encountered along the way. Many of these points will be very familiar but are nonetheless well worth restating.

The challenges facing local government show no signs of reducing in intensity. I would encourage you to take the time to read this report and related case studies, and consider how a focused programme of digital channel shift could benefit your council.

Councillor Peter Fleming OBE
Chairman, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

2. Executive Summary

Councils across the country continue to face challenging times. Between 2010 and 2020 they will have lost almost 60 pence out of every £1 the Government had provided for services, but the demand for local services continues to grow.

At the same time digital technology is changing how people go about their daily lives. Whether booking holidays, doing their banking or the weekly shop, many people now turn instinctively to the internet via smart phones, tablets and computers. Using technology is becoming the norm.

There is a win-win for local government in harnessing technology to improve the services that it provides to its customers. Technology can help deliver to citizens the online self-service they expect as well as improve services during a time of reduced budgets.

Councils have long realised this and over the last decade they have become increasingly sophisticated and holistic in their approach to efficiency and online services.

To nurture this opportunity the LGA set up the Digital Channel Shift Programme to support the use of digital technology and promote the greater use of online tools for the benefit of both their customers and staff.

More than 60 councils applied and 23 were awarded grant funding. The successful projects came from unitary, county and district councils and included a range of services – cemeteries, archives, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and highways – as well as introducing innovative technologies such as harnessing 'bot' technology.

As well as financial support the LGA also mentored project managers throughout the programme. They ran a series of workshops to share learning, provided best practice and learning from previous programmes, helped councils with supplier management issues and linked up similar projects to share learning as the programme progressed.

Projects included:

- online licensing portals for taxi drivers to apply for licences

- SMS text messaging services for council tax payments and household waste recycling

- expanding council tax, revenues and benefits services online to provide self-service for customers 24/7

- a 'digital first' self-service tool for funeral directors to book funerals at cemeteries and crematoria

- online citizen self-service for reporting waste collection errors and ordering documents from archives.

Throughout the programme the participants tracked and assessed both the financial and non- financial benefits gained – and significant results have been delivered.

Financially, a total of more than £1.69 million in efficiency savings and increased income was generated during their first year of operation – delivering an average return of £5.64 on every £1 of grant funding.

There were also non-financial benefits to the councils, with improved efficiency and accuracy in transaction processing enabling better planning and targeting of resources. A number of projects found the new services improved job satisfaction and working relationships, while using in-house skills to develop solutions meant that councils now have ongoing skill sets to continuously improve and develop their digital services. Self-service with automated or speedier processing of the majority of service transactions demonstrably frees up officer time, allowing them to spend more time supporting vulnerable people or resolving complex cases.

Customers too are seeing the benefits with evidence that they appreciate these more easily accessible channels for interaction. Customers are getting faster service delivery and quicker decisions about applications, benefits and other services. Convenient, anytime, anywhere access is what many people want, and the satisfaction feedback on these projects is consistently high.

The programme identified the following core themes for successful digital channel shift:

Engagement – involve everyone: all touchpoints to the project must be engaged in order to take everyone on the same transformation journey. Investing time up front with staff and service areas will pay dividends.

User research is essential: understanding your customer needs is key to a successful project and the LGA encouraged all the councils to undertake thorough user research as early as possible in order to inform development. Projects successfully used a range of methods including reviewing existing evidence, interviewing actual or potential users and talking to people inside and outside their organisation who know and understand both the service and the user group.

Understand local demographics: to ensure the solution properly meets user need, it is vital to understand the demographics. This was key to the success of many of the projects. A number grappled with demographic assumptions concerning older populations or areas with low literacy levels and proved that such simplistic assumptions do not always hold true, and as a result delivered significant success in terms of the take-up of their new digital channels.

Digital inclusion: provide choice of access channels to those who are unable or unwilling to use digital channels. Projects offered one-to-one encouragement to try digital services with the support of floorwalkers and face-to-face advisors and traditional channels were always available.

Test, test and test again: you can never do enough testing. Using agile working processes to iterate, test and iterate again delivers better end results. As technology continues to evolve at a rate of knots a product is never finished – continuous improvements can always be made.

Managing suppliers – be proactive: the overwhelming advice from projects was to manage suppliers closely, escalate issues early and remain flexible. Also, ensure you have your supplier project manager's support throughout the entire project – locking in the expectations on both sides.

3. Introduction

The Digital Channel Shift Programme was set up in January 2017 and originally funded 23 council-led projects to support the innovative use of digital technology, encouraging people to move away from the more traditional contact channels towards digital self-service for local public services.

In a digital world where more citizens are happy to carry out their business online, councils have already embraced the opportunity to provide access to various services online, enabling greater levels of self-service as well as helping better manage increasing levels of demand whilst balancing decreasing levels of funding. The use of technology to deliver services more effectively and enable staff to work differently has increased productivity and reduced costs.

This programme enabled these councils and their partners to implement digital tools and technologies for the benefit of their customers, staff and partners. The successful projects identified specific services that could be improved by digitisation, making it easier for citizens and businesses to self-serve, while improving the service and saving money.

Building on previous LGA programmes

The LGA has funded a number of digital programmes over recent years, including the Digital Channel Shift Programme, to support councils to innovate and improve their service by implementing appropriate digital tools and solutions.

The Digital Experts Programme was set up in March 2015 to enable more councils to use the digital tools and approaches already

> "More and more people are used to using technology. People want to interact with us but they don't want to come in, they don't want to phone us up, if they can do it online rather than talk to us that's great. As a council we need to adapt to that."
>
> **Simon Pipe, Customer and Media Services Manager, Harlow Council**

> "Digital is the infrastructure that helps us provide services for people – it's not so much a digital transformation, it's actually a service transformation in terms of delivering better services to people."
>
> **Councillor Jane Scullion, Portfolio Holder for Business Change and Customer Service, Calderdale Council**

successfully applied by their peers. It funded 27 projects involving 42 councils.

The Digital Transformation Programme in 2016 funded 20 projects, supporting 35 councils and partners to develop digital solutions for their wider work on national programmes of transformation including the integration of health and social care, troubled families, welfare reform and public health. There are nine case studies published on the LGA website.

The Digital Housing Programme 2018/19 is currently supporting five councils selected as pilots to reuse the assets and learning created by a group of Kent councils (on the Digital Transformation programme) to improve their own online housing forms for the benefit of their residents.

These programmes have helped to significantly improve how services are designed and delivered – using digital as a tool, rather than focusing on digital as an end in itself. Residents and local businesses are able to access more services online, while staff and elected members can work more effectively both in and out of the office. The total estimated savings and income generated from these programmes is in excess of £6.63 million.

Digital Channel Shift Programme – approach and criteria

From the outset the Digital Channel Shift programme was designed to complement the work on channel shift that was already taking place in the participating councils.

> "It is important for public services to recognise that the customers themselves are on a journey – their preferences are changing and technology is changing – and we have got to work with them and respond to that as well."
>
> **Tom Horwood, Chief Executive, Waverley Borough Council**

Channel shift could range from redesigning existing online services to creating, developing and introducing new digital services.

The programme required participants to demonstrate, at a high level, the different phases/stages that a channel shift project needs to follow including:

• identifying the right service/customers for shifting online (eg by using customer insight tools and approaches)

• putting in place the necessary resources required and governance arrangements to support and drive the project

• planning to apply design principles, eg those developed by the Government Digital Service (GDS), to design the online service and the council website overall so this works for the user and can be accessed on different devices

• integrating the redesigned 'front-office' service (eg the app, e-form etc.) into the service back-office and other systems such as a payment engine so this improves the process end-to-end

• supporting more customers (residents, businesses and staff) to carry out their business online including tapping into

> "The LGA has played a very important role over the past two or three decades in trying to inspire and lead change particularly in the digital sector within local government. This programme is all about sharing knowledge, sharing innovation and making sure that we move forward together as a local authority family."
>
> **Jim Dillon, Chief Executive, Scarborough Borough Council**

existing schemes and 'assisted digital' initiatives

• saving money by delivering a more user-friendly and efficient online service.

Bids for funding were open to all English councils (one bid per council or group of councils) and bids involving partner organisations were also welcomed.

The criteria, established for the programme included:

• to implement a new improved online service that will increase the volume of self-service transactions for a particular service/customer group

• to redesign online services so these operate effectively on a range of devices

• to help get more local people online so they carry out their business online with the council/partner organisations.

The outcomes of the project were required to demonstrate:

• the new/redesigned online service and any assets developed

• the improved customer experience – evidence of impact

• the benefits for staff/partners – evidence of impact

• the savings generated – these needed to be identified and quantified

• the new skills developed and how these will be reused for another service areas.

Grants and channel shift focus

In total the LGA received 64 applications, which were subjected to a detailed evaluation process. Twenty-three were awarded grant funding. Of these 23 two had to return the grant money shortly afterwards as changes in their internal priorities meant that they were not able to continue with their proposed projects. Of the remaining 21,18 were in a position to have their case study captured at the point at which this report was written, with one of the remaining projects continuing its work which will be captured later in 2019.

In the three that either did not complete or were significantly delayed, it was because of major reorganisations taking place after projects had been agreed (for example, one council merging with another) or initiation of new corporate change programmes.

The successful projects covered a range of customer groups and services including cemeteries, archives, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), highways and parish council portals as well as introducing innovative technologies such as bots.

A summary of the completed projects is below. These projects have shared their experience and learning with other councils, including through workshops hosted by the LGA, and their stories have been captured in published case studies, now available on the LGA website. There is also a series of short videos – telling the stories of what each project has achieved from the perspective of the different participants and roles involved and highlighting both challenges and learning.

Council	Project	Focus
Calderdale Council	Taxi licence renewal and new application self-service.	Taxi licensing
Cheltenham Borough Council	Online licensing portal for taxi drivers to apply for a licence anytime, anywhere via a new end-to-end digital service.	Taxi licensing
City of Lincoln Council	Self-service for council tax customers of the joint City of Lincoln and North Kesteven District Council revenues service.	Council tax
Elmbridge Borough Council	Personalised SMS text messaging reminder service to let customers know when a council tax payment is due.	Council tax SMS text notifications
Gloucestershire County Council	Online registration and document order service for its archive customers.	Archiving
Harlow Council	Expanding its revenues and benefits services online to provide self-service for customers 24/7.	Revenues and benefits
Lichfield District Council	New online revenues and benefits services, enabling customers to self-serve at any time of the day or night.	Revenues and benefits
Liverpool City Council	'Digital first' self-service tool for funeral directors to book funerals at the city's cemeteries and crematoria.	Cemeteries and crematoria
Newcastle City Council	SMS text messaging chatbot enabling residents to apply for household waste recycling centre permits.	Chatbot for waste recycling
North Yorkshire County Council	Parish portal automating and streamlining service requests for highways defects.	Parish council highways portal
Rochdale Borough Council	Promoting behavioural change to increase self-service, with a primary focus on specific, existing online services.	Behavioural change (range of services)
Scarborough Borough Council	Online citizen self-service digitising the bin collection service.	Refuse collection

Sunderland City Council	Redesigning the digital citizen experience for missed bin collections.	Refuse collection
Torbay Council	Enhancing online council tax forms and automating processes, as part of wider digital transformation.	Council tax
Wakefield Council	Repeatable model for process and digital service redesign by focusing on complaints around pothole reporting and repairs.	Highways pothole reporting
Waverley Borough Council	Upgrading all existing online forms to drive channel shift.	Online forms (range of services)
West Sussex County Council	Online checklist tool for requesting special education and healthcare needs assessments, offering guidance and an online application form.	SEND

4. Channel shift

In this age of austerity councils across the country are facing the stark reality that between 2010 and 2020 they will have lost almost 60 pence out of every £1 the Government had provided for services. Collectively, the sector faces a funding gap of more than £3 billion in 2019/20.

Meanwhile, demand for services continues to increase from hard-pressed citizens.

Finding operational efficiencies to enable continued service delivery with reduced budgets – and cope with reductions in headcount – has presented a significant challenge to councils.

