Digital Experts Programme case study

A joint 'Connected Customers' project with North Warwickshire Borough Council and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

The issue and context

North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC) and Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council (NBBC) have been working together for a number of years on website design and content to reduce duplication and help share cost, ideas and skills. The two councils also use the same customer relationship management (CRM) system and work together on wider customer access initiatives as part of the Warwickshire Direct Partnership.

In common with other local authorities these two councils are aiming to minimise costs and improve services by progressing towards a more efficient and customer focused approach. For example, NWBC's customer access strategy revolves around the following vision:

> 'To provide efficient, excellent access to high-quality services, driven by the needs of our customers.'

This vision is supported by a series of aims and commitments that will deliver real, practical improvements, which will be recognisable to customers, staff and partner organisations as customer-focused, accessible and effective.

Over recent years there has been a steady growth in the number of customers accessing the councils' websites. However, keeping abreast of innovations is a continual challenge. For example, in the last 12 months both councils have seen huge growth in the numbers of people using their websites and online services from smartphones and tablets (a shift of 5.5 per cent from desktop computers to mobiles devices), and the existing website was not designed with this in mind.

Consequently, the councils applied to the Digital Experts Programme for funding to enable them to launch a new, jointly hosted web site that was mobile friendly and had a responsive design. The online forms utilised by the councils would also be reviewed and streamlined and other services, such as webchat, would be investigated.

The project objectives and targets

The content management system (Jadu), which is used by both councils, is now available in a version which makes it easy to use regardless of the device. The system is based on a concept known as 'responsive design' which allows the content to be displayed in a dynamic order depending on the type of device used to access the content. Both councils are now committed to implementing this solution.

In addition, the funding provided through the Digital Experts programme would allow the council to investigate and develop additional features which both councils regard as essential to their work to:

- Increase online accessibility to services
- Support the emerging 'connected customer' and
- Reach out and support those customers not yet engaged with the digital world.

It would also be used to improve dialogue with customers and enable the councils to develop approaches that involve their customers and communities in service and usability testing so that any solutions better meets their needs.

A further outcome would be methodologies to help the councils better evaluate the success of the move online.

The councils planned to use the funding to help achieve the following specific objectives:

Customer engagement and service impact

- Feedback and improvement – to commission development to enable customers to easily comment on the online services they receive and enable staff to enter into dialogues to improve services and deliver the service customers expect.
- Engagement – to continue investigating web chat and to pilot its use by customer services staff with people visiting the websites, as a way of providing 'right first time' services and learning from popular customer contact practices in the private sector.
- Channel shift – to work on enhancing and expanding the councils' online promotion campaign which aims to increase awareness of online services and encourage customers to change behaviours and channel shift.
- Customer account – to investigate and if possible commission integration between the councils' CMS and CRM so that customers have a single way of signing on and either registering interest in a service or viewing their previous service interactions.

Information management

- Bring in expertise to help to explore the level of commonality between the information the two councils publish on their websites and between the services delivered.

- Resource a feasibility study into the development of common information. If possible manage a pilot project in a service area to assess any approach identified, recognising that the two councils provide very similar services, but that there are differences in approach, service levels and costs.

Democracy

- Commission development to enable the councils to improve the quality of the information held about council decisions and councillors.
- Bring in expertise to encourage staff and councillors to develop the skills needed and then to engage with people using social media.
- Investigate and pilot different social media to enable better voice and video interaction.

The councils envisaged this work would link to other projects that they are collaborating on including the provision of a mobile IT 'bus', provision of services from community hubs and a commitment to the Get Online campaign and active 'Learn my Way' courses.

In this way the councils aimed to:

- Save £9,000 per annum in each council through joint hosting
- Increase the number of people who choose to self-serve, through improved mobile access, by 10 per cent within the first 12 months of going live
- Increase website traffic via mobile devices by 15 per cent
- Increase visitors' satisfaction with the website and self-service. This will be measured through a decrease in negative comments or in service failures by 25 per cent and by increasing the average page rating over the period between go-live and 12 months into operation
- Increase the number of payments made via the website (both by direct debit and by card payment) by 5 per cent.
- Implement web chat.

The approach and progress to date

The web sites were redesigned, using Jadu, to provide a cleaner, simpler image utilising the responsive design technology.

For example, the original front page of North Warwickshire's website, which had been designed with the functionality of the desktop in mind, looked like:

Looking at best practice from other sites and guidance from the Government Digital Service the redesigned page looks like:
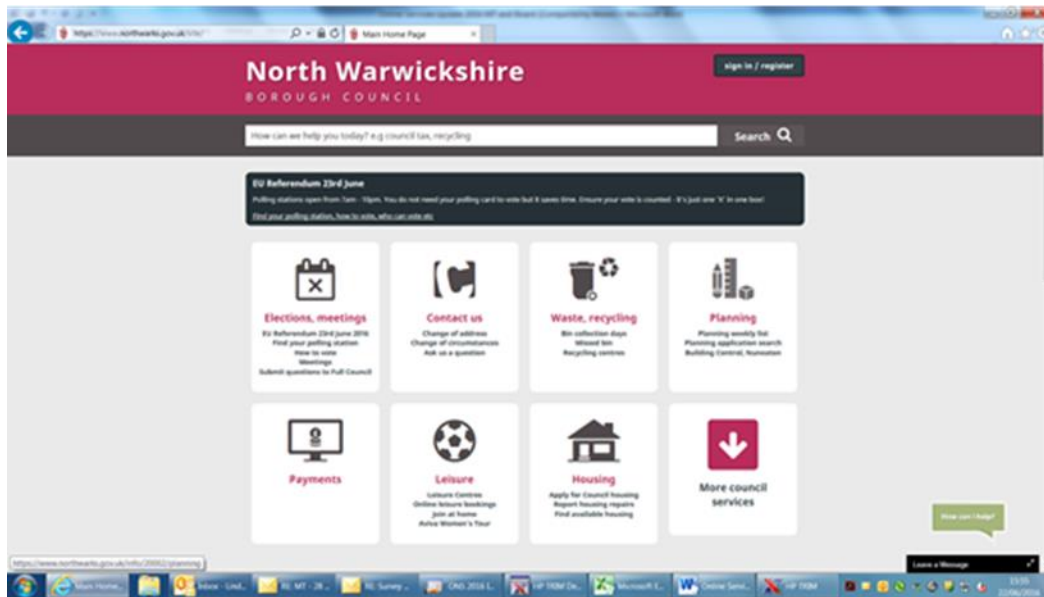
NBBC updated their site in the same way.

