

The Digital Experts programme

A final evaluation



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Background to the evaluation

This report presents the final evaluation of the Local Government Association's (LGA) Digital Experts programme. It builds upon an interim evaluation published in May 2016.

The Digital Experts programme was established in March 2015 when, following a comprehensive bidding and assessment process, the LGA agreed to fund 27 projects involving 42 councils. The projects are summarised in Appendix 1.

The objective of the funding was to enable more councils to use the digital tools and approaches already successfully applied by their peers, complementing other work for instance on shared services, commercialisation or demand management.

The programme would therefore help to spread these innovations more widely within the local government community, first by demonstrating how councils and their partners, by exploiting the potential of modern digital technologies, can target and deliver improved services to residents, operate more effectively (eg by supporting mobile or remote working) and generate efficiency savings; and second by offering practical pointers as to how best to replicate success.

The context for the Digital Experts Programme is well known. Central government funding for councils was cut by some 40 per cent over the previous Parliament. The Institute for Fiscal Studies anticipates that spending cuts will continue until 2020.

While addressing the impact of austerity, councils are facing the challenges of dealing with:

- increased demand, not least through demographic change and the knock-on effects of funding reductions in other public services
- major government initiatives including Welfare Reform and Troubled Families
- the move towards devolution of public services
- new public health responsibilities
- health and social care integration
- fundamental alterations to the local government finance system
- continuing pressure on core services such as housing and waste management.

By early 2016, 13 of the 27 funded projects were judged to be sufficiently advanced to warrant being presented to the wider local government community and for lessons to be drawn from their experience. The LGA therefore commissioned an interim evaluation, which involved an analysis of the 13 projects' monthly progress reports since March 2015; a site visit to each lead authority; and detailed discussions with a range of key participants, including council staff but also partners, volunteers and residents where possible.

During the summer of 2016, the remaining 14 projects were reviewed and a further eight were deemed ready for formal visits to capture their case studies. These visits took place during the autumn. The six outstanding projects had, for various reasons, been unable at that point to fully deliver their original objectives and were not far enough advanced to warrant a detailed analysis. However, all of them had important lessons to share with the wider local government community, and these were captured and the case studies or project summaries published on the LGA website.

During the autumn of 2016, the project team also contacted a number of the original 13 projects reviewed earlier in the year to obtain updates on further progress, particularly in relation to cost savings.

“The programme aimed to spread digital innovation more widely within the local government community”

The outputs of the programme are as follows:

For each of the 21 completed projects:

- A case study, covering the main issue the project was trying to address, the local context, the project objectives and targets, the approach and progress to date, the outcome including successes and challenges, the financial savings generated, the non-financial benefits for both customers and councils, key learning points and next steps. A short supplementary update on progress is also available for several of the 13 projects originally reviewed in the spring of 2016.
- A series of short videos ('vox pops') with key participants in these projects, setting out in their own words why the project was important and what it has enabled them to achieve.
- Copies of any practical documentation, such as job descriptions, project plans and so on that could help other councils to undertake similar projects.

For each of the 6 remaining projects:

- A short report outlining the project's original objectives, the progress to date and, in particular, the reasons why the objectives have not yet been met. In each case, the wider lessons for other councils are explored.

Overall

- An overview evaluation (this document) that builds upon the interim evaluation published in May 2016 and draws out:
 - the outcomes that were achieved by the programme, including evidence of benefits (including financial savings) both to residents and the participating councils
 - the key messages and lessons for the sector, including how good practice can best be replicated and mainstreamed
 - any recommendations for the design of future programmes of support.

All of this material is available on the LGA website. See Appendix for more details.

The benefits of the programme

The interim report analysed the impact of the Digital Experts programme in the 13 initial projects under three broad headings: financial savings; benefits to residents; and other benefits to councils and their partners. Our work with the remaining 14 projects has reinforced and added to the benefits that the programme has been able to deliver.

The key benefits of the Digital Experts programme

- **Financial savings** – from reducing avoidable contact or redirecting customers to self-service and cheaper online channels; cutting the administrative time and costs of rekeying data, handling cash or cheques, printing or travel; sharing procurement, development, operational and project management costs; developing in-house skills and capacity to replace costly external support; making greater use of community resources such as volunteers
- **Revenue generation** – through supporting online initiatives such as paid-for garden waste schemes, helping to generate much-needed income to cover the costs of this service and for reinvestment in other local services
- **Better customer service and support to residents** – by providing simpler, round-the-clock access to information, advice and services via a range of devices; more integrated and seamless processes; quicker and more personalised responses to queries and service requests; assisted digital support and self-service options, helping to build residents' digital skills and confidence
- **New and more productive ways of working** – through giving staff new skills and better technology support and offering them greater opportunities to shape their work both in and out of the office; encouraging effective collaboration between councils and with other public, private and voluntary sector partners; highlighting new models and ways of doing things and producing valuable data on both customer behaviour and operational effectiveness; improving residents' perceptions of their councils as organisations fit for the 21st century.