Harnessing digital technologies to enable citizens and businesses to self-serve whilst designing out failure demand from service delivery processes have therefore become twin priorities for councils.

The win-win of self-service

Across different demographics, people are increasingly comfortable with carrying out transactions in the online world. From using social media to booking holidays, checking their online banking or doing the weekly grocery shop, people turn to the internet via smart phones, tablets and computers on a daily basis.

The commercial world realised some time ago that not only did people like the 24/7 convenience and choice of the online world, but that it was much cheaper for them to provide goods and services via digital channels.

Local government has also been travelling the online services path since the early part of this century when the Government's local e-gov

"As a council we have downsized by 30 per cent in response to austerity but our ways of working had not changed. With a larger workforce we could cope with an analogue approach to service delivery but now we needed to work differently."

Neil Rodgers, Service Director for Planning, Transportation & Highways, Wakefield Council

"We have had a long-held ambition to make the processing aspects of our work more efficient for customers – primarily to make it easier for people to get what they want from the council quickly and efficiently. But also, in these times of financial constraint, we need to be able to demonstrate that we have services that are efficient and are provided at the lowest possible cost. There's a win-win in this – it is better for our customers and better for the organisation in terms of making savings."

Councillor Ric Metcalfe, Leader of the Council, City of Lincoln

programme funded trailblazers developing online services.

Over the last decade councils have become increasingly sophisticated and holistic in their approach to efficiency and online services. It is not as simple as just putting an online form on the website.

To deliver real benefits to both the customer and the council, online forms must be integrated with the service's back-office systems, service delivery processes must be automated, and both the online customer journey and performance data analysed, to identify service failures and improvement opportunities. And, perhaps most importantly,

"The project has been extremely successful – 58 per cent are using the new service and we're trying as a council to get more people online. But we still need to be there for the ones who can't do – we don't need to be digital by default because that's a step too far. However, whilst there are people who can't do digital there are also a lot of people who don't want to do anything but digital – so giving them that facility at little cost means that we'll achieve more in the long run."

Councillor Bill Chatt, Cabinet member, Housing, Public Health, Sustainability and Environmental Services, Scarborough Borough Council

> "We are heading for a One Council model where everybody is working equally towards transformation – whether you are a binman or whether you are in the IT department, people understand that we can work together.Transformation isn't about getting rid of jobs it's about getting the best value out of those jobs and all the service unit managers are challenged to think outside what they normally do. This approach has identified a lot of people with skills they didn't know they had and that's important because it's all about people – we're trying to make sure we maintain employment for Scarborough Borough Council's employees and also efficiencies and a better service for members of the public."
>
> **Councillor Heather Phillips, Portfolio Holder for Transformation, Scarborough Borough Council**

customers must be encouraged – nudged even – to use these new digital self-service channels to help themselves.

There is an inherent win-win on offer from developing online self-service:

- excellent online self-services that customers choose to use

- more efficient processes reducing both avoidable contact and costs

- freed-up officer time, allowing them to spend more time helping people unable to self-serve.

Demographics

Understanding the demographics of both end-user customers and internal service delivery users is crucial if an online solution is to properly meet the user's need.

Some projects were faced with demographics traditionally seen as being hard to encourage to 'go online'. For example, Torbay, as a seasonal holiday location, serves a surprisingly ageing local population and is one of the most deprived areas of the south west. However, the success of their project demonstrates that these customers can adopt digital self-service if they are given the confidence to do so through one-

to-one support and floor walkers guiding people through the service and the online services themselves are well designed.

North Yorkshire, found that the specific demographic of parish councillors – generally being an older population – meant that additional support would be required to help them move to the new online service. The customer support team therefore stepped in to 'walk people through' the new process until it became familiar to them, and an engaging video was produced to explain the change.

A number of projects also involved the engagement of internal users with little familiarity with digital tools, for example Sunderland and Scarborough's waste projects and Newcastle's WasteBot.

In each case understanding the demographic, working environment and specific user needs of these internal users – bin lorry drivers and waste site officers – was crucial to the projects' success. In all three cases, the service was designed such that the user interface was easy and simple – touch screen in-cab units and phones with large keypads that can be used whilst wearing gloves – and on-the-job training ensured that adoption was successful.

Challenging demographic assumptions

There is a common belief that older people and those with low literacy or for whom English is a second language are unlikely to be able – or willing – to enjoy the benefits of the online world.

A number of our projects were indeed grappling with meeting the needs of their older populations, such as Lichfield, or had many people for whom English was not a first language, such as Rochdale. However, both have proven that that simplistic assumptions do not hold true, and have delivered significant success in terms of the take-up of new digital channels.

> "If parents don't have the digital skills they can call in and then we will support them through the paperwork and so will the schools."
>
> **Helen Johns, Head of Inclusion, West Sussex County Council**

In Cheltenham, take-up of taxi licensing applications via mobile phone has been a resounding success. Drivers can apply for or renew a licence at their convenience in just 15 minutes and back-office processing has been successfully automated, delivering savings and freeing staff time to work on other strategic activities.

The percentage of taxi and private hire applications and renewals received now carried out online since launch is 100 per cent – the shift was made 'overnight' with all renewals and applications after this point made online or online with support.

Meanwhile, digital channel shift does not just mean services that are accessible via a PC, laptop, tablet or smart phone. In Newcastle, the team chose to apply sophisticated bot technology within an SMS text channel in order to both digitise the end-to-end process and open up the ability to apply for a permit to all, including customers without a smart phone. All applications – 100 per cent – now go via this new digital channel.

Digital inclusion

All the projects in this programme had a proportion of their residents who were less able to use digital services – either through low literacy, lack of English as a first language, or disability.

All projects therefore provided help for those unable or unwilling to use digital channels. For example, the majority of customer service advisors are happy to help people to fill in forms face-to-face or via the telephone, ie assisted digital.

In Harlow, for example, whilst great emphasis was placed on assisted self-service via the civic centre and one-to-one encouragement to try digital services with the support of floorwalkers and face-to-face advisors, traditional channels were always available.

In order to address a lack of digital skills and confidence, the council created a partnership with a local adult learning provider, ACL, for either free or subsidised digital courses to help improve people's skills and confidence.

Rochdale also had a holistic approach to digital inclusion, with a dual focus on both encouraging customers to access council

City of Lincoln revenues and benefits customer comments

"Very smooth and easy to navigate the website. Clear what details were needed."

"Incredibly efficient service."

"Easy to do – I'm all for saving trees!"

"Uncomplicated and straightforward, the way it should be. Well done."

"Quick and easy, why can't everything in life be this simple?!"

Scarborough refuse driver comments

"It's really good, it's a piece of cake for us."

"I can concentrate more on driving, instead of paperwork."

"In-Cab allows me to report any problems with bins at the press of a button."

Cheltenham taxi licensing customer comments

"It couldn't get any better, at first I was apprehensive it was going to be complicated but Wow no big deal at all really easy [sic]."

"It was so easy. Good being paperless and the process is much quicker, make it even better by being able to pick up the plates anytime."

"Payment and process online was really easy, but it's a shame we still have to come into the office to pick up the plates, (it would be easier if we could pick up at any time)."

"Very easy and comfortable and not as scary as first thought. Saves a lot of time." Interviewee added that he was very happy, and feels he has peace of mind – even told his friends and other drivers how easy it was.

"The new system is perfect and so easy, the only confusing thing is recognising the difference between letter O and number 0. Certainly a step forward."

services online, and on giving everyone the opportunity to make the most of digital benefits.

This wider approach has seen the borough embrace 'digital' and reach out to residents with information about saving money through paperless bills and comparison shopping. Skills training is also offered through the library network including beginners classes, coding clubs and even organised 'hacks' for ideas on how council data can be used.

Rochdale also had a strong focus on its large ethnic minority community, and found that

"I'm sure if we can do it other councils can too. It feels like you're taking a risk but you're doing it in a measured way – and today we need smart solutions. Digital solutions are things that work and that helps us for next year, rather than ten years ago."

Councillor Joyce McCarty, Deputy Leader of the Council, Newcastle City Council

whilst there may not always be language interpreters available at the contact and service centres, online services mean that family members can help relatives with filling in forms. For example, children can help older family members after school hours – something that they would not be able to do during council opening times.

Delivering success

Projects set themselves ambitious take-up targets. In the majority of cases these were met – and in many cases exceeded.

For example, Sunderland set itself a challenging overall target of 38 per cent contact via digital channels. Thanks to the project,

"At the beginning of 2018 we were set a very challenging target of 38 per cent contact for the web. We were achieving something around 20 per cent at the time so we knew we had a lot of hard work to do. But we have smashed it – achieving 55 per cent with Environmental Services as a result of this project."

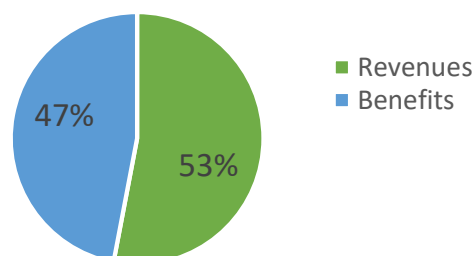**Helen Johnston, Customer Services Delivery Manager, Sunderland City Council**

however, it delivered a 55 per cent take-up rate in its environmental services.

Key to delivering success was understanding the data. Using customer insight and collecting comprehensive baseline data on current performance at the start of the project, and applying standardised progress metrics through its duration, were common factors to those projects delivering success.
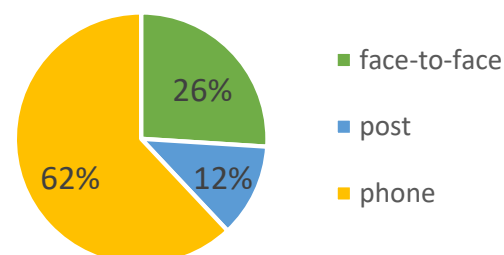
One example, from Lichfield, demonstrates how using data to explore the problem being addressed gives a baseline from which to demonstrate success.

With the aim of driving channel shift in its revenues and benefits service, the team first explored why and how customers were currently contacting the council, providing a base from which to monitor and track progress as the project developed.

Lichfield: reasons for contact

- Revenues
- Benefits

47% / 53%

Lichfield: contact channels

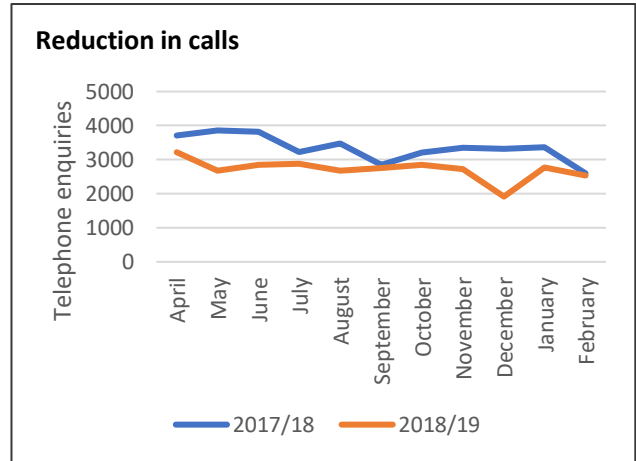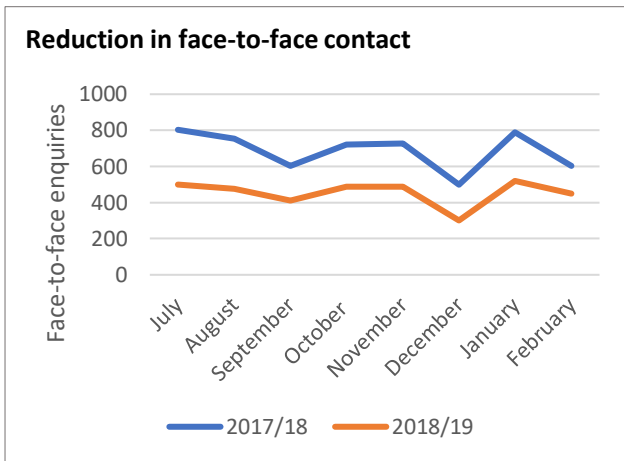- face-to-face
- post
- phone

26% / 12% / 62%

"This project has been extremely important to the council in two main ways. Firstly the LGA support provided us with the momentum to focus on introducing forms for revenues and benefits and secondly we recognise that an enormous amount of contact we have with our residents is about council tax bills and benefit applications and it's given us the opportunity to digitise a wide range of services that we offer."