The improved accessibility and image of the website was also enhanced by improved content that was re-written according to newly developed guidelines so that it was more 'mobile-friendly'. Extracts from these guidelines are available via the LGA website.

The next step taken by the councils involved the redesign of their online forms (or e-forms) to make the site simpler to use. For example, a new online form was developed to allow customers to report fly tipping:

The new forms also had additional features added, for example the inclusion of a map to locate the fly tipping:

These new forms were developed in conjunction with front-line users via a series of workshops that not only secured buy-in from them but also resulted in improved processes. For example, analysis of the forms used for missed bins, replacement bins and new bins in NBBC resulted in a streamlined service with improved reporting that was not only simpler and easier for the customer to use but also delivered a real cost saving for the waste management service.

Web chat has also been introduced on a trial basis with NWBC offering the option from 10.00 am to 12.00 noon and from 2.00 pm to 4.00 pm each day.

The outcome – successes and challenges

Financial benefits

This project has delivered an annual saving of **£45,000** for Nuneaton and Bedworth and **£28,500** for North Warwickshire. These figures are calculated as follows:

NBBC

- The decision to jointly host the web site has delivered a direct saving of **£9,000** per annum.
- Accurate figures for web visits do not exist for the old system so a direct comparison cannot be made but the use of web forms is indicative and these have grown by 67 per cent (from 7364 to 12318) in the nine months since the new system was introduced. There is also a corresponding drop in phone and face-to-face transactions that was measured.
- The number of phone calls has fallen by 1643 over the last year as a result of customers using the website to self-serve. Using the standard SOCITM channel cost, of £2.83 per phone call, this generates a saving of **£4,650** per annum.
- The number of face-to-face transactions has fallen by 2450 over the year and, again using the SOCITM channel cost of £8.62 per visit; this generates a saving of **£21,119** per annum.
- The streamlining of the waste management process for dealing with missed bins etc. has resulted in a post being deleted at a saving of at least **£10,000** per annum.

NWBC

- The decision to jointly host the web site has delivered a direct saving of **£9,000** per annum.
- The number of phone calls to the contact centre has fallen by 3432 over a comparable six-month period before and after the launch of the new website. Extrapolating this to a full year and applying the standard SOCITM channel cost of £2.83 per phone call, this generates a saving of approximately **£19,500** per annum.
- This calculation reflects a very real change that has seen a staff reduction of 1.5 FTE in the contact centre over the year.

Non-financial benefits

The partnership between the two councils worked well because the councils are relatively similar (i.e. two small to medium sized borough councils) and the skill sets that they contributed were complementary rather than competitive. The project has strengthened this relationship.

The project has resulted in better services and happier customers and staff and has received comments such as:

> 'Very easy to use and navigate web pages'
>
> 'Excellent form! :-)'
>
> 'Found the form very easy to complete & understood it very well
>
> 'So easy to use'
>
> 'Very helpful'
>
> 'Excellent'
>
> "Great to see it working on a mobile device – do people still use computers with large monitors?"

This type of success encourages further take-up of online services and enhances the councils' reputations and supports further work to improve and add services online.

Lessons learnt

During this project a number of lessons were learnt:

- Don't be afraid to plagiarise. There are plenty of examples, experience and expertise in other councils and this should be utilised wherever possible – there is no need to re-invent everything locally. Copy the best.
- Involve staff in a range of roles, particularly those on the frontline early and often in order to get buy-in and ownership.
- There may be problems getting timely buy-in from third-party suppliers when there is no financial benefit to them, so it is important that they are involved early in the process and managed throughout the project.
- The councils should have done more benchmarking before the start of the project so that benefits could be measured and reported more easily to help secure ongoing investment in other work.
- A 'big bang' isn't always necessary and there are benefits to a more careful, 'agile' and pragmatic approach.
- Moving customers to self-service using online facilities can be made more difficult if you provide a good, responsive telephone and face-to-face service therefore, you need to actively promote the online services.

Next steps

This project is considered, by both councils, to be a great success but is only one step in an ongoing journey and there are many further developments either planned or being evaluated. These include:

- The development of customer profiles which will include customer accounts and allow customers to monitor the status of an order (e.g. when will my new bin be delivered?) and to pre-load online forms.
- The generation of the next customer access strategy (the current version runs to 2017) which will focus on the customer and the use of social media channels.
- Developments to allow more agile working by members of staff – so that systems can be accessed and updated from across the boroughs and do not fail in areas where the signal is patchy or non-existent.
- The development of more sophisticated and interactive links between the website, the CRM and back-office systems.
- It is expected that the use of webchat will grow. However, the current experience indicates that the queries being raised by customers tend to be quite complicated and can result from a failure to resolve an issue online. Therefore the councils aim to

gather the learning from these interactions in order to simplify processes so that more customers can self-serve via the website.

In addition to these future developments, the website must also keep up with changing requirements as and when they occur. For example, in response to a decision to charge for replacement bins.

Further information

For further information on this project please contact:

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