Financial savings

The Digital Experts programme as a whole is estimated to have delivered in the region of £2.05 million of savings plus an additional £591,000 of revenue generated.

Given that most of the projects involved the creation of digital infrastructure or assets that the participating councils will continue to use in the future, the financial savings can be expected to increase over time.

Moreover, a number of the projects have used (and will continue to use) the Digital Experts funding to help raise much-needed revenue for reinvestment in local services – for instance, through launching garden waste schemes with a strong online focus. Breckland and South Holland have for example generated some £350,000 to date through their garden waste initiatives.



An advert for South Holland's garden waste scheme

Savings have come in various forms:

- from avoiding contact through providing residents with direct digital access to well-designed services and encouraging greater levels of self-service
- from moving people onto cheaper contact channels ('channel shift')
- from reducing the time spent on travel and office-based administrative tasks by equipping staff with appropriate mobile solutions
- from eliminating re-keying by customer services or other staff by integrating processes and developing links straight from an App, e-form or website directly into back-office or contractor systems
- from reducing cash handling, cheque processing and printing
- from making greater use of community resources, such as volunteer 'digital champions', to deliver support previously provided or commissioned directly by the council
- from joint procurement or development of solutions and sharing project management or technical expertise
- from developing greater in-house skills and capacity, thereby avoiding the cost of employing expensive external consultants.

Although the benefits were more difficult to quantify, several of the projects were also anticipating that their emphasis on encouraging greater online confidence, resilience and self-service among residents would help to reduce the pressure on councils to provide services directly and therefore generate long-term savings.

Your Homes Newcastle has carried out an innovative analysis of the savings potentially achieved in five of its projects where agile techniques were employed. The team investigated the project elements that had been de-scoped as a result of the rigorous process of prioritisation that the agile approach encourages and found there had been around an 8 per cent reduction in low-value work.

The Digital Experts projects captured in spring 2016 have continued to draw significant value from their investments. For example, **Test Valley's Citizen Access** project is estimated to have delivered almost £15,000 of additional savings in the seven months between April and October 2016. It has also played an important role in enabling Test Valley's revenue service to offer savings options in the region of £200,000 for 2017/18 as part of the council's Medium Term Financial Plan.



Flooding in the Dorset village of Burton Bradstock

Benefits to residents

The Digital Experts projects have delivered a range of specific benefits to residents:

- Easier, round-the-clock, access to information, advice and services.
- Simpler, cheaper and more convenient contact with the council – for instance, via the use of web chat – saving people the time and expense involved in visiting or phoning the council.
- More integrated and interactive service delivery. By integrating their Apps or websites into their own back-office systems, and creating digital links to contractors, councils have been able to offer residents a quicker, more seamless and interactive level of service, including automated acknowledgements of service requests and updates on progress. Residents may also sign up to receive ‘push’ information.
- A faster response from public sector bodies, resulting in a better and more timely service.
- Greater awareness of the support and services available, recognising that residents are often unaware of the many services already provided by their local councils.
- Opportunities for local people to get involved, for instance as ‘digital champions’ helping other people in their area.
- Greater confidence in dealing with the digital world.

As well as offering direct financial benefits to the participants, the new call cascade system implemented by the **Dorset Local Resilience Forum** with support from the Digital Experts programme should help the partners to deliver a faster response to emergencies such as flooding, potentially mitigating the damage and cost to individuals, businesses and the public infrastructure (eg roads, bridges etc.).

Other benefits to councils and their partners

In addition to financial savings, the interim report highlighted a range of wider benefits for councils and their partners:

- more skilled, productive and involved staff – providing staff with new digital skills and supporting technologies, thereby making them more effective and enhancing their sense of career development
- greater collaboration between local councils, helping to share resources, costs and encourage joint learning
- closer working with the voluntary sector and other public service partners on local initiatives
- exposure to new models and ways of doing things, particularly where innovative private sector firms at the forefront of digital innovation have been involved
- greater self-sufficiency internally to develop future applications and to respond quickly to changing customer or other requirements
- a wider range of data on both customer behaviour and operational effectiveness, enabling the councils to drive further improvement
- better resident perceptions of their councils as organisations fit for the digital age.

“At last a council moving with the times – 21st century”

Customer comment on Redcar and Cleveland’s web chat service

The key messages

Our review of the final 14 projects (including the six projects that have not yet met their objectives) has reinforced the benefits outlined above, while also bringing out important additional messages.

The financial benefits of digital approaches are clear but need to be identified and captured

Although the Digital Experts programme has generated substantial financial efficiencies, as well as helping to raise revenue for reinvestment in local services, many of the projects were surprised, when encouraged to do the calculations, by the range of savings they had been able to make.

This suggests that there is still a ‘budgeting’ rather than an ‘investment’ mind-set among many staff and that the process of identifying and capturing the financial benefits of digital projects (although required by the Digital Experts bidding process) is still under-developed or treated as an afterthought rather than a core activity.

