Digital Experts Programme
Customer Self-Service Portal for Council Tax, at Newcastle-under-Lyme

The issue and context

Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council is situated in the north of Staffordshire, near Stoke-on-Trent. It comprises approximately 58,000 households and businesses all of whom will interact with the council about their council tax or business rates accounts. The council also has had a case load of approximately of 7,700 housing benefit claims and 10,000 council tax reduction claims in the past 12 months. The council fields over 100,000 telephone calls in relation to these services per year.

The Revenues and Benefits service, in the context of needing to meet increasing customer demand for high-quality, accessible services with fewer resources, wished to review the way that it provided services. A significant proportion of the contact handled by the service is by phone and either relates to basic account enquiries or common changes to accounts that are relatively simple in nature and follow a set process, but which, over time, have become complex in their execution. Both types of transaction are time-consuming and better use of technology would alleviate a large proportion of the current pressures.

The service is facilitated by the council's Revenues and Benefits team, who in addition to handling telephone services, also deal with landlords and housing associations and operate a face-to-face service at the council's two customer service centres in the borough, dealing with approximately 3,000 customers each month across both sites.

The council is facing a £1.8 million funding shortfall in the 2016/2017 financial year. Enabling customers to self-serve over digital channels is one approach the council is taking to make savings. By offering customers a self-service portal, the council is seeking to save the time required to process the large number of 'simple' changes that customers currently telephone the council to request. These include tasks such as registering a customer for single person discount or registering a change of address, which typically follow a set process and do not require a significant amount of customer interaction. However, at present, such tasks require significant manual intervention by council staff.

The council's insight research – based on Experian - identified that nearly 40 per cent of Newcastle-under-Lyme's population may take up the opportunity to self-serve if appropriate online tools were available – and a further 30 per cent may do so with encouragement. This is based on customers' propensity to use internet banking services and purchase goods online.

The LGA funding was used to partially cover the costs of implementing the proposed system. This includes purchasing the software, and project managing the implementation.

The project objectives and targets

The council bid for funding to introduce a new customer portal dedicated to the Council Tax and Business Rates service. The council sought a software solution that would integrate both with:

- the web site – to promote self-service by customers and
- the back office software – to minimise the amount of intervention required by staff.

The intent was to redesign the service as 'digital first' – with the web channel as the principal channel, rather than an additional or supplementary channel for user interaction.

In 2013/14, just under 9,000 council tax and business rates enquiries were processed, face-to-face, at the council's service centres. The service also received more than 100,000 phone calls. The introduction of a new online self-service facility with the additional provision of assisted self-service for those who need this service has the potential to reduce this number considerably. A reduction in the need for staff to handle and process simple enquiries would reduce the number of staff required to deliver the service during normal operations.

Alongside introducing the software, the project team sought to engage staff in the redesign process, with the objective of removing any steps that either do not add value for the customer or are not required by the authority and, overall, of making processes better.

The portal will also enable customers to register for electronic billing when this service becomes available. The council will evaluate adding e-billing once people have become familiar with the portal and using the features it offers. This is likely to be introduced in the first half of the 2016/2017 financial year.

The approach and progress to date

The approach comprises two elements: purchasing and implementing the portal; and working with staff to redesign the process to make the customer experience as simple and straightforward as possible.

The project was led by the IT project manager, reporting to the project board. The project board was set up with the Revenues and Benefits manager as the project executive, Northgate as the senior supplier (they also provided their own project manager) and the technical support and customer services manager for Revenues and Benefits acting as the senior user. The council's ICT and other Revenues and Benefits staff were also involved when needed. The software solution had been identified prior to LGA funding being awarded – the LGA funding paid for the purchase of the software solution and the project management of the roll-out.

To instigate the project, the IT project manager completed a draft project plan setting out the activities that the council needed to complete – such as baselining current council tax data. This was supplemented by a technical plan by the supplier, to install and configure the software. The project manager then brought the supplier together with Revenues & Benefits managers, to review the software and functionality, and met with the supplier separately to plan the installation and ensure the local infrastructure would be ready.

A project plan covering the council's and the supplier's related activities was agreed and signed-off in May 2015. During this time, workshops were held to review and map the related processes. This allowed the project manager to review the processes for possible improvements and efficiencies alongside the installation of the software and to take advantage of the features it provided.

By the end of June 2015, a test environment was ready and the Revenues and Benefits team began testing the software during the second week of July. Testing continued throughout August.

Integration with the back-end document management system began in August and was complete by mid-September. The ability to pass information directly to the back-office helped to reduce the need for manual intervention in the process, saving time both for the customer and the council.

The project held training sessions for internal users of the portal at the end of August 2015, to familiarise them with the system. The portal went live for Revenues and Benefits staff on 18 September to allow for a short period of 'bedding in' and the opportunity to identify and resolve issues prior to a full public launch. No significant issues were encountered.