Neil Turner, Director of Transformation and Resources, Lichfield District Council

Lichfield

NB. Note seasonal activity spikes across all charts below in January after Christmas break

Reduction in face-to-face contact
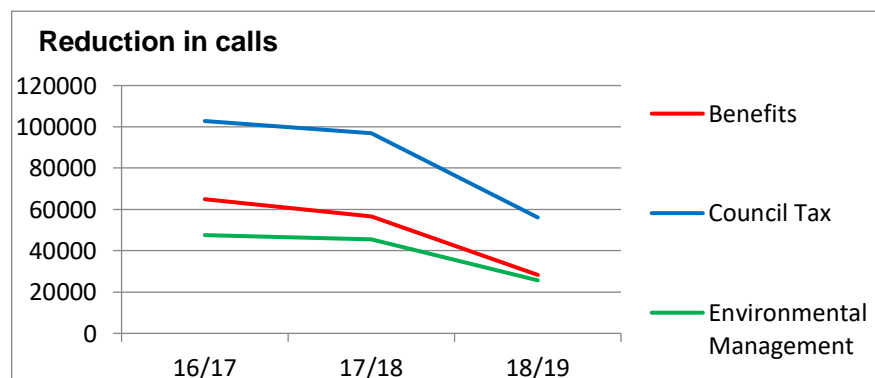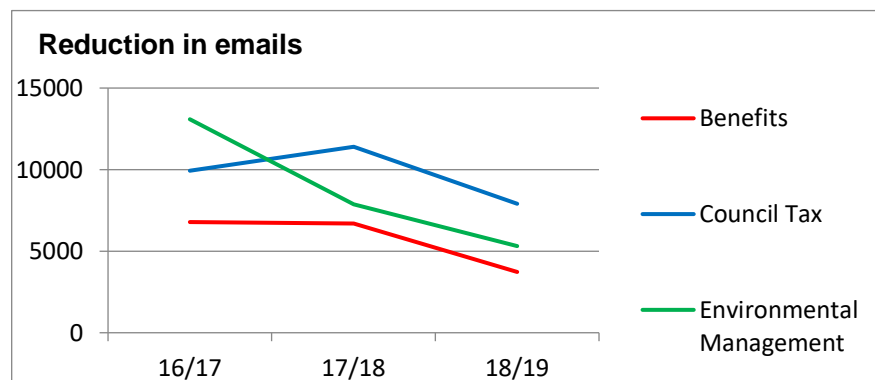

Reduction in calls

Lichfield did not have these services online previously. However, 41 per cent of revenues customers and 43 per cent of benefits claim customers are now helped via online forms, and 31 per cent of change in circumstances are also dealt with now via online forms.

Rochdale

Another clear example of channel shift success comes from Rochdale – where, thanks to the metrics gathered from the outset, results are clear to see in the charts below.

Alongside the reduction in calls and emails, the council has seen 2,000 more accounts created than expected, compared to the previous year. In addition, one third of council tax requests for the current financial year are expected to be via self-service, compared to just 1.7 per cent previously.

Meanwhile, 43 per cent of missed bins are now reported online, up from 26 per cent before the project started. Forty-nine per cent of bulky waste collection are also now ordered online, up from 13 per cent.

Reduction in emails

Reduction in calls

5. Benefits of the programme

There are two core areas that the LGA asked councils to explore in terms of assessing the benefits that they realised from their digital channel shift projects:

- financial
- non-financial.

5.1 Financial benefits

In terms of financial benefits, councils participating in the LGA Digital Channel Shift programme were asked to report on the efficiency savings realised and the revenue generated at the point we captured their case study. The efficiency savings are often taken as released capacity, rather than as a direct cashable saving.

Collectively, councils participating in this programme delivered a total of £1.69 million in efficiency savings and increased income during their first year of operation. Savings have come, for example, from reduced face-to face and phone contact, reduced officer time in rekeying data and reductions in print and postage costs.

At the start of each project councils were required to record metrics for the status-quo – for example, contact via telephone, face-to-face or online – in order to provide a baseline for the service relating to the project.

Councils were then encouraged to calculate their own cost per transaction or contact for each channel or invited to use figures

"Without metrics it's impossible to understand the impact of a change. Hence you can't measure whether that change has been successful. So we obtained the required metrics in the initial stages of the project to enable us to understand the effectiveness of the changes we made over the course of the project."

Asam Jan, Transformation Project Manager, Rochdale Borough Council

"In the current financial climate, a saving of £93,000 a year through shifting to digital is a significant amount of money. And that means we can invest in other services and the saving in officers' time means that they can do more enforcement activities and more of the things that the public needs them to do."

Councillor Dr David Willingham, Chair of Licensing, Cheltenham Borough Council

calculated by Socitm in their 2012 report, Potential for Channel Shift in Local Government:[1]

- £8.62 per face-to-face visit
- £2.83 per phone call
- £0.15 per online visit.

Baselining usage metrics for all customer channels before starting any change work is crucial to ensure that any final evaluation is evidence-based and reflects an accurate account of the outcomes.

Whilst this sounds like an obvious starting point a number of councils reported issues with comparison of the 'before' metrics with the 'after' – like-for-like is not always possible as a service is transformed. For example, Rochdale found that the back-end reporting from its Capita revenues software did not provide the statistics and metrics that the project required. This was successfully resolved by deploying Google Analytics code in the new online services, enabling the council to improve consistency in baselining and monitoring metrics moving forwards.

Interestingly, these projects were not 'whole council change programmes'; rather they were precisely targeted projects – although they may have been part of or aligned to wider corporate

"Like every council we have to balance our budgets and we were looking at ways to achieve this. These savings have made a massive impact on balancing the budget."

Councillor Amy Wilson, Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport, Sunderland City Council

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[1] Potential for Channel Shift in Local Government, Socitm, 2012 https://www.socitm.net/

change or transformation programmes – setting out to address a specific service. This highlights that councils can gain significant financial benefit from smaller, targeted investments in the digitisation and automation of process-driven or high-volume areas, for example licencing or council tax.

In addition, the projects were asked to assess how officer capacity released by channel shift had financially benefitted the wider service. This benefits realisation work highlighted that almost a quarter of a million pounds was generated by officers in two councils:

- Torbay officers undertook a review delivering £138,105 in additional council tax revenue.

- Lincoln council tax officers were able to deliver an increase of £84,819 in revenue.

Lincoln was also able to avoid £15,000 in costs by undertaking system integration in-house as opposed to employing consultants to undertake the task.

5.2 Return on investment

The LGA asked the projects to set out how they would deliver a minimum efficiency saving of three times the grant investment. Councils were awarded a maximum of £15,000 in grant to support the delivery of their projects, therefore the LGA was looking for delivery of upwards of £45,000 in savings from each.

In total £299,500 in grants was awarded to participants of the Digital Channel Shift Programme. These councils successfully achieved over £1.69 million in savings and

"Each form that's completed is less work for officers – and not just in the council tax office but if someone has filled in a piece of paper and written in the details that goes to an officer who has to scan it into the workflow and it then has to go to the appropriate person who has to pick it up – the whole thing just magnifies. And it allows you to capture so much information like email addresses that you don't get in letters."

Bob Wagstaff, Council Tax Team Leader, City of Lincoln Council

increased income during their first year of operation – delivering an average return of £5.64 on every £1 of grant funding.

5.3 Non-financial benefits

Councils participating in the programme were also asked to track and assess non-financial benefits gained during their projects.

This process looked at three areas of benefit:

- benefits to the council

- benefits to customers

- benefits to partners.

5.3.1 Benefits to the council

Efficiency

Without exception, those councils that integrated online forms with back-office systems – from licencing to council tax – have improved efficiency and accuracy in transaction processing, whilst at the same time removing the risks of error from rekeying data.

This back-office integration and automated workflow processing approach enabled both Calderdale to react to the launch of Uber in its

"We are saving around £100,000 a year – and for a borough council that's quite significant. If we keep that momentum going that gradually adds up into not only an improved service but a much cheaper way of providing that service."

Ray Lee, Strategic Director, Elmbridge Borough Council

area and Lincoln to cope with a significant increase in new housing, in each case without taking on more staff.

In addition, with paper removed from processes, the majority of these projects also reported reductions in paper and postage costs and storage space requirements. In Cheltenham, for example, with licensing now digitised there is no need for filing storage space – the removal of paper is part of a wider transformation project that has enabled the council to compress some of its office space.

Improved data accuracy and visibility

As highlighted above, integrating online forms with the back office removes the risk of error from rekeying, which has improved data accuracy in back-office systems for the projects adopting this approach.

This improved data has provided additional benefits, such as better customer insight and intelligence. This has proved a boon to future service planning and also in enforcement or counter-fraud activities – particularly in the waste and licencing projects. For example, in Newcastle WasteBot not only helped to reduce fraud onsite, but the data generated helped to target potential fraud for enforcement action.

A number of projects have also included dashboards with real-time back-office and service performance clearly visible to all involved – from the front line to the service back office – again enabling better planning and targeting of resources.

Improved council reputation

The improvements to customer experience and service delivery have, not unexpectedly, had a positive impact on the councils' reputation with their customers. Various feedback surveys from across the different projects reported improvements in satisfaction and anecdotal evidence from floorwalking and customer service representatives suggests that providing

"Feedback has been positive – engineers have even received direct 'thank yous' from customers, which is great for job satisfaction and morale."

Donna Hodgson, Network Manager – Highways, Wakefield Council

"Awesome service. Love being able to manage my council tax online."

City of Lincoln revenues and benefits customer

a more flexible and accessible service has enhanced the participating councils' reputations for delivering efficient, modern services to their citizens.

Releasing capacity

As highlighted under 'financial benefits', the shift to online self-service and automated processing has released significant amounts of officer time across these projects.

Staff no longer have inboxes full of memos and backlogs to respond to. And in all cases, this time has been put to good use – from the additional council tax reviews generating significant income to managing increasing workloads with the same resource noted previously.

In addition, staff have been able to spend more 'quality' time working with vulnerable people or complex caseloads or supporting people who need help to use digital channels to self-serve.

Lichfield, for example, used to have one specialist visiting officer who helped people to fill in forms in their own homes. Due to the reduction in individual workloads this role has now been absorbed by all staff, meaning that those customers who need this one-to-one support can be visited and helped more quickly as more staff are available.

Released staff time in Gloucestershire is being used to widen accessibility to archived material, with staff now able to help those who are unable to access the online service or who prefer to use paper forms to explore the wealth of the collection.

Meanwhile, in Sunderland, the release of capacity in customer and environmental services teams has enabled the service area to absorb other demand pressure, for example changes to the bin rounds, without the need for additional staff.

Many projects have also invested this released time into improving services. For example, in

> "We are getting really good feedback from the funeral directors to the point that the last funeral director I went to see isn't actually a major user of our service but is the president of the National Association of Funeral Directors for Merseyside. He was so pleased with the system that he has invited me to give a presentation at the next meeting!"
>
> **Alan Sheldon, Senior Cemeteries and Crematoria Officer, Liverpool City Council**

Cheltenham, officers have been able to set the council up as a training centre for new taxi and private hire driver training.

Staff morale

A number of internal performance reviews suggest that the redesigned online services have had a direct impact on improving staff morale and job satisfaction.

In Scarborough staff feel more productive and staff satisfaction levels in general have risen across customer services, back-office administration and refuse crews according to both staff surveys and one-to-one reviews.