Yet the ability to show solid financial returns – to Members and senior officers, to residents and to national bodies and Government – is essential if funding for investment is to continue in these times of austerity. There is a lot of work still to do at local level, therefore, to put in place the mechanisms to baseline current service performance and to capture the impact of any changes, including the move towards more digital operation.

We do not underestimate the complexities of doing so, and it would be valuable to complement this work at local level with work at national level to create more sophisticated techniques for evaluating investments in digital technologies and approaches – for instance, to model the impact of channel shift. Socitm’s work on analysing the costs of different contact channels is an example of modelling that could be usefully built upon.

Digital technologies are more prevalent than ever among customers

Even over the short period during which the Digital Experts programme has been running, digital technologies have marched on. An Office for National Statistics bulletin issued in May 2016, for instance, found that 87.9 per cent of adults in the UK (45.9 million) had recently (in the last 3 months) used the internet, compared with 86.2 per cent in 2015¹.

The projects were generally very aware of trends in technology use, often complementing national data with local surveys. There was a strong focus on:

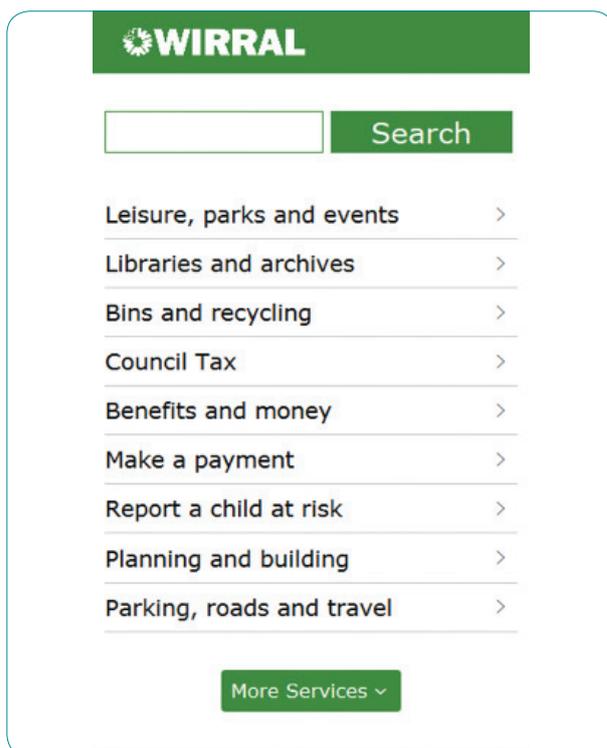
- making the access to services more mobile-friendly, adopting clearer designs and customer pathways and improving search facilities

¹ ONS internet users in the UK 2016 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2016>

- taking a customer-led (rather than a service-led) view of the world, reducing the amount of redundant information and using plain English on websites and making them more transactional
- introducing new digital channels such as web chat and Skype that are both more efficient and also divert people from traditional contact methods.

The partners in **Dorset** have moved beyond their historic focus on the dorsetforyou website towards considering their overall 'digital presence' in the area and the full range of ways in which local people's lives are touched by digital technology.

Wirral Council has aimed at radical simplicity and 'the minimum viable product' when redesigning its e-forms.



Wirral's redesigned mobile home page

One result of the increasing prevalence of digital technologies among customers is that councils such as South Holland and Lancaster have been able to launch new garden waste services as primarily digital initiatives, achieving very high levels of online take-up (over 70 per cent in both cases).

A strong message, therefore, is that customers may be more willing than you imagine to use digital services. Councils should be prepared to be bold and think 'digital' wherever possible. This may involve addressing the concerns of councillors and service managers, who will often have a particular perception of their service users.

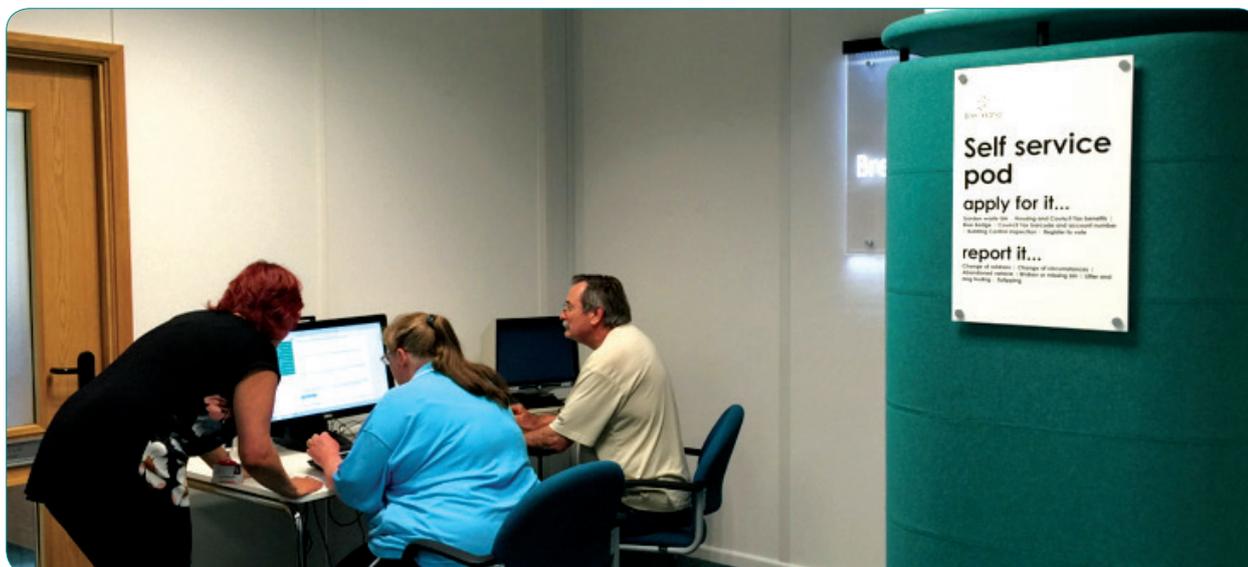
It will also mean thinking carefully about how services are promoted – for instance, always offering customers a digital channel as the first option in any marketing material. This is a particular challenge, as councils such as North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth point out, when the existing face-to-face and telephone services are already of good quality.