Following a successful week of use by Revenues and Benefits staff, the service was made publicly available via the council's website on 28 September 2016. The council tax web pages have been updated to include a short introduction and links to the new service. Approximately 800 members of the public who had registered to be notified when the service was available were emailed advising them that they could now access it.

Figure 1. Promotion of the service via the Council's twitter feed

Various communications activities were carried out to promote the service, including:

- An email to all people who had registered their interest and who asked to be notified when the service was available
- A banner on the council's website homepage (see below)
- Promotion of the service via the council's twitter feed
- A general press release
- An article in the council's November newsletter, delivered to every household within the borough
- Changes to the automated replies from the council tax enquiries generic email address so that it advised customers that the citizen access portal was now available and could be used to carry out many routine tasks
- Customer service advisors informing callers about the citizen access portal when they receive calls about things that could be processed using the service
- Leaflets promoting the service to be distributed via the council's customer service centres
- Making two additional self-service computers available for members of the public to use in the customer service centres, so that customer service advisors can direct customers to these, to enable them self-serve when reporting their council tax changes.

Figure 2. Banner Advert on the council's website homepage

The outcome - successes and challenges

The system went live to the public with the following functionality:

- The ability to notify the council of a change of address (moves either into, out of or within the area)
- The ability to apply for a single person discount (SPD)
- The ability to apply for other discounts and exemptions
- The ability to set up a direct debit or to amend the details of an existing one
- The ability to notify the council of a change to personal details (names, email addresses, telephone numbers etc.)

- The ability to view council tax accounts, including recovery history, payments made and instalments for the current year's liability as well as for previous years
- The ability to view housing benefit entitlement (where relevant) including amounts and payment dates as well as to view the status of any current claims.

The table below outlines the total usage for the customer access portal from October 2015 until the end of February 2016.

	Detail	Basis of Saving	Total Transactions (Oct '15 to Feb '16)	Time Saved (to nearest hour)	Value of the Saving
Staff	The number of transactions resulting in a change to council tax liability	Time saved from more efficient processes e.g. from removal of process steps, such as re-keying information, document scanning etc.	997	332 hours	£4037
Public	The number of transactions resulting in a change to liability	Time saved from telephone call or visit avoided, plus the subsequent processing time saved	259	107 hours	£1301
Public	The number of time that an account was accessed to view information or to update details that did not result in a change to council tax liability	The time saved from a telephone call or visit avoided	2197	366 hours	£4450
Totals				805 hours	£9788

As part of the redesign process, and to calculate the financial benefits, the IT project manager worked with Revenues and Benefits staff to map their current process and calculate and baseline the time taken to process a typical transaction. This time included taking the call, completing any follow-on activities, such as data entry or writing-up information and scanning and indexing documents. The table above takes an average from across the range of transactions to calculate the overall time savings.

The project manager then calculated the time required to complete the same transaction using the citizen access portal. This was done by removing the time taken for steps that would no longer need to be completed, such as separate data entry, completion of paper forms and scanning and indexing documents. An assumption was made that there would be a corresponding slight increase in the duration of the call or contact due to data being entered directly onto the system.

The total time saved was derived from comparing the time taken to process a transaction before and after the implementation of citizen access using an averaged transaction time and the standard hourly rate for a typical Revenues and Benefits advisor (including on-costs).

Key learning points

- Taking the opportunity to look at the existing 'as is' processes with the Revenues and Benefits staff, to identify how they currently operated and how they would use the portal, greatly smoothed the transition and helped make staff more welcoming of the portal.

- Integration between different software systems is often a significant challenge for digital projects. The experience of this project, which included the implementation of a portal product from the same supplier as the council's existing Revenues and Benefits system, resulted in a much smoother integration process as the products had been designed to work together.

Next steps

The implementation of the citizen access portal means that the council can now progress with other projects intended to make more services available online and to make it easier for residents and businesses to self-serve.

The ability to register for e-billing has been configured within the citizen access portal as part of this project and is ready for use. The option is not currently activated however, so it is not visible to public users. To fully enable e-billing to work, a separate module within the Revenues and Benefits back office system needs to be enabled and configured. This is a separate piece of work over and above the scope of the citizen access project and has been included on the Revenues and Benefits service delivery plan for the 2016/2017 financial year

The council has recently conducted and is reviewing a pilot project to use mobile devices (tablets) prior to it being expanded as a wider corporate project for mobile working. Because citizen access is a web-based application it is envisaged that as part of the future roll-out of mobile devices, these will be made available to the council's visiting officers, allowing them to record and process council tax-related changes during home visits.

Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

Darren Buttery
Darren.Buttery@newcastle-staffs.gov.uk
Customer & ICT Projects Manager
Customer and ICT Services
Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council
01782 742163