Highways engineers in Wakefield, also enjoyed the closer relationship with members of the public. Having a 'two-way' digital connection led to members of the public sending 'thank yous' direct to the engineers who had fixed their problem – this had a particularly positive impact on team morale.

Many of the revenues and benefits services involved in the programme also reported that staff had enjoyed their new roles – their work is more varied and they have more time to focus on complex cases. In benefits in particular, staff are happy that they no longer have to key in information and instead can focus more on checking the information and the claim itself.

Customer services staff also reported greater satisfaction in a number of these projects. Many of the self-service capabilities developed were also designed to be used by customer services staff empowering them with the same information on screen that would be available to a customer or back-office service member of staff.

Having information at their fingertips allows staff to deal quickly and confidently with customers. For example, the information from WasteBot in Newcastle enabled site staff to feel confident in challenging site users who were abusing the process. Meanwhile, in Sunderland customer service staff could access information to allow them to confidently respond to customers complaining about 'missed' bins.

Interestingly, a number of projects reported some initial staff fears that self-service or automation could lead to job losses. In Rochdale, for example, additional care was taken to engage call centre staff and demonstrate as quickly as possible the benefits of releasing capacity – in this case it was the ability for the call centre to take on more services.

Improved working relationships

Thanks to the user research and agile methodologies which projects were encouraged to adopt, many have reported improved relationships – and greater mutual understanding – between customer services staff and the back-office staff.

In addition, the process of user research also built new working relationships in many cases between wider service partners. For example, alcohol and entertainment licensing digitisation in Cheltenham helped to forge new working relationships with key partners, such as the police, trading standards, the county council and other internal departments. In West Sussex, the user research forged stronger relationships between the special educational needs (SEND) team, school special education need coordinators (SENCOs) and parents.

Many of the projects also worked closely with their core suppliers during the process and report improved and positive relationships with them as a result.

Reuse of assets

Many of these projects aimed to reuse the methodologies and digital products developed to help transform other services. For example, from the outset Wakefield intended to create a replicable model for transforming other elements of highways services and wider customer-facing services.

In North Yorkshire's project the ability to both upload photographs and provide highways inspectors' information to the parish council via the portal have been replicated in the main customer portal.

Liverpool's unique cemeteries and crematoria self-service booking for funeral directors is receiving national attention and interest from other councils. The council plans to publish the open source code to make it freely available to others.

Gloucestershire, meanwhile, is confident that it has helped to enhance the core archiving system that is used by a majority of the country's archivists. As stipulated in the original funding agreement, the improvements developed at Gloucestershire are now incorporated in the supplier's base software build and therefore available via the usual update process to all users at no extra cost.

Behavioural change

Many of the projects reported a positive shift in customer behaviour while they were underway thanks to the improved ease of use and transparency created in the delivery of the service.

For example, in both Sunderland and Scarborough, customers now take more responsibility for putting their bins out for collection at the right time. When both services were first digitised, call centre staff initially had difficult conversations with customers, outlining the evidence that bins had not been put out for collection and stating that the bin lorry would not be returning to pick up their bin that week. However, these conversations quickly turned to a more positive theme, educating customers on

"The specifications drawn up as a result of the LGA funding have been built into the base build now of the new version of the CALM software – so that will roll out automatically to any user who updates their software. Once that has happened we can be used as an example – so people will be able to look at our website and see the service in action."

Claire Collins, Digital Reservation and Access Officer (Project manager), Gloucestershire County Council

"Our staff at the household waste sites can experience daily abuse from users.

"WasteBot has contributed to a reduction in abuse though as the terms and conditions of the site are clearly laid out in the application process and the database enables us to record abusive behaviour which we can then follow up with further correspondence."

Paul Cooper, Senior Neighbourhood Manager, Newcastle City Council

how to play their part and take responsibility for putting their bins out at the correct time. In both councils the first year of operation saw a reduction in missed bins and a reduction in complaints about the service.

Newcastle's WasteBot roll-out also led to a positive change in customer behaviour. The removal of paper permits simultaneously meant fraudulent use of permits was much more difficult, and this has led to a significant drop in confrontation for staff onsite. Staff now use WasteBot and proof of ID onsite to verify permits. Due to the 90-second application process via text message, those who have arrived without a permit can get one within minutes.

Meanwhile, Rochdale's approach focused on behavioural change nudged people to self-serve at every stage of their interaction with the council. From the point at which the customer first approaches the customer centre, or calls in to the council, staff and automated messages remind people to try the self-service facilities rather than to wait in a queue. As has been noted in the previous section, this approach led to a significant channel shift to self-serve and impressive savings for the council.

5.3.2 Benefits to the customer

Convenient, anytime, anywhere services

Being able to choose when and how to access public services is a game changer for citizens and businesses, and makes access to local services as accessible as banking or shopping online.

For example, taxi and private hire drivers can apply for licences in Cheltenham and

> "We have listened to what our customers want and whilst most are pretty digital savvy, we do still have some who require help. But we have trained our customer services to give that help so they can actually talk to the customer and talk them through the form and key it in – so what the back office get is the finished product."
>
> **Pat Leybourne, Head of Customer Services, Revenues & Benefits, Lichfield District Council**

Calderdale at any time of day or night – to fit in with their shift-based working life – via their mobile phones, tablet, laptop or desktop computer.

And council tax customers self-serving via 'MyCouncil' accounts in Lincoln and Harlow now have access to their council tax account history and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Improved customer experience

Councils participating in these projects have focused on the customer experience, ensuring that customers can find the information and services they need as quickly, and simply, as possible.

The majority have also built in reminders to services where repeat applications or payments are required – for example, Elmbridge is using GOV.UK to send SMS text message reminders of council tax payments due. The reminders are designed to make payment as simple as possible, including links in the message to

> "Initially customers were not happy that we were informing them that their bin had not been missed when they were trying to report that it had been, and we got a number of complaints. This has changed significantly though as people have got used to the idea that we have technology that enables us to go back and check exactly what happened to their collection. Having this live information gives our customer service team the confidence to deal with difficult conversations."
>
> **Ian Richardson, Acting Assistant Director of Environmental Services, Sunderland City Council**

enable customers to immediately take action and make the payment.

There is evidence that customers appreciate these improved, easily accessible channels for interaction. Satisfaction feedback on customer journeys and interactions across these projects is consistently high: in Lincoln 96 per cent of customers rate the online service as good or above, and in Scarborough there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of compliments received about the refuse and recycling service.

Faster decisions and transparency

Customers are getting faster service and quicker decisions about applications, benefits and other services covered by projects in this programme.

For example, in Cheltenham, end-to-end licence application process times have been reduced by 77 per cent for licenced drivers (93 days down to 22) and by 67 per cent for licenced vehicles (27 days down to 9).

Reminder emails that licences are due for renewal also means that drivers have advanced warning of the application process, and the end-to-end digitisation means that there is no risk of reminders 'getting lost in the post'.

Meanwhile, for all councils working on council tax projects, customers are now receiving bills more quickly on notifying the council of moving into a property, plus faster responses to queries and applications for single person discounts.

Better support for vulnerable customers

Self-service with automated or speedier processing of the majority of service transactions frees up officer time, allowing them to spend more time supporting vulnerable people or resolving complex cases.

All councils participating in the programme had used some of the released staff capacity to help more vulnerable customers.

> "Don't think of it as efficiency savings but think of it as moving resources across so that you are supporting those people that will otherwise fall through the cracks – so essentially you are providing a better service all round. That's what we should be doing."
>
> **James Straw, Senior Benefits Manager, Harlow Council**

In Rochdale they used that time and customer insight data to identify these customers in order to be able to work more closely with them.

Assisted digital and non-digital

All councils took care to ensure that support was available for those unable or unwilling to use online self-service facilities.

All had put in place options, from retention of paper forms to help with making an online application or service request.

The majority deployed the same self-service forms to the customer call centre, enabling call centre staff to take the customer through the application on the phone.

A number of councils, including Rochdale and Harlow, deployed floorwalkers to help people use available PCs or their own phones to apply for services or to teach them how to use the new online facilities.

Others, for example, Calderdale and Cheltenham, had PCs and officer support available to help drivers apply for licences and demonstrate how to self-serve the next time they needed to apply.

Feedback from a number of projects suggested that, where English was a second language, the availability of online services 24/7 enabled family members to help people to find information and apply for services – for example, when children came home from school they could help parents or grandparents fill in forms online, outside of normal council office hours.

Harlow had taken this one step further, enabling family members to be verified in order for them to then help their relatives gain access to their revenues and benefits services at home.

> "This is all about understanding who are the people who may fall through the cracks in society. We have integrated place teams working in our most deprived communities to try and identify those people and work with them."
>
> **Mark Jones, Senior Customer Access Manager, Rochdale Borough Council**

> "It is essential for our vulnerable customers that we do provide paper-based forms as and when we need them. It's a case of each customer is dealt with on his/her merits as we know the vast majority will be able to use the online service, there may be some that can't and we have to be able to support them too."
>
> **James Straw, Senior Manager (Benefits), Harlow Council**

> "We had a set way of working and we weren't looking at it from the customer perspective. The LGA Digital Channel Shift Programme gave us the focus to examine and reinvent our service delivery – not only with regards to potholes but across the entire organisation."
>
> **Neil Rodgers, Service Director for Planning, Transportation & Highways, Wakefield Council**

5.2.3 Benefits to partners

Benefits did not accrue only to the projects themselves. In a number of cases project partners also benefitted to some extent. For example, West Sussex's checklist and improved electronic application form strengthened working relationships between schools, parents and carers.

In Gloucestershire, thanks to the new online service, the local police constabulary will be able to access its own information at all times. This will save officer time coming into the archive office to wait for documents to be found – avoiding approximately 46 visits a year.

In Liverpool, funeral directors have benefitted by having easy access to a booking system they can use whenever they need it, enabling them to provide an even better service to their customers.

6. Understanding user need

All projects in this programme were encouraged to undertake thorough user research to ensure that their projects met the needs of their users. Projects were also encouraged to undertake thorough user testing prior to launch.

The majority of projects approached user research by taking advantage of existing data and user insight. This was used to explore current user profiles and create an evidence base from which to identify user need.

Additional datasets were also useful at this stage. For example, Rochdale used the Experian Mosaic database which allowed the project team to segment the borough and identify the type of areas and households that would be likely to access online services.

The data helped Rochdale to identify those people capable of doing things online who were not currently doing so, but might be encouraged with the right nudge or support.

User research

Projects deployed a number of tactics within their user research, including:

- reviewing existing evidence (for example, service analytics and customer insight, external data sources)

- interviewing and observing actual or potential users

- talking to people inside and outside their organisations who work with these existing or potential users (for example, caseworkers, call centre agents and charity workers).

West Sussex County Council's special education needs assessment team conducted excellent user research.

"Key challenges from a project management perspective were the different wants and needs so actually clarifying what it was that people wanted and what they actually needed was different depending on what area they worked in or location they were working in."

Emma Jane Lickiss, Project Manager, North Yorkshire County Council

"As part of the project we held a stakeholder engagement workshop which contained around 40 professionals as well as users. It was a fantastic session with everyone coming together to share ideas on how might we improve the process, and how might we help to dispel the myths that are held around education health and care plans."

Laura Goman, Customer Experience Business Change Project Manager, West Sussex County Council

In their discovery phase the team held an initial stakeholder event involving 40 professionals from school special education needs coordinators (SENCOs) to NHS and education staff, along with parents and carers from the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum. It was at this stage that the need for a pre-application checklist was identified in order to help parents, carers and SENCOs to navigate the education, health and care needs assessment (EHCNA) process.

This checklist was high on everyone's priorities due to the number of requests for assessments that were turned down. Furthermore, there was particular interest in providing clarity on the customer journey, creating greater transparency about what support was available and what was required in order to access that support.