Two caveats are important:

- First, the digital services need to be well designed so that they are quick and easy to use. Therefore, customer involvement in their creation is vital (see below).
- Second, there will always be some people who are unable or unwilling to use digital technology and councils do need to provide for them. However, many of the projects have introduced self-service kiosks or PCs in their reception areas and are encouraging residents to go online with support from staff.

“Of course we want to help people get online. But the change in our thinking has been to recognise that most of our residents can already do this, or could do so with a bit of support and encouragement either from us or their network of family, friends and neighbours. It's only a small minority who will never be able to use online services”.

Executive Director



Self-service and assisted digital facilities at Breckland Council

Councils are continuing to innovate

The projects demonstrate in a very positive way that councils are taking advantage of developments in digital technologies and approaches and are continuing to innovate.

The participating councils have overseen the introduction of a range of new facilities, such as Apps, mobile-friendly digital service platforms, automated agents, e-forms and web chat, all of which are making life easier for customers and helping to save money.

Nottingham City Council used its Digital Experts funding to extend the use of Speech Recognition Automated Agents to the reporting of events such as missed bins. By December 2016, over 66 per cent of missed bin calls were being handled by the automated agent – in excess of 1000 successful calls per month, easing the pressure on the council’s contact centre.

However, advances in other areas have been equally significant:

- A number of the projects have implemented ‘agile’ project management approaches, involving the use of techniques such as user stories, daily

‘stand ups’ and time-boxing.² Not only have these approaches helped the councils to identify their key priorities, to manage their limited development resources more effectively and to deliver projects on time and to budget, they have also encouraged a wider involvement of staff and provided a common language for discussing problems and solutions.

- The participating councils are also making increasing use of the data they collect through their digital operations. It is now common practice to use tools such as Google Analytics to monitor web traffic and to identify points in the user journey which are causing problems. The feedback from customers received by staff in contact centres or using web chat is also being analysed to improve online services. Meanwhile, delivering services with a digital focus is offering new opportunities to shape operations.

South Holland has described the data it has received through its primarily online garden waste pilot as ‘second to none’. Staff are able easily to plot both existing subscribers and people on the waiting list in ways that would have been extremely time-consuming under traditional manual methods.

² For more details, see <https://www.agilebusiness.org>

As a customer



I need the council (and partners across the city) to understand me and all the services I use

so that the services I access are more personalised, joined up and convenient.

- ✘ I don't want to have to access different services in different ways.
- ✘ I don't want to identify myself multiple times.
- ✘ I don't want to feel that I have no role or say in the services I use.

As a partner and co-provider of services



I need to be able to work jointly with council staff with shared data and processes

so that we achieve the best possible outcomes for customers in the most cost effective way possible.

- ✘ I don't want data about customers split across systems.
- ✘ I don't want to miss warning signs and opportunities to intervene.
- ✘ I don't want duplicated effort across agencies.

As a frontline member of staff



I need information and support (case based reasoning and scripting) wherever I am and whatever I'm doing

so that I can provide a wide range of services quickly, consistently and expertly.

- ✘ I don't want to have to switch between multiple systems.
- ✘ I don't want to have to consult guidance manuals.
- ✘ I don't want to have to return to the office to access information or use systems.

Examples of Newcastle City Council's user stories

The move towards more digital approaches is also changing the role of customer-facing staff and promoting better internal relationships.

In several of the projects it was apparent that contact centre staff are now trying to reduce the number of transactions they carry out themselves, instead acting as advisers and encouraging callers to use the council's online facilities. Reception staff are also increasingly assuming the role of 'meeters and greeters' who will help visitors to use the online facilities available in the waiting areas.

