Digital Experts Programme case study
Southampton City Council

The issue and context

Southampton City Council's population is relatively digitally savvy, with 89 per cent regularly going online and 70 per cent of residents ready to transact with the council via the Internet. Southampton City Council is seeking to develop their web presence to fully tap into the local population's capacity for self-service.

Furthermore, like many councils, Southampton City Council (SCC) is under great pressure to make savings – needing to address a £90 million funding gap by 2018. Digital transformation is expected to contribute £7 million towards this savings target.

The council's new website was published in October 2014 and has been designed with a focus on top tasks and making it easier for customers to find what they are looking for easily. Alongside this, the web forms were revised and refreshed. However, statistics since the launch of the new website and forms show that on average 55 per cent of forms relating to environmental and highways issues are abandoned before completion.

Hence, the focus of the project was to pilot the use of web chat on Southampton City Council's website to assist those customers who need help, and identify how web chat can be best deployed to support more residents to complete their tasks on the website.

The project objectives and targets

The purpose of the project was to undertake a trial of live web chat. The funding covered an initial six-month trial encompassing the procurement and set-up of the software, and also the development of the 'target operating model' for web chat – where it would feature, how it would appear, and who would staff it and so on.

The intention of the trial is to shape the technology and operational model to ensure it is 'fit for purpose' for SCC's future organisation and to ensure it can fully integrate with ongoing website and customer account developments.

In the long-term, the objective is for web chat to significantly reduce the rate of abandoned forms on the website, by supporting people to complete them or re-directing them to the appropriate part of the website, rather than customers resorting to a phone call, email or a face-to-face visit to complete their business.

By offering people assistance online through web chat, the aim is that they remain online and complete their business. It also builds confidence in their ability to self-serve and transact online. The ultimate objective is to reduce the number of calls coming into the council. For example, in 2014 the customer contact centre received 60,289 calls relating to waste and highways services. SCC hopes that the web chat service will help to reduce this figure by 15 per cent over the course of the year.

Furthermore, web chat allows an agent to handle multiple enquiries at one time. For example, Leeds City Council found that an average agent handles 7.3 calls per hour while an agent dealing with web chat can handle 10 chats per hour. Taking into account licensing costs, Leeds City Council estimates a 13 per cent saving over the equivalent cost of phone calls.

A further rationale for offering web chat is to enable instant feedback from customers on the content, navigation and usability of web pages and forms and analytics – and to give insight into how customers use the website and where improvements could be made. The feedback from customers would enable SCC to respond by changing web pages to reduce avoidable contact and more importantly improve the customer experience.

> "Web chat is not another Channel. It's about keeping people online, identifying where people are struggling, and changing the system accordingly. If it isn't easy for people to do it, they will find a different way which will probably be more expensive to serve." *Jon Dyer-Slade, Transformation Lead for the Digital Programme, Southampton City Council*

Progress to date

Southampton approached three of the market leaders who have worked with other local authorities and received quotes back from two. Agilisys Engage was chosen as the product for the pilot based on cost and quality of service and product.

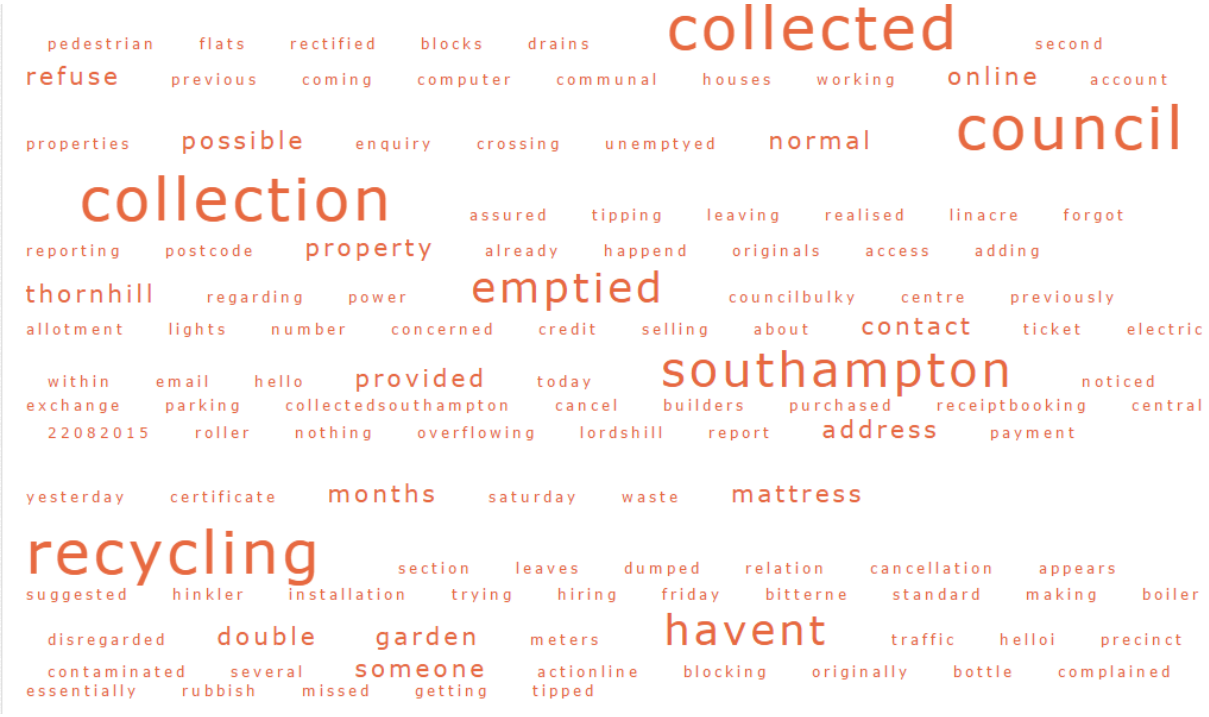
The project was led by the digital transformation programme manager, reporting to the transformation lead for the digital programme. During May 2015, web chat was implemented on a test web site enabling the project team to set the design, look and feel of the web chat interface.