In the subsequent checklist design phase, the team focused on clarifying both individuals' rights and the threshold requirements for initiating an EHCNA – and simplifying the user journey through the process.

Once the checklist was created, further workshops involving the Parent Carer Forum and SENCOs worked through the checklist design to obtain feedback and refine the tool. At this stage the team deployed eye movement tracking software to track how customers moved through the checklist and web information and to spot where they may be having problems.

A number of councils – including Rochdale and Lincoln – focused on specific 'digitally capable' user groups that had the potential to self-serve

within their user research. Customer insight and analysis work had previously identified subsets of such customers that could be targeted.

In Rochdale, contact and service centre staff were then involved in collecting user feedback during customer interactions to inform change and then, importantly, to assess how well the changes were received.

Whereas in Lincoln, the team opted to use council staff as an easily accessible pool of people for initial user research – noting that councils employ a wide range of demographics, the majority of staff are also end-users of the revenues and benefits services, and are demonstrably digitally-capable in that they already use online services in their daily working life at the council. Workshops with the revenues service teams then brought in expert user knowledge to ensure that the new online forms being designed complied with legislation and captured all information required for processing.

A number of projects delivered online forms for services. In all cases a satisfaction survey was built into these forms to enable the capture of information for ongoing research and iterative development.

When a service was to be used or delivered offsite it was essential to research in the field. For example, in Newcastle, research at household recycling and waste sites demonstrated that the majority of site users would have access to a mobile phone, but not always necessarily a smart phone. To meet user need the team felt it was clear that SMS text messaging would enable the most people possible to access the service. In addition, as staff wear protective gloves while onsite, it was essential that the service could be used on an easy-to-access device with large buttons.

> "It's very difficult for funeral directors to set a time for working with us because their work can be so unpredictable and very demanding. So it was easy for me, having once worked in the industry, to be able to dedicate some time to testing the new system."
>
> **John Little, Memorial Management Officer, Liverpool City Council**

On a final note, a number of projects reported the challenge of reconciling the different wants and needs of users who interact with the digital service. Gaining consensus on actual 'needs' versus 'wants' early on can be difficult but it is essential in developing a successful solution.

User engagement

A number of projects encountered problems with running their user research.

Some found that engaging internal partners was difficult, due to competing workloads and priorities. Gaining senior management and member-level support was key in countering any initial reluctance on this front.

Others found that engaging end-users can be a challenge as often these end-users cannot see how they will benefit from giving their time in this way.

Often, the projects were dealing with a particular niche user group – such as taxi drivers, funeral directors or parents/carers of children with special education needs. Whilst the fact that it is a niche service made it easy in all such cases to identify and define the end-user, this can bring its own unique challenges in terms of recruiting them to get involved in user testing.

For instance, in Liverpool the project team encountered difficulties engaging with funeral directors.

Funeral directors provide a highly emotional, unpredictable service to people reacting to the death of a loved one – dealing with the bereaved rightly took precedence over planned user research sessions. To counter this the team had to become creative and instead harnessed the experience of a staff member who had previously worked for a funeral director. Using this perspective the team delivered a highly successful user experience for funeral directors to use self-service to book crematoria and cemetery funeral slots.

Other tactics deployed by councils to conduct user research included adding questions to call centre scripts to capture feedback and working with face-to-face advisors or 'floorwalkers' to document the experience of the customers they are helping to access a service.

Customer journey and analytics

The majority of councils also deployed Google Analytics to track the customer journey through their website. This wealth of data enabled them to identify where customers might be having problems and thereby to explore how these could be addressed.

This data could also help pinpoint where integration or other technical failures occurred and provided vital clues to help resolve such issues. For example, in Lincoln, analytics highlighted broken journeys where customers had entered information in unexpected formats in council tax forms. Simple tweaks to field validation were made to either accept the entry, or prompt for a different format to be entered, resolving the issue.

North Yorkshire's team are heavy users of Google Analytics, constantly monitoring usage and customer journeys to look for opportunities to improve. Staff use a dedicated dashboard created by the council's business intelligence team to show which parish councils are using the new parish portal and which are yet to log in. This dashboard information was used to target the 'hard to reach' parish councils who were not yet using the portal, including those 'inactive users' with an account. These parish councils were then contacted individually to establish why they had not yet reported a fault on the portal and what barriers they were encountering in using the portal.

At the start of the programme, not all councils were seasoned analytics users. Sunderland, for example, initially felt that it lacked a comprehensive understanding and commissioned a local digital marketing agency to support their project with a review of its current analytics and tracking approach. Part of this engagement provided advanced Google Analytics, Google360 and Data Studio tools training and 'tag manager'[2] skills transfer in order to integrate 'live chat' into the website and give the team the skills it needed moving forwards.

The team found the training and new skills enormously beneficial within their agile and iterative project management approach. They were able to review current website usage, design and test new customer journeys and provide insight and evidence for improvement.

Keep it simple

Common to all the user research undertaken by these projects was the finding that 'keeping it simple' and avoiding technical jargon was essential to driving take-up.

One clear example here is Lichfield's experience that the terminology used in the old online forms did not mean anything to the customers trying to use them. It was apparent that the original forms had been designed by 'tech savvy' people with in-depth knowledge of council tax legislation, but that this had not translated into easy-to-use forms for the general public.

These issues often required only small word changes or the addition of a question to make the form simpler to understand and more customer-friendly.

A number of councils using supplier-designed forms for council tax encountered similar issues. When this issue was raised with the supplier, the team was told, "well that's people using the form wrong". This was not helpful in terms of customising the forms to meet local need and addressing the realities of local demographics or lack of citizen understanding of how services work.

The ability to refine language and simplify the customer's journey was key to driving take-up. Projects made a significant effort to encourage the use of plain English – roads, not carriageways; bins, not refuse containers – and often harnessed internal communications teams

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[2] Tag manager – the ability to manage user-generated tags within collaborative software

for help in simplifying language to meet local needs.

Two projects, Elmbridge and Newcastle, also focused on digital simplicity, ie text messaging, as the lowest common denominator for a digital channel. Elmbridge's research indicated that 90 per cent of all incoming text messages are read within three minutes, and that over 99 per cent of all text messages are read by the recipient.[3] Using the GOV.UK Notify SMS channel therefore provided an opportunity to increase council tax payment rates through timely 'nudges' via text reminders.

User testing

Testing new digital solutions with users should be done as early as possible in order to inform the development process.

In general, projects tested developments with their users during the user research phases. Issues encountered in engaging users in the first instance remained and had substantial impact on testing timescales for many projects.

To get around engagement difficulties the projects deployed creative tactics, including running initial test workshops with internal staff, involving customer service advisors with targeted questioning either face-to-face or over the phone, and deploying floorwalkers to take customers through the new services for feedback.

All councils were clear, however, about the value of thoroughly testing new services ahead of launch and the importance of involving all internal stakeholders, users and end-customers as much as possible in this process.

A significant number of councils successfully deployed an agile and iterative approach to development, with iterations tested at every stage.

All projects benefitted from this user testing process, ultimately delivering better solutions for their customers as well as reducing failure demand.

For example, Harlow undertook testing for the initial online forms (moving into or out of the borough) during an internal soft launch to test the My Revenues and Benefits service via the

"Develop it, test it, tweak it, develop it, test it tweak it was our approach…releasing a little bit, getting feedback and then tweak – so we absolutely followed an agile approach."

Jenny Nelson, Digital Newcastle Programme Manager, Newcastle City Council

intranet, asking staff to sign up for the service and to feedback on any issues. The floorwalking team then provided an opportunity for further testing by taking customers through the self-serve process on four terminals in the self-serve area and gaining feedback on the usability and content of the online forms. The response to this form of engagement and testing was very positive and valuable feedback was gained on content and navigation that was subsequently incorporated into future changes in the forms. For example, floorwalkers found that customers were interpreting questions differently and put forward a strong case for using simpler language.

West Sussex took advantage of Flashback software to test its checklist and application forms with parents, carers and school SENCOs. The software monitored eye movements and tracked actions taken to complete the task. This feedback was used alongside traditional, verbal, feedback to improve the tools – for example, some users felt that the initial designs and language were too 'harsh' for such an emotional issue and further iterations amended the language to make the process less daunting to parents and carers.

User Experience Design (UX)

Having identified a problem with keeping customer journeys and the user experience consistent through its multiple supplier portal offerings, North Yorkshire focused on in-house portal development and improving the user's experience.

The council's wider project team and software developers were given high-level training by QA (a specialist provider) on how to design web forms using a new methodology that has been proven to encourage take-up of services online – User Experience Design (UX). Whilst a relatively new methodology to most councils,

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[3] MobileSquared https://mobilesquared.co.uk/

this approach is used by leading organisations like Sky Digital, Virgin and the BBC to design web services for customers that are engaging and encourage more interaction and transacting. For example, the BBC iPlayer was designed using this technique.

North Yorkshire is clear that the opportunity provided by the LGA to invest in in-house UX skills was important not only to the success of this project but was an investment that would have ongoing benefits in continuously improving and developing digital services in the future.

Training

Whilst online services used by the public must be straightforward and intuitive, internal systems are often more complex. Therefore, thorough internal user training is essential if a system is to be successfully adopted by staff.
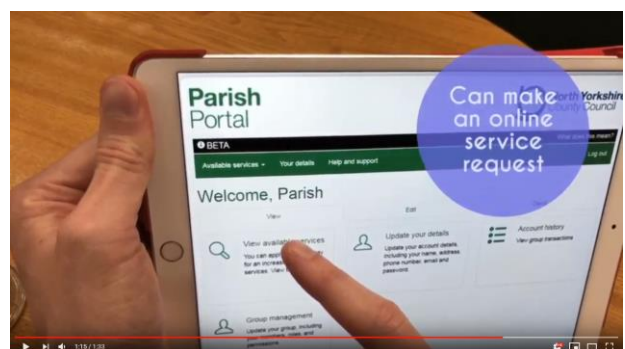
Wakefield, for example, found that asking a customer services 'CRM' expert to deliver key training messages and translating these messages for individual service areas was key to its successful go-live.

In Liverpool, approximately 60 contact centre staff needed to be trained in how to use the new system so that they could support those users (funeral directors) still wanting to book by phone rather than to self-serve. This user training was undertaken in-house, and internally produced user guides led users through the different permutations of calls and requirements to complete a booking for a funeral director.

Meanwhile, it was felt that the funeral directors themselves would need some training on the new self-serve booking system. Due to the difficulties previously noted in getting funeral directors to come to the council offices, a senior cemeteries and crematoria officer visited each business to train their staff in how to use the system. This mixed approach to training, taking account of user need, was very successful.

In projects where systems were to be used onsite or on a mobile basis, direct user training was required. For example, in Scarborough, training staff accompanied the refuse crews on their rounds to deliver 'on-the-job' training. A 'crib sheet' was also provided in-cab for crews as an ongoing reference in the use of the new system.

A number of projects produced end user training videos. For example, North Yorkshire produced a video to help parish clerks make the shift to online, and Gloucestershire produced a series of videos to help people to get the most out of the new digital archive services – the first of which, The Basics, has had over 1,400 views.

7. Driving user take-up

Successfully promoting the availability of new online self-service options is essential in order to drive take-up.

Our projects used traditional and more innovative approaches to engaging the public and encouraging them to use the new online services.

Like a number of councils, Sunderland has been running a general 'do it online' campaign to encourage residents to make the council website their first port of call for information and service requests. When a particular service has been redesigned, such as waste services in the LGA project, this has been the focus for communications. Activities included e-bulletins, information and adverts in resident publications and on council communications. Messages directing people to new online channels were included on social media, email, text, direct mail and automated voice messages.

Lincoln, on the other hand, took a targeted approach to engaging a niche group of users, student landlords. The team contacted all landlords in the city and explained the speed of turnaround available via self-service, compared to the timescales involved in the traditional process and subsequent delay in service delivery – as a result, they successfully engaged landlords in using the self-service options.