Internally, the more successful digital projects are fostering closer working relationships between project teams, ICT staff, service managers, customer service advisers and web designers, particularly where some of the new agile approaches are employed or 'digital champions' have been identified across the council.

A number of the projects noted how a more collaborative spirit has been engendered, staff feel more involved, job roles are being interpreted more fluidly and there is a greater focus on the customer journey. Anecdotally, there is even more face-to-face interaction among staff and less reliance on communication by email.

“The digital champions have been a great success. It's a great leveller – everyone contributes ideas regardless of their position. We're now looking at introducing a 'champions' model into the other strands of our wider transformation programme.”

Executive Manager

Two important caveats should be made here.

First, where internal working relationships and project resourcing are not well planned and managed or key staff are brought in late to a project, problems and delays can occur. These issues are explored later in the evaluation.

Second, many of the benefits of digital approaches come from the end-to-end integration of systems across the customer journey. Just putting a PDF form on the web that then has to be printed, filled in manually and sent to the council for manual re-keying is of limited value. Similarly, councils need to have the flexibility to make quick changes to their websites or other systems to reflect changes in customer requirements or legislation and deliver rapid improvements in user journeys.

However, a message emerging from the Digital Experts projects is that their private sector partners – whether ICT suppliers or waste contractors or others – are frequently not able to offer the required flexibility and that linking different systems often remains a tortuous, time-consuming and expensive business. In some cases, the suppliers seem content to take advantage of captive markets and profitable legacy products. If councils are to innovate and act in an agile way, they will depend on their suppliers innovating and acting agilely too.

Customer-led design really is critical and Government can help

A strong message from the projects is that customer-led design is vital to success. Most of the participating councils have involved residents at various stages of their work – from concept through to final detailed design. The feedback has been invaluable in helping the project teams to understand how customers behave, what information is really vital to them, and how they are likely to navigate a path through a new system.

The **Dorsetforyou** partners have been experimenting with innovative techniques such as:

- Remote video testing, where users' pathways through specific website content and processes are filmed with their agreement. This has proved invaluable in 'getting inside' people's thought processes and in highlighting to service managers the problems users are facing in carrying out their business online.
- Rapid feedback sessions with potential users in popular customer locations such as libraries, swimming clubs and leisure centres. Staff can show users alternative prototypes of screen layouts for example and get immediate responses.

Government Digital Service

Design Principles

Listed below are our design principles and examples of how we've used them so far.

- 1 **Start with user needs**
- 2 **Do less**
- 3 **Design with data**
- 4 **Do the hard work to make it simple**
- 5 **Iterate. Then iterate again.**
- 6 **This is for everyone**
- 7 **Understand context**
- 8 **Build digital services, not websites**
- 9 **Be consistent, not uniform**
- 10 **Make things open: it makes things better**

Government Digital Design service guidance

To complement resident involvement, a number of the projects have used customer service staff from their call centres or one-stop shops as 'surrogate' customers to test new processes and web designs. A key message is that testing is not a one-off event, but an ongoing process that will continue after the launch of any new initiative and underpin future improvements in the customer journey.

Government has played its part. The design guidelines produced by the Government Digital Service (GDS) have proved particularly valuable and have been adopted with minor variations by a number of the Digital Experts projects, such as North Warwickshire and Nuneaton.³ The guidelines have provided a common language for internal conversations and a useful evidence-based challenge to traditional perceptions of what customers need. The Dorsetforyou partners, for instance, have built on the GDS guidelines to create a set of design principles that have been signed off by their Partnership Board and by the councils' chief executives, thereby providing a solid framework for subsequent work with individual service functions.

However, there is more that Government could do to promote the creation and implementation of practical digital assets designed on these principles, as is evident from the unsuccessful attempt by one of the Digital Experts projects to use the GDS code base as the basis for a new customer-focused digital platform. On detailed investigation, the code was not found to be organised or documented in a fashion that made it readily useable by other organisations, despite Government's encouragement of public bodies to reuse such assets.

If Government is to maximise the value of the digital assets it has developed, therefore, it should engage and involve colleagues from across the public sector to help co-design and test these assets before promoting them widely. This will help manage the expectations of other parts of the public sector who may wish to use these assets.

³ See <https://www.gov.uk/design-principles>

We have built the platforms, now we need to use them

Much of the Digital Experts funding has been used to invest in new infrastructure, whether a more mobile-friendly website or portal, an e-forms package, an App or web chat.

Although the projects have already delivered many benefits, including financial savings, there will be even greater returns over the coming years if the new facilities are exploited to the full. This will require:

- Active marketing of the facilities to residents to increase their use and make the new digital options the channel of choice. Every opportunity needs to be taken to promote the new facilities, through traditional media such as posters, newsletters and articles in local magazines, through online or social media channels or through contact centre or reception staff pointing out the benefits of going digital.
- A continuing focus on improving processes, making the customer journey smoother and more efficient and honing the information presented to the customer. Capturing feedback from customers, either directly or through front-line staff, will be essential, but resources will also have to be made available to ensure any work is actually carried out.
- A strategic push to reshape services so that they can take full advantage of the new digital facilities.