By June the pilot had secured the involvement of the central web team to field web chat inquiries, and the team completed training in how to use the tool during July. The central web team comprises content writers and web designers who were ideally placed to respond to issues customers reported having in navigating the website

Web chat was initially made available on selected areas pages of the web site – such as the Contact Us page – and tested, before being rolled out to the waste management pages.

However, the project quickly learnt that the nature of the queries being raised by the public extended beyond technical or design aspects of the web site that the central web team could respond to. For example, while some inquiries did relate to the functionality and design of web pages – as anticipated – more related to practical questions relating service delivery – such as "How do I report a missed bin".

Figure 1. Word cloud based on the content of web chats: June - October 2015



Hence, during August 2015 the project team approached the customer service contact team to add to the skills-set needed to deal with web chats. Four members of the customer service team were trained during September. The intention was for four customer service staff to operate the web chat for up to two hours per day – three call centre agents plus one team leader.

However, since the performance of call centre outsourced operatives is measured based on the number of calls answered, in practical terms this meant the majority of web chat inquiries were dealt with by the contact centre team leader – who had both the flexibility in his/her job role and the breadth of knowledge required to field the variety of questions.

That web chat was only available at certain times and certain web pages may have also inhibited adoption by customers. The web chat dialogue box would only appear on the site whilst an agent was signed in, and would disappear when they signed-out. The pilot team suspect that its inconsistent presence may have discouraged use by customers and made it very difficult to evidence any effect of web chat on reducing telephone call volumes.

The web chat pilot then encountered a number of challenges which impeded its wider availability and adoption. It was envisaged that one of the ways web chat would support residents in their use of the Southampton City website was in helping them sign-up to My Southampton – SCC's online account for residents. The pilot reported that My Southampton had been delayed due to integration issues and was not sufficiently ready to benefit fully from web chat. This is one of the areas that the pilot hopes will progress rapidly from April 2016.

Likewise, a separate project to deliver improved search functionality across Southampton's site was delayed. This would have a major bearing on how customers would navigate the site and where web chat could feature and add most value. Southampton is seeking to make progress on the new search functionality during 2016.

Perhaps the most significant challenge arose from the recognition that, given the range and depth of knowledge required to respond to the inquiries coming through web chats, web chat needed to be resourced by customer service staff. However, this requires a change in the contractual arrangements with Capita who run the council's contact centre. These negotiations were subject to a wider conversation underway with Capita.

The outcome - successes and challenges

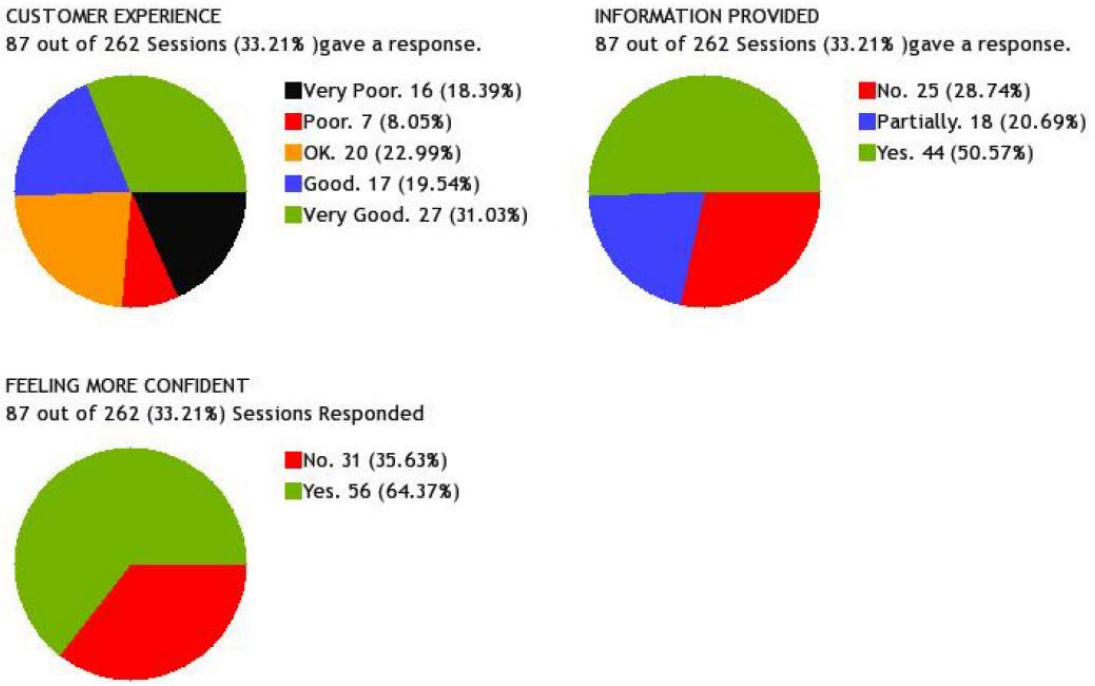
The purpose of the pilot was to test web chat and develop the target operating model for the future. The major outcome from the pilot is the learning that the pilot has generated and a clear view of what the target operating model constitutes i.e.