Meanwhile in Waverley the project team recognised that driving behaviour change both internally and with end-users would be a continuous process of awareness raising and reinforcement. An ongoing internal and external communications campaign was therefore

"Having a dedicated resource – someone that is accountable for channel shift and can really focus on it and who understands customers, who's good at building relationships with services, with ICT, with customers – is absolutely crucial. We're all so busy reacting to day-to-day demands and the urgent things that come up and this type of work needs a very proactive person – and needs that dedicated role."

Mark Jones, Senior Customer Access Manager, Rochdale Borough Council

"We looked at the customer journey from a web perspective, from a contact centre perspective and from a face-to-face perspective to see how customers come in via these channels and then identify opportunities, amending those journeys to push them to our online services."

Asam Jan, Transformation Project Manager, Rochdale Borough Council

designed to promote self-service and the new online services as they became available.

Nudging more customers online

Uniquely in these projects, Rochdale Borough Council dedicated a full-time resource to behavioural change in order to drive sustainable channel shift – successfully delivering over £182,000 in savings through significant take-up of self-service and corresponding reductions in the use of traditional contact channels.

The approach started with analysis of customer behaviour to understand 'why' customers reported problems. Being able to identify the drivers for customer behaviour provided opportunities to change the interaction. For example, keen to increase recycling rates, the team provided opportunities via all channels for customers to request additional recycling bins when they were reporting a missed bin or collection issue.

Equally, however, the council was keen to reduce landfill. Therefore, no option was given to self-serve requests for general waste bins. Instead the customer was asked to call in to the contact centre, where advisors took the opportunity to discuss reducing landfill and increasing recycling – and offer an additional recycling bin instead.

The results speak for themselves and evidence the potential gains that can be made from a dedicated focus on behavioural change through improving the customer's journey across all channels and nudging customers to use online services. As a result of this success the project manager's initial 12-month funded post has been made permanent.

> "As floorwalker, my role was to introduce myself as a benefits officer and reassure the customer that they didn't have to physically see the same benefits officer but that I could assist them in reporting their changes online. Overall it was positive. There were people who really appreciated my help in telling them about the service, especially as I was able to show them how it worked and actually do if for them so they could see for themselves how easy it was."
>
> **Donna Bouzidi, Revenues and Benefits Officer at the time, Harlow Council**

Face-to-face

With the objective to shift more users online – and a recognition of the need to increase digital skills in all users – the majority of projects provided one-to-one help for those customers who needed assistance to help them start their digital journey.

In many of these projects, customer services staff discussed and promoted the self-service options during any face-to-face customer enquiries. They also helped users to sign up during appointments, on main reception counters or by deploying floorwalkers to engage with people as they queued for the service desk.

In Harlow, for example, floorwalking support officers engaged with customers and encouraged them to try the self-serve options. These officers used common consumer technology, such as tablets and smart phones, to demonstrate and champion the services and show customers how easy they were to use, how much of their time it would save and how it would reduce the need for them to contact the council in future.

Meanwhile, in Lichfield, customer services staff made appointments for people to come in to make a benefit claim and then sat with the customer to fill in the form online.

Signage

A number of projects also deployed signage and adverts on TV screens in customer centres to promote the ease of self-service while people waited in queues.

Print

All opportunities to add easy-to-follow URLs on bills and other printed material relevant to the new service were taken to promote the online service.

Indeed, some of council tax projects removed telephone numbers from annual council tax bills and replaced them with URLs to encourage self-service.

Typical print promotion included:

- leaflet campaigns to accompany the annual billing cycle
- posters in libraries, job centres, and the civic centre
- adverts in magazines published by the council and other local public and third sector organisations
- articles in local and council publications.

Email

Most projects added awareness messages in standard email communications with customers. For example, highlighting that a query being answered by email could be done in future without delay online.

Staff were encouraged to add messaging to their email signatures and auto email responses were often amended to encourage sign-up.

Where councils had gained consent to send emails to customers this was also used to great effect to spread awareness. For example, targeting customers who are already using digital channels or online payments for some services and letting them know that they can also now access new services helps increase take-up.

Lincoln used this type of direct targeting, based on existing knowledge about customer behaviour, to offer additional services in what turned out to be their most successful promotional campaign. For example, when customers applied for the garden waste service a question within the form asked customers if the council could contact them regarding other council services using that email address. Where permission was given, newly available services were successfully 'pushed' to these customers.

Interestingly, the team at Lincoln found that as part of this email push campaign, the peak time for responses and action was 10.00 am. The team surmised that this was the point in the morning when people took a coffee break, having been in work for a few hours, and looked at their mobile phones. Taking advantage of this user behaviour the team opted to schedule such emails in future to land in people's inboxes ahead of 10.00 am.

Social media

All councils today have active social media communities across Twitter and Facebook and run information and engagement campaigns throughout the year. And indeed, all our projects leveraged these existing resources and campaigns as a channel to inform the public about their new services and encourage take-up.

Website

As noted in previous sections, great focus was placed on the customer's journey in accessing services and web analytics.

But other opportunities were also taken to promote new services via websites.

Lincoln used logic within the forms to 'cross-sell' other services to customers that they had not yet signed up to. For example, paperless bills include a link to sign up for direct debit payment where customers had a history of paying their bills by cash; while the move forms provide links to both the single person discount application and direct debit creation.

Meanwhile, in a number of projects, keyword lookups were added to forms so that Google and council website searches would display the correct relevant pages regardless of search

terms used. For example, entry of any of the following could lead to a direct debit form: DD, direct, debit, direct debit.

Telephone numbers were often reduced in prominence and replaced with 'contact us' forms offering an alternative self-service option. For example, in a number of projects, if a customer types in 'I would like to contact you about a direct debit' they will be offered the relevant forms alongside a message saying "Did you know you could do this online?".

Finally, a number of projects, including West Sussex used web banners to flag new services to customers.

Staff intranet

Internal intranets were used to engage staff and promote use of new self-service options where they themselves could be customers, such as for council tax. For services with new automated forms, staff were encouraged to use these instead of resorting to email or memos.

Telephone

The majority of projects enlisted the support and help of call centre staff to nudge people towards self-service. Many used scripts to

prompt staff to discuss self-service during any related customer conversations.

The majority also harnessed Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) to add nudges to online services wherever appropriate in the customer journey. For example, in Rochdale, IVR filters calls and suggests that the caller can more quickly complete their request online.

If the caller still opts to speak to the customer centre, advisors will handle the request but then also suggest that, in future, such requests could be more quickly completed online. They also explore with the customer why they have chosen not to go online – and any information on how they could help customers get online is fed back to the project team for action.

To ensure consistency in the IVR messaging and customer journeys across services, Rochdale created a template and standards enabling control of the messages and journeys to be handed to the contact centre.

One striking example of how IVR can successfully be used to nudge customers to online channels was the inclusion of a prompt in January 2019 to self-serve for council tax services. The day the message went live there was a marked increase in people dropping off calls and 62 people registered for council tax services via Rochdale's MyAccount – a significant uplift on the average 14 new sign-ups per day.

Word of mouth

Wakefield successfully harnessed the support of councillors, encouraging them to engage directly with their constituents after briefing them on the council's digital strategy and new self-serve MyAccount.

A number of other councils, including Lincoln and Rochdale, harnessed the power of personal recommendation by encouraging members of staff to use the services themselves and then 'spread the word' through friends and family.

In addition, those projects targeting specific segments of the population – such as taxi drivers in Calderdale or funeral directors in Liverpool – also successfully harnessed personal recommendation through influencers and conferences.

Partners and third sector

Where available and where appropriate, a number of projects engaged with the third sector and other partners to help drive take-up. For example, Harlow reached out to Citizens Advice (CAB), a local Advice Centre, HarlowSave, and Streets to Homes organisations, to encourage them to both spread the word and help customers to self-serve.

Managing expectations

In an age of austerity it is important to manage customer expectations about how quickly some services can be delivered. For example, Wakefield specifically looked to provide information to people reporting potholes on the criteria and timescales for repair.

In West Sussex the special education needs assessment team specifically developed a web checklist to walk people through the information they needed and explain the criteria and options for support – this was successful in managing expectations at the outset of the customer journey. If, after completing the checklist, the customer then feels it is appropriate to apply to West Sussex for an assessment, an application link is provided.

Since the checklist has been live, 64 per cent of parents/carers and SENCOs submitting applications for an EHCNA have first used the checklist. This has led to a three per cent reduction in inappropriate requests. Whilst the reduction in inappropriate requests is low, the overall number of requests for EHCNAs only increased by two per cent during 2017/18 compared to 2016/17, against an expected increase of 20 per cent nationally.

"We felt that the checklist was quite important – not only does it save hassle for us further down the line in terms of applications coming through from applicants that won't qualify, it saves the applicants ultimately a lot of time and money. The last thing that we want is somebody applying who isn't eligible. So we feel it's really important to manage those expectations right from the outset."

Toni Kershaw, Customer Access Manager, Calderdale Council

Calderdale undertook a similar checklist approach to the customer journey for applying for a taxi driver licence – ensuring that applicants were eligible to apply in the first instance and were aware of all the information they would need to provide during the application process. Customers need to check the relevant boxes to confirm that they have read the information, are eligible to apply, and have supporting evidence to hand before they can go through to the actual application process.

8. Project approach and learning

The top message from teams across our projects is "Always expect the unexpected!"

Projects encountered delays and challenges from all sides. However, a number of key themes and best practice emerged.

Stakeholder engagement

Engagement: internal buy-in from staff and high-level support from both senior management and councillors is important in any change project. Investing time up front, to make sure that staff working on the service understand the rationale for the project and the benefits they will gain, pays dividends.

Involve everyone: all service users and staff with touchpoints to the project must be engaged in order to take everyone on the same transformation journey. According to Lincoln, the aim should be for staff to see the project as an opportunity, not a threat to jobs. "There was initial resistance in some teams but delivering the evidence that technology can reduce admin time and let them keep up with demand and release capacity was important."

Service areas are experts in what they do: when conducting user research the service officers know the service best. This can be a double-edged sword however, as not only is there valuable knowledge to be gained, but there can also be resistance to the thought of change or challenge around 'who knows what's best for our customers'. Engaging with the service areas early is key.

Focus on the service: Liverpool's team advise that transformation projects should never assume that all services within a council run in the same way and that they should be ready for

> "Understandably staff within the contact centre had a worry about loss of jobs – so we engaged with them to explain that channel shift is more about creating capacity within the centre to bring in more services. This was seen with the transition of school services into the contact centre when capacity had been created."
>
> **Asam Jan, Transformation Project Manager, Rochdale Borough Council**

> "Engage with the service – nobody knows the service better than the service itself."
>
> **Asam Jan, Transformation Project Manager, Rochdale Borough Council**

two-way learning about niche and specialist services, and their unique user needs.

Use the right tools: successful user engagement depends on using the right tools and language for people. For example, Scarborough initiated a whiteboard version of a Kanban board – a visual system for managing and improving work as it moves through a process – in the refuse collection vehicle depot to log issues and actions in a format that was transparent, visible to all and easily understood. This tool played a key role in positive engagement with drivers.

Listen to and value your stakeholders: according to Sunderland you can never do enough engagement. The team met with key people in the service so that they owned the content and felt valued in the process. "So we weren't doing something to them, but we were actually asking them what services were important to their customers."

Manage expectations: setting deadlines and managing expectations with internal customers

> "James as the project manager is responsible for all the vehicles and all the operatives so at the end of each day when the drivers come in there's a white board which they can update – and they'll actually report anything that's wrong. James has his column on that board where he updates it with how he has responded to it and what the fix has been – so everybody can see what is happening and the drivers and operatives are engaged throughout. It's effectively a practical way to do a Kanban board down at a depot for the operatives to use in a way that attracts, appeals and works for them."
>
> **Jeff Crowe, Project Assurance/Analyst, Scarborough Borough Council**

is key, according to Waverley. Everyone needs to understand the processes and timescales involved in setting up and testing new solutions and the time commitment they are expected to give to the project in order to get the right end result: "Agree this process at the outset in order to keep delivery on track."