Councils such as **Breckland** are deploying multi-disciplinary teams to carry out service reviews with a strong emphasis on exploiting the potential of digital approaches.

- Continuing discussions with suppliers and contractors to ensure that their systems and working processes are fully supportive of the councils' digital ambitions, rather than a barrier to them.

- Active use of the data created by any new digital infrastructure and processes both to communicate with residents and to improve the planning, targeting and delivery of services. To take one example, the resident email addresses collected as part of a new garden waste scheme represent a 'marketing' asset that most private sector firms would see as incredibly valuable.
- Ongoing support for 'assisted digital' schemes, whether delivered by council staff, partners or volunteers, with the aim of giving as many residents as possible the skills and confidence to do their business online (whether with the council or other organisations).

To achieve all of this, councillors, senior directors, service managers, ICT, contact centre and communications staff among many others will have to accept that 'digital' is no longer something separate or new, but simply the way in which residents expect many services to be delivered in the 21st century. The evidence from the Digital Experts programme is that many councils have embraced this message.

One of **Newcastle's** ambitions is to extend the use of the agile approach to the wider organisation, so that it becomes more widely understood and accepted and its benefits are felt across the council.

Members of the **Dorset Local Resilience Forum** are exploring the possibility of using their newly installed automated call cascade system to support the organising of events such as festivals and air shows as well as sharing information on a more regular basis, rather than just for major incidents.

“Digital is no longer something separate or new, but simply the way residents expect many services to be delivered in the 21st century”

Delivering successful projects – the challenges

Although the great majority of the projects in the programme delivered all or most of their original objectives, all the councils faced a range of technical, resourcing and organisational challenges. These challenges were particularly acute in the six projects where the LGA could not complete a detailed analysis as these projects had not reached fruition. However, they did share their experiences so far and, as such, the six projects offer valuable learning points on how best to manage future initiatives.

Getting the resources right

All the projects experienced difficulties with resourcing to various degrees, but the six projects in particular struggled with getting this right. This was in part due to the significant cuts that councils have been subject to since 2010, which ultimately has led to cuts in their workforce. The result is that work pressures and competing priorities affected not just the project team but a range of other colleagues:

- ICT development staff within the council who were often juggling a number of different projects and had long 'to do' lists.
- Contact centre and customer service managers and advisers who were under immense pressure to handle day-to-day contact, often with reduced staff numbers.
- Staff in service departments, who were facing increasing demands on their time.
- Other key contributors including partner organisations. For instance, one project depended heavily on the involvement of their private sector partner, who was not able to update and integrate their IT with the council's thereby hampering the effectiveness of this project.

Milton Keynes found that the time involved in recruiting and supporting volunteer 'digital champions' was much greater than they had anticipated. The volunteers required a lot of hand-holding even for apparently simple tasks such as reporting on the activity they had undertaken.

Changes in project personnel, either because the person had moved on to a new job or as a result of a reorganisation, caused delays in some cases, as the new project managers took time to become familiar with the work.

Meanwhile, the external ICT suppliers struggled at times to meet their commitments to the projects. Smaller suppliers in particular, although generally more flexible and less bureaucratic than their larger counterparts, were often dependent on a small number of technical staff whose absence through holiday or sickness was difficult to manage.

While there is no easy answer to such challenges, the more successful projects appear to have:

- Identified, organised and committed adequate resources to the project from its outset and managed these effectively throughout – not just project management or technical staff, but personnel from the full range of functions that would be required for successful delivery (including external suppliers).
- Maintained regular oversight of the project's progress and resourcing through regular project governance arrangements, involving representatives at a senior enough level to re-balance the staffing where necessary. As the projects using 'agile' techniques have demonstrated, this does not necessarily entail heavy, bureaucratic arrangements.

Delivering successful digital projects – key elements:

- a clear scope and set of objectives and outcomes for the project, understood and agreed by all the relevant partners (including external suppliers)
- a good understanding, backed up by appropriate research, of the potential customers for the digital initiative and the types of devices they use
- support from senior councillors and officers for a 'digital by design' approach that makes digital channels the first option offered to residents (but with suitable safeguards for the digitally excluded)
- suitably skilled and committed staff resources, drawn not just from the technical or project management teams but also from front-line service departments, contact centre and communications staff, and private sector and other partners
- appropriate governance arrangements, with designated senior responsible officer(s) empowered to ensure that the resource requirements, priorities and interdependencies of different projects are understood and managed
- plans for early engagement with future users, including residents, front-line staff and partners, both on the design and testing of any new system and processes
- agreed processes for creating a baseline of current performance and costs and for identifying and capturing the financial benefits of the investment in new digital technologies or approaches
- contingency plans for addressing any technical difficulties or delays, including contacts with other councils that have completed or are undertaking similar projects
- arrangements for actively marketing the new digital options to potential users, both via traditional media but also through social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

Balancing the Digital Experts projects with wider programmes of work

A related problem, from which several of the projects suffered, was the need to deliver the specific Digital Experts project within a wider and more ambitious programme of corporate transformation.