- Call centre agents with the breadth of skills and knowledge of council services
- A responsive web team to correct or improve web content to improve the customer journey
- Flexible workforce planning to ensure web chat is available at times of the day when demand is high (including early evenings, after the telephone lines close)
- Consistent offering of web chat to increase awareness of its availability.

However, following the challenges the pilot encountered outlined above, Southampton CC have not been able to implement the target operating model that the pilot has identified. The pilot has only been able to offer web chat at limited times and the vast majority have been fielded by a single member of staff – the customer services team leader. Hence, the volume of actual web chats to date remains relatively low – at 262 over the course of the six-month pilot.

Over the long–term the financial benefits of web chat will arise from supporting people to use the website, and avoiding the need for them to switch to other more expensive channels. Hence, the benefits scale up according to volumes.

Figure 2. Feedback from post web chat customer survey for the six-month pilot



Over the course of the pilot period over 65 per cent of those who responded to a brief post-web chat survey said that – by making them feel more confident using the site – web chat had helped avoid a telephone call. Another council supported by the Digital Experts programme – Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council – found that a web chat helped to avoid telephone calls on nearly 60 per cent of occasions, and a face to face visit on 24 per cent of occasions.

The project found that other local authorities' estimates of the savings from web chat varied widely. For example, Leeds City Council found that web chat was 13 per cent cheaper than a phone call – based on a call centre agent being able to manage 7.3 calls per hour versus 10 chats per hour. The project reviewed other examples of web chat in use, including a county council in the south west that estimated the savings from web chat compared to telephone calls to be up-to 60 per cent. Hence, the project used estimated savings of 15 per cent per web chat over a phone call.

However, looking ahead it appears that Southampton CC will be able to implement the target operating model identified by the pilot, with negotiations with Capita to make customer service staff available expected to be completed in March 2016. Hence, if the target operating model identified by the pilot can be implemented the prospects for web chat supporting substantial savings are good.

Furthermore, the support of customer service agents, working a flexible pattern staggered according to expected demand patterns (10.00 am to 7.00 pm, to cover times when the telephone lines close), as well as the ongoing development of the My Southampton account), are all expected to be more conducive to a wider adoption of web chat by residents. The My Southampton account was soft-launched in January 2016, and the wider digital transformation programme is adding functionality to the account through the development of end-to-end customer journeys.

In 2014, the customer contact centre received 60,289 calls relating to waste and highways services alone. If web chat can help Southampton convert 15 per cent (over 9,000) of these to web chats – eminently feasible given Southampton's web-ready population – then the savings in this service area alone would approach £4,000.

Key Learning Points

- In the initial iteration of web chat, having the web team – including content writers and web page designers responding to queries, enabled them to fix technical and navigation issues relatively quickly, almost instantly. Web chat comments such as "I'm trying to click here, but it's not working", provided real-time feedback that helped to support continuous improvement in the site.

- The pilot discovered that the number of web chats rises as the phone lines close. Hence, one of the lessons of the project is to change the hours that web chat is available. Hence the contact centre is considering operating a shift pattern for call centre agents to cover web chat from 9.00 am to 7.00 pm to meet demand during the early evening following closure of the phone lines.

- The limited resources available from the customer service team meant that web chat was only available for two hours a day. The team suspects that this discouraged customer use as its availability was inconsistent.

- Identifying the internal resources required to operate web chat on a day-to-day basis was a fundamental challenge, and having allocated the task to the central web team the pilot quickly learnt that the knowledge and skills of customer service agents were also needed. As the case study illustrates, assigning these resources to the pilot requires a contractual change in the performance management measures by which agents are evaluated. This has proven time-consuming to negotiate.

- One key lesson is that, if working through partners to deliver services – such as a customer contact centre provider – engaging them early in understanding and discussing the contractual relationship and whether a change or service can be added can facilitate the process

Contact for further information

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