Get imaginative with stakeholder engagement: getting stakeholders together in short timescales can be difficult so be flexible in how they can participate – use teleconferences, video conferencing and screen sharing as well as face-to-face sessions in order to make it easy for people to be involved.

Metrics

Performance monitoring is essential in order to track progress and realise and capture benefits. The first step in this is to ensure a solid baseline and key metrics that can be compared 'before' and 'after' change.

The goal is to devise a key set of metrics that can be monitored throughout the project and be used to calculate benefits delivered. Common metrics used by projects included:

- the number of face-to-face appointments
- call volumes
- the number of online transactions/use of online forms
- reductions in processing/service delivery times
- sign-up and unsubscribe rates
- click throughs on web links
- keyword tracking
- web analytics and user journeys
- customer feedback (online and face-to-face)
- late payment figures.

> "We are not wedded to agile or waterfall – we use both and apply the right style to the right project."
>
> **Robert Ling, Assistant Director Technology & Change, North Yorkshire County Council**

Some projects struggled with accurate monitoring of metrics when key indicators changed as new processes evolved or baselines were found to be inaccurate.

Agile vs waterfall

Sunderland was one of a number of projects to take advantage of the GDS-delivered training, 'Agile for Teams', on which the LGA organised a number of places for councils.

Under an agile[4] approach, projects run a discovery phase exploring the user need, leading to a focus on rapid prototyping and the development of a 'minimum viable product' delivered in short sprints. Project teams can use this rapid and reactive development cycle to engage users with developments and changes – and gain feedback for further improvement. Teams meet daily with key people to talk through the project and agree what is going well, what is not, and what are the next steps to take. Product development is a continual and iterative process – reviewing and making sure developments work and, if they do not, agreeing how they can be revised. This constant dialogue can be helpful in driving projects forward and in accommodating and reacting to unexpected issues.

All the projects harnessed agile working methodologies to some extent, despite the cultural change that this often involved.

Key learnings include:

Agile really works: take the effort to educate stakeholders about agile methodology and delivery practice. Taking an iterative approach enables continuous and rapid improvement based on feedback.

Educate stakeholders: in North Yorkshire the software development teams were already confident users of agile methodologies. However, this was the first time that an agile approach to project management had been taken. Agile training for the project management and service teams was very well received, and the resulting enthusiasm meant that the agile working process "was an easy one to follow".

Agile is not always the answer: North Yorkshire uses a mix of both agile and waterfall

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[4] For more information, see https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/agile-delivery

> "It was quite a challenge for us to review the website in the timescales we were given because we were trying to allow the implementation of the in-cab technology and the integration at the same time. We decided to take good advantage of agile project management methodology training so a few people in customer services went along to that training. That gave us the skills and tools needed to kind pick up the pace and using things like setting targets to make it a minimal viable product. I would recommend using agile."
>
> **Helen Johnston, Customer Services Delivery Manager, Sunderland City Council**

methodologies as appropriate. An agile approach encourages teams to build quickly, test what they have built and iterate their work based on regular feedback, while waterfall is a sequential software development process that follows defined phases towards wider goals.

Moving at pace: taking an agile approach and training gave Newcastle's team the skills and tools needed to pick up pace. Using techniques such as setting targets to create a minimum viable product was very useful.

Building trust: Sunderland recommends using an agile approach as ''it's not technical, not complicated and helps you to deliver. And it builds up trust with the stakeholders that you work with because you can deliver and share the success on a sprint cycle basis".

Agile can be challenging: whilst a core project team may be comfortable with agile working methodology and practice, the wider stakeholder community was not always confident with this way of working. This was reported to lead to 'project creep' in some instances with add-ons being requested to the original scope. Some also encountered a challenge with taking an agile approach within a culture of traditional IT project management.

Standards

The majority of projects took advantage of the Government Digital Service design principles aligned to the GOV.UK website, in line with a commitment to making the councils' online services as accessible and usable as possible.

Elmbridge also took advantage of the GOV.UK Notify product, something that Scarborough is now in the process of assessing for their own use. Notify enables a service to communicate with customers about service delivery. For example, in Scarborough it would be used to let people know about revised collection services and seasonal changes to their bin collection days.

A number of projects, including Scarborough, took advantage of the unique property reference number (UPRN) contained in councils' Land and Property Gazetteers. Use of this standard can have knock-on benefits in terms of data use across a council. Having a 'golden record' of properties can, for example, enable rapid handling of Data Protection Act subject access requests.

External events

A number of projects encountered events beyond their control that impacted the project. For example, Gloucestershire's archive transformation ran alongside a major building programme to create a new Gloucestershire Heritage Hub. Disruption from this building work meant that the public research room service had to be temporarily re-housed and impacted the facilities available for the launch of the new service, training events and promotion.

In West Sussex the project scope had to be revised due to a wider corporate review of the county's transformation strategy – which led to a delay in acquiring the new digital tools the team required to deliver the original scope within the project timeframe. However, the team took the opportunity to refocus the project to incorporate delivery of a checklist, the need for which had emerged during the discovery phase.

Other projects encountered issues ranging from software licence or upgrade deadlines to a change in corporate policy with a move to

> "Agile is a successful way to run a project. It worked really well for the parish portal because we were continually wanting to engage with the users and having that output at certain points enabled to us to get their feedback."
>
> **Emma Jane Lickiss, Project Manager, North Yorkshire County Council**

single sign-on that needed to be accommodated.

In all instances teams were successful in navigating the changes and refocusing the projects.

Unintended consequences

A number of projects found that giving customers better access to services increased the volume of service requests. For example, Wakefield found that the new ease of pothole reporting significantly increased demand and led to some duplicate reporting during severe weather events.

Rochdale also fell victim to its own success – promotion of new self-service options on the IVR led to an increase in the number of abandoned calls, causing a problem for the contact centre as it had a service level agreement (SLA) relating to such events. A change in the SLA was required and this was subsequently agreed and signed off, with abandoned calls following IVR messages now seen as a win for everyone.

Gloucestershire, meanwhile, warned of the unforeseen consequences of being a pioneer. Many of the teething problems encountered by the team arose simply because they were first to embark on this type of project in the archive world.

Understanding the role of politics

Local government operates in a political environment and all council officers must take account of local democracy and localism in project plans.

For example, in Harlow, original plans to close a civic centre cash office were abandoned due to member concerns over the impact of this on residents. Whilst the decision reflected wider local need, this impacted on the reduction in footfall the project team had targeted with the switch to self-serve.

Bins, for example, are a sensitive local political issue across the country. In Sunderland the planned change from weekly to alternate weekly collection required regular engagement with councillors and customer feedback/performance reporting.

> "We had not done enough engagement with our elected members and they were really nervous that implementing this would create some division within the taxi trade community, and that they would find it difficult to use."
>
> **Sarah Richardson, Assistant Director, Customer Services, Calderdale Council**

In Rochdale, meanwhile, a change in political leadership during the project's time span provided a new opportunity to hold engagement sessions with members and the newly appointed leader of the council. This resulted in unexpected communications from the leader successfully encouraging members and staff to use the online services themselves and to spread the word.

Capacity planning

From staff illness and extended holidays through to key staff changes in both the project team and wider stakeholder and service communities, all projects reported learnings on capacity planning.

For example, Torbay reported that individual teams working on the project had different capacity issues: the revenues team has annual peak workloads related to council tax billing, and the IT teams are running multiple projects in parallel alongside day-to-day support. Aligning capacity across all teams was difficult and impacted on timelines.

On the other hand, North Yorkshire reported that the bulk of product development was conducted over the summer months when its highways service experts had more available time. The team believes this was a key factor in being able to meet the project's delivery timescales and recommends thinking about the availability and capacity of service users to commit time to projects in relation to their day-to-day workloads.

An oft-repeated piece of advice from projects was to build in more contingency time to take account of seasonal peaks in workload, such as annual council tax billing runs, or annual holidays such as the extended Christmas and New Year break.

Learn from others

Contact with other councils working on similar projects or with the same software tools is hugely beneficial for sharing ideas, advice and learning.

Teams in different councils were able to discuss issues and exchange ideas through the LGA programme. Project leads working on similar projects were encouraged and supported to share their experiences and issues as part of a peer group as well as at regular workshops organised by the LGA and via supplier user groups.

For example, Torbay and Harlow were able to discuss issues and exchange ideas as they worked to deliver online self-service for revenues and benefits. Calderdale and Cheltenham shared learning relating to their online licencing developments. And a number of projects using the same online forms software used the product user group to gain advice.

9. Managing suppliers and technology

No project is an island and few have the luxury of a green-field start. All the projects involved improvements to existing services and processes, and all had different starting points in terms of the status quo. These differences meant that experience and outcomes differed even for those implementing the same technology products.

However, a set of common issues, or areas for improvement, emerged relating to their relationships with suppliers.

Procurement

A number of projects found that the realities of procurement processes delayed their planned timescales.

For example, Cheltenham's initial procurement process was more challenging than had been expected as the available frameworks for software procurement did not meet the council's needs, resulting in a decision to go to open tender. This delayed the planned project timings. In addition, the process was further extended to give bidders time to do a practical demonstration of their products to inform the final decision-making.

North Yorkshire also encountered delays in procuring specialist UX training due to internal procurement processes – again impacting on the delivery milestones. However the team was able to adapt to manage these delays and deliver go-live within the target timescales.

A significant number of projects also passed on learning relating to understanding the full breadth of the product and support being purchased. For example, Harlow encountered issues relating to different processing approaches between the generic product and local practice that it had not been aware of at the time of purchase.

"Try and use the supplier's project manager as much as you can. It was noticeable the drop in support we got and our confidence with the implementation thereafter, once that project manager role had ended."

Toby Bowler, IT Systems Administrator and Project Officer, Harlow Council

"It would be beneficial to have more documentation along with the API. A lot of the documentation was built around Civica's own forms – so they sell the package as a forms package with APIs behind it. To have full documentation would have been a great help to know what the API did, compared to what the Civica forms did."

Nick Jones, Project Leader IT, Torbay Council

Managing suppliers

The best laid plans can always be subject to external impact and unexpected events, and the overwhelming advice from projects was to proactively manage the supplier relationship.

Issues encountered included:

- supplier delays in product development, upgrade, and/or delivery

- delays in fixing reported bugs

- unexpected impact of upgrades on existing systems – including bugs introduced by supplier upgrades and being charged to fix them

- products not functioning as expected

- lack of documentation, eg on APIs

- unexpected charges, eg for skills transfer

- conflicting priorities

- churn of key contacts within supplier project management and technical support teams.

To counter these issues projects shared a number of key learning points:

Engage with supplier user groups: a number of the projects used the Firmstep online forms platform and engaged with the company's customer network. This engagement had a positive impact on sharing knowledge across projects. For example, the Lincoln team used this network to enhance its own knowledge base and use of XML.

Leverage supplier support: Harlow's team was keen to advise councils to ensure that they have supplier project manager support throughout the entire project – locking in the expectations on both sides.

Explore standard components: Elmbridge pioneered the use of the Government Digital Service's GOV.UK Notify as a means of keeping customers updated on requested service delivery. Use of standard and open platforms such as GOV.UK Notify can be of great benefit to local public services.

Never assume: a number of teams encountered challenges getting new software up and running smoothly – co-dependencies on internal system and network upgrades or conflicting corporate priorities often impacted project delivery. Many, including Harlow, found that they did not have as much control over customisation (in this case, of Civica forms and workflow) as had been anticipated.

Lincoln also encountered problems with its assumption that it could customise council branding on its Firmstep forms for customers of the joint revenues service it provided – but as Lincoln held the licence its branding was automatically applied to all forms. The team

successfully addressed this problem by applying their own in-house skills in JavaScript (a web programming language).

The general advice was to speak with the supplier's technical consultants in advance of procurement, rather than relying on sales information.