The result was often to introduce delays, with the Digital Experts team having to wait while – for example – a separate development team completed work on a corporate sign-on process or an upgrade to the council's CRM system.

When these corporate projects hit snags, as was not uncommon, the Digital Experts implementation would be further delayed, meaning that both the council and local residents were deprived of the benefits of

the project for an extended period, including the potential financial savings it could have delivered.

Once again, there is no easy answer, but it does highlight the need for effective overall programme governance and management, under senior-level sponsorship and oversight, to ensure that the interdependencies between different elements of work are understood and important if smaller projects do not get lost from view in the wider process of change.

It also places a heavy responsibility on project managers (and their sponsors) to continue making the case for their initiative and to shout long and hard if their work is being delayed.

Our Customer Charter

MAKE IT HAPPEN

- We are here to help
- Listen to you and understand your needs
- Aim to get it right first time
- Are friendly, fair and honest

We ask you to: Treat us as you would like to be treated



MAKE IT EASY

- We treat everyone as an individual
- Offer a variety of ways to access our services and help you to use them
- Explain decisions and outcomes clearly
- Handle your information with care and respect your privacy

We ask you to: Give us the correct information and tell us if things change



MAKE IT BETTER

- We make more information available online
- Use your feedback to develop our services
- Work together as one Council

We ask you to: Offer us your ideas for improvement





Nottingham customer charter

Working in partnership

All the Digital Experts projects were dependent on internal partnerships to a greater or lesser extent and many involved partnerships across organisations.

While many of these partnerships worked very well, the messages when difficulties arose were often very similar.

First, ensure at the outset that all the different partners have understood the objectives of the project and are fully committed at senior level to seeing it through to completion and providing the resources to do so.

There were a couple of multi-authority projects where one of the councils dropped out at a very early stage, suggesting that the project had not been signed off at a sufficiently senior level and therefore was not seen as a priority when resources were tight.

However, it is equally important to engage suppliers and contractors. One project failed to meet its ambitions because the council's waste contractor was unwilling to make the changes required to move to a more digital mode of operation, despite assurances to the contrary.

Second, even small projects require appropriate oversight, sponsor involvement and mechanisms for reviewing progress and resourcing, particularly where a number of partners are involved.

A few of the multi-authority projects gave that the impression that the individual project managers, while very competent, had been left to 'get on with it' in something of a management void. This meant that when problems over resourcing occurred, it was more difficult to resolve them as the issues were not being handled at an appropriate level within the partner organisations.

Finally, try to ensure some consistency of personnel and job roles. Particularly in multi-authority projects, a new project manager is going to take time to become familiar not just with the project itself but with the objectives, working practices and personnel of any partner councils. All of which can lead to additional delays.

The screenshot shows a web form titled "Fly tipping, Litter, Fly posting, Dead Animals, Graffiti and Syringes - Problem Report". The form is part of the "North Warwickshire Borough Council Self Service" and includes "Register" and "Login" links in the top right. The navigation bar shows "Home" and "Services". The form has a breadcrumb trail: "Introduction", "Contact", "What are you reporting?", "Fly tipping", and "Email Details". The "What are you reporting?" section contains a list of options: "Fly tipping" (checked), "Fly posting", "Litter", "Graffiti", "Dead Animal", and "Syringes". A green checkmark is visible to the right of the "Fly tipping" option. At the bottom, there are buttons for "Previous", "Cancel", "Save", and "Next".

An example of North Warwickshire's redesigned e-forms

Dealing with technical challenges

Many of the projects, not just the six that did not meet their objectives, had to face unanticipated technical difficulties, particularly where the solution required the integration of systems from different suppliers.

This is not unexpected given the wide range of legacy systems that most councils still depend upon for delivering key services and the fact that these systems were usually designed for use by back-office staff rather than in a customer-facing environment.

Data quality was another issue, with some projects having to devote more time than expected to cleaning up their data, eliminating duplication and applying consistent standards to its capture, management and storage.

While technical challenges are always likely to arise, the projects point towards ways in which these difficulties can be mitigated:

- Involve all the relevant partners, including ICT suppliers, at the outset of the project so that they fully understand the project's ambitions, timescales and technical and resource requirements. If possible, do some preliminary analysis and testing of the technical aspects of the project.
- Be realistic about timescales and do some contingency planning – what resources might be available if an element of the project requires more time and effort than anticipated? And do not announce the new facilities to the public too far in advance – the worst possible outcome is for a customer to have a bad initial experience of a new service on the website, for instance, and to revert to traditional contact channels.

- Do not be afraid to plagiarise other people's ideas and experience. In a couple of instances, other councils were able to lend expertise and support. The project funder, in this case the LGA, may also be able to help if given adequate notice of problems, for instance by putting pressure on suppliers to improve their performance or by pointing the project team in the direction of councils who have addressed similar issues.