Keep flexible: Newcastle is an example of a project that changed tack during the project in response to new products being available. During the Discovery phase it was ascertained that the council's existing text marketing service provider was not available as a channel on the chosen Microsoft Bot Framework, leading to use of an alternative text provider at additional cost. However, the team is open to future change to bring back the corporate provider and reduce ongoing costs. Elmbridge changed SMS text provider after the start of its project when GOV.UK Notify was made available.

Mobile device challenges: Scarborough encountered issues with in-cab device reliability in real-life conditions. For example, operatives were hitting the touch screen in specific areas if the response was slow, resulting in a number of broken screens that had to be replaced. Working with its supplier, trials are now ongoing on different, more robust, device options.

Manage suppliers closely and escalate issues early: Wakefield found issues with using multiple suppliers and ensuring that they did not run over the agreed days budgeted, especially when this additional work was being used to correct faults that the supplier had caused.

LGA support

A number of projects encountered issues with supplier delays or upgrades to key components for delivery of their products. For example, Lincoln City found that an upgrade by its forms supplier, Firmstep, during the project removed some functionality vital to the solution the team was looking to implement.

Through contacts made within the Firmstep customer network and at LGA Channel Shift Programme workshops, the team realised that a number of other councils were facing the same issue. Following discussion, the LGA agreed to support these councils by raising the problem directly with Firmstep. The issue was

subsequently resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.

Lichfield encountered a similar supplier issue with the overrun of its supplier, Northgate's, product development, pushing delivery into the council's busiest time of year, the annual billing run. The LGA helped highlight the risk of project delay with the supplier, Northgate, which helped to bring the project to a successful conclusion, although the revenues form did not finally go live until May 2018.

As with all its programmes, the LGA was happy to support projects with such issues in order to avoid impacting delivery timescales and to find successful resolutions for all parties.

10. Building skills for the future

Building in-house skills is always a good investment. It both helps in terms of retention of staff and team morale, and avoids the need to buy in specialist or consultant time. And, of course, new skills can also be reused on future projects.

Invest in skills

The core focus of Newcastle's 'Chatbots for Channel Shift' project was development of in-house skills to provide a base for continuous service and process improvement via the use of chatbot technology.

The upskilling of ICT staff in new technologies can be challenging, acknowledges the council, but it is well worth the effort. Indeed, Newcastle encountered a significant learning curve to make WasteBot a reality. However, the collective learning means that future bots for council services will be rolled out more quickly.

In Sunderland, a focus on training the in-house digital team in Google Analytics was key to the project's success. The council also developed its own in-house training guide for web analytics to supplement existing customer persona and segmentation skills and aims to transfer this knowledge to a range of public, voluntary and community sector partners.

Meanwhile, keen to avoid a perceived overreliance on consultants and suppliers, Lincoln City developed self-sufficiency in system integration by providing training for two key members of the project team in advanced XML. This skill set successfully enabled the team to integrate online forms and back-end systems during the project – and provided a resource for future integration projects. In this initial project alone Lincoln City saved

> "All the investment is in ourselves. We didn't want to go out and ask the supplier to build something for us that only they could use. We wanted to develop the skills in-house. It was an investment up front but now it's paying itself back in terms of a business model."
>
> **Anne-Louise Arkle, Product Manager, North Yorkshire County Council**

> "We felt really strongly that we wanted to build our skills in-house so this just wasn't a one-hit wonder and so the LGA funding was used to fund some specialist training from Microsoft on how we use their bot framework which basically allowed 12 members of our team to undertake three days of intensive training on the framework which enabled them to build the bot."
>
> **Jenny Nelson, Digital Newcastle Programme Manager, Newcastle City Council**

approximately £15,000 in external consultant costs.

Other councils investing in core skills include the following:

- North Yorkshire's UX training is being deployed on further web portal projects in line with the council's 'develop, improve, reuse' approach.

- Wakefield's 'model' approach to transforming pothole reporting has already been applied to other highways processes.

- Scarborough's experience in the use of Firmstep is enabling the council to provide online forms for other services and processes.

- Sunderland combined and reused the skills gained during the project to transform other environmental services, including bulky waste collections, fly-tipping and garden waste.

> "We struggled with customer journeys and UX through different supplier portals, so we took the decision to develop our own approach. The decision was taken to see how best we could achieve that. We were fortunate enough to have our own development team and, as we developed the main customer portal, it gave us the ability to transition that same development over to other market segments [like the parish portal] at very low cost."
>
> **Robert Ling, Assistant Director Technology & Change, North Yorkshire County Council**

11. The role of the LGA

The Digital Channel Shift Programme has highlighted the successful and valuable role that the LGA can play in supporting councils on their digital journey.

The association provided £15,000 to each project and many said that the funding was a catalyst to kick-starting their work on digital projects.

During the programme the LGA supported projects in a number of ways, including bringing them together in a series of workshops to encourage learning, share experience and provide practical help and support. In a number of cases they connected projects working on similar services – providing mutual support – and also helped to deal with specific issues when these arose.

Councils have also been sharing the learning within their regions and service areas. Projects have been invited to speak at LGA events to showcase their work to peers in other councils to help mainstream the learning. They have also been signposted to and requested to speak at other sector-led events. Newcastle for example will be speaking at UKAuthority's Bots4Good event.

Some are taking part in initiatives including Digital Leaders Week by running webinars on the work they have completed. Projects have also fed into other initiatives – the projects on taxi licensing, for example, sharing their knowledge and experience with a similar Local Digital Declaration project on licensing

Newcastle has been shortlisted for #DigitalLeaders100 list 2019 in Innovation of the Year for their adult social care bot, which helps people to access information and guidance on a range of social care topics using web-based natural language processing.

The case studies and videos of all the projects are available on the LGA website and the LGA will continue to encourage the projects to share their own learning through webinars and engagement with other councils doing work in similar fields.

This report brings together learning from councils across the programme, drawing out the key points that will be relevant to others and highlights the assets and resources available, including the case studies with the project manager contacts. The published case studies can be found on the Digital Channel Shift Projects webpage.

https://www.local.gov.uk/digital-channel-shift-funded-projects

Associated with this report is a set of programme briefing notes on four different themes. These are designed to help councils sell the benefits of doing these activities to stakeholders and colleagues and to highlight where these approaches have been used effectively in councils. The programme briefing notes cover these topics: the benefits of an agile approach, successful stakeholder management, running a successful project and user research and testing.

They can be found by navigating to our Digital Resources webpage.

https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/digital/digital-resources

As part of its wider support to help councils get the most out of their investment in digital tools and solutions, the LGA has launched the Digital Inclusion Programme with supporting funding for the successful councils involved.

This new programme is aimed at helping councils to empower individuals or groups of people in their community who are currently not accessing online services, as well as to provide support to improve their skills and confidence once they are online – whilst at the same time helping to generate efficiencies for the council.

Successful councils will benefit from up to £20,000 funding and receive support from the LGA as they progress with their project, including support to baseline and capture the learning to ensure it can be shared with other councils.

For more information go to the LGA website's 'Digital' page at https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/digital

The LGA provides support, resources and funding opportunities on a wide range of areas including cybersecurity, care and health improvement and efficiency and design in the public sector. Case studies and further details about the assets and funding opportunities associated with these programmes can be found by navigating to the LGA's efficiency and income generation webpage.

https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation

Appendix - The projects

Council	Description	Focus
Calderdale Council	Calderdale Council's new taxi licence renewal and application self-service capability has delivered over £53,000 in savings in its first six months of operation.	Taxi licensing
Cheltenham Borough Council	Cheltenham Borough Council's online licensing portal allows customers to apply for a licence anytime, anywhere via a new end-to-end digital service that has empowered customers, transformed back-office processing and delivered 100 per cent channel shift.	Taxi licensing
City of Lincoln Council	City of Lincoln Council provides a joint revenues and benefits service for itself and North Kesteven District Council. A shift to online forms has delivered over £84,000 in savings, a 36 per cent increase in self-serve web traffic for these services, and an uplift in collection rates increasing income across both councils by almost £85,000.	Council tax
Elmbridge Borough Council	Elmbridge Borough Council has deployed GOV.UK Notify to send personalised SMS text messages to council tax customers reminding them that a payment is due, delivering nearly £40,000 in back-office efficiency savings in the first year of operation and a template for extending personalised SMS message reminders to other council services.	Council tax SMS text notifications
Gloucestershire County Council	Gloucestershire County Council's archive team has delivered online registration and document order facilities giving its 10,000 users a year anytime, anywhere access to the catalogue of 800,000 items – delivering an expected £45,734 annual efficiency savings along the way.	Archiving
Harlow Council	Harlow has proved that helping people to self-serve improves both service quality and efficiency in key areas such as revenues and benefits and that taking account of local demographics is a key part of ensuring the success of this work.	Revenues and benefits
Lichfield District Council	Lichfield District Council has moved revenues and benefits services online, enabling customers to self-serve at any time of the day or night. Over 40 per cent of customers now use the forms, with the subsequent drop in face-to-face and telephone enquiries helping to deliver over £140,000 in savings during the first year of operation.	Revenues and benefits
Liverpool City Council	Liverpool City Council has developed a 'digital first' self-service tool for funeral directors to book funerals at the city's cemeteries and crematoria. As well as reducing calls to the council contact centre for this service by 65 per cent and delivering annual savings of £64,500, the new tool enables funeral directors to respond to people's needs more quickly during this major life event.	Cemeteries and crematoria

Newcastle City Council	Newcastle City Council's Digital Newcastle team built the in-house skills to develop WasteBot, an SMS text messaging chatbot on the Microsoft Bot Framework. WasteBot replaced a paper-based process for applying for household waste recycling centre permits that took up to 14 days and turned it into an accessible, easy-to-use, 90-second chat process for residents. This new skill set is now being applied to a social services chatbot and other services.	Chatbot for waste recycling
North Yorkshire County Council	North Yorkshire County Council's in-house development team has built a parish portal to automate and streamline service requests from parish clerks regarding highways defects and enable them to access real-time information on subsequent progress and repairs.	Parish council highways portal
Rochdale Borough Council	Rochdale Borough Council dedicated a full-time resource to behavioural change in order to drive sustainable channel shift – successfully delivering over £182,000 in savings through significant take-up of self-service and corresponding reductions in the use of traditional contact channels.	Behavioural change (range of services)
Scarborough Borough Council	Scarborough Borough Council has delivered over £250,000 in savings and a 58 per cent channel shift to online citizen self-service by digitising its bin collection service.	Refuse collection
Sunderland City Council	Sunderland's digital transformation of waste services has delivered a significant digital channel shift and change in user behaviour – from just 14 per cent of transactions online in financial year 2016/17 to 55 per cent in 2018. It has reduced missed bin reports by 7,000 and delivered £136,364 in savings, well on the way to meeting the project's 2020 target of £200,000 in savings and 60 per cent online transactions.	Refuse collection
Torbay Council	Torbay's ongoing journey to both release internal capacity and improve citizen self-service by enhancing online council tax forms and automating processes has delivered impressive results to date, including £138,105 in additional council tax revenue and £24,489 annual efficiency savings.	Council tax
Wakefield Council	Wakefield Council created a repeatable model for process and digital service redesign by focusing on a key problem area – complaints around pothole reporting and repairs – as part of the shift to encouraging citizens to use low-cost digital service channels rather than traditional face-to-face telephone contact.	Highways pothole reporting
Waverley Borough Council	Waverley Borough Council undertook an ambitious project in 2017 to upgrade all existing online forms to drive channel shift – delivering £94,000 in savings, an 11.4 per cent reduction in calls, a 19.9 per cent shift to self-service and a 12 per cent increase in online payments over the following year.	Online forms (range of services)

West Sussex County Council	West Sussex County Council's SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) team has transformed the experience of schools, parents, carers and young people applying for education and healthcare needs assessments for a child within the school environment by creating a checklist tool to guide users through the information maze before offering further guidance and an online application form.	SEND

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