The **Dorset** partners commissioned an external partner to review the Government Digital Service code base they were hoping to use as the basis for their digital platform. The review highlighted the fact that the proposed solution was not practical – potentially saving the partners a great deal of time and expense.

“Even small projects require appropriate oversight, sponsor involvement and mechanisms for reviewing progress and resourcing”

Concluding thoughts – designing future programmes

The Digital Experts programme has reinforced a number of messages about how successful programmes to support digital experience-sharing and innovation across the sector can best be designed.

- Although much can be gained from feedback via regular monthly progress reports and email contact, there is a real value in establishing direct ‘account management’ communication between the LGA sponsors and the various project teams. For instance, the tele-conferences held at key moments during the development of the projects were extremely helpful in re-energising the teams, identifying priority actions and addressing potential problems or delays. They also helped to establish personal contact and made the eventual site visits to capture the case studies smoother and more productive.
- If projects are experiencing problems (not unusual in complex initiatives of this sort), it is vital that they let the LGA sponsors know at the earliest possible stage. As we have suggested in the previous section, the LGA can potentially help in various ways, from intervening with suppliers to facilitating contacts with other councils. Some of the projects ‘went to ground’ at various points, meaning that it was too late for the LGA to make an effective intervention by the time the problem came to light.
- Councils need to think carefully from the outset about the longer-term sustainability of such initiatives so that the benefits can continue to be realised over time. This may perhaps be an area that the LGA bidding process and criteria for awarding funding could emphasise more.

In one instance, a fairly successful initial project could not be continued because of lack of ongoing funding, despite the fact that the project was addressing an issue that was very relevant to the council’s wider plans for transformation.

- Finally, the projects have all contributed to creating assets, good practice and learning that need to be shared as fully as possible across the sector if the return on the LGA’s investment is to be maximised. The LGA is doing this not just through placing material on its website and by sharing experience among the councils participating in the programme, but also by giving leading projects the opportunity to present their work in external forums, such as in the Innovation Zone at LGA annual conference. The evidence from many of the projects is that they too are making such communication a core priority.

The **Dorset Councils Partnership**’s shared planning service is now showcasing its innovations, including the work it has done with town and parish councils, to other planning services in Dorset in order to highlight the positive impact of taking a digital-led approach.

Newcastle City Council has started conversations with neighbouring councils about its agile project management approach. Via its involvement in the Agile Business Consortium, it also hopes to stimulate debate more widely across the local government community about the potential benefits.

Appendix

The 27 Digital Experts projects

Details of all 27 Digital Experts projects, including case studies, project reports, vox pops and additional practical material, can be found by following the link on www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/productivity/-/journal_content/56/10180/6357119/ARTICLE.

The table below gives a brief summary of each project.

Local authorities involved	Project focus
Blackpool Council	Developing fully integrated processes principally for waste management, initially for requesting bulky waste collections and subsequently for reporting missed bins and fly-tipping.
Breckland and South Holland Councils	Providing a common online 'book and pay' facility which would operate across a range of services and which residents and businesses could access via different devices, including laptops/PCs, tablets and smart phones, as well as at council offices on a self-service basis or with assisted support.
Christchurch and East Dorset Councils	Introducing a solution that would offer customers full online functionality to apply and pay for licences via the dorsetforyou site.
Dacorum Borough Council	Conducting research into the initiatives and actions that bring about channel shift and their effectiveness. Combining the findings of this research with local demographic profiles to create a locally appropriate method which will inform a channel shift implementation strategy.
Dorset County and Districts	Developing a customer-focused design approach, applying this approach to key service areas and building a flexible prototype services platform that would replace and significantly improve upon the councils' existing website and content management system.
Dorset Local Resilience Forum	Introducing an automated call cascade system that would assist the partners involved in the Dorset LRF to communicate effectively, before, during and after a major incident.

Essex County Council	Further developing the Adult Services' information, advice guidance and advocacy website to ensure that it is user-friendly on mobile devices, and that pages on the website are printer friendly. Events and workshops will be held to promote the website and encourage residents to use it.
Gloucester City and Gloucestershire County Councils	Developing and implementing a 'My Council / Report it' App for anyone who wanted to notify either the city or the county council about a range of issues.
Lancaster City, Preston City and Fylde Councils	Creating a 'digital contact centre', with a single sign-on, which will give the 354,000 residents in the councils' combined population access to a self-service 'one-stop-shop' portal containing all the information and services relevant to them based on their post code.
Luton Borough Council	Implementing a system of digital e-bundling for court cases, allowing cases to be presented to the courts electronically and ensuring that staff can meet the requirement to process an increasing case load in tighter timescales.
Milton Keynes Council	Via Digital Unite, providing an online Digital Champions Network to create, develop and support digital champions (volunteers) in local communities by equipping them to deliver peer-to-peer training.
Newcastle City Council	Significantly enhancing the council's skills and capacity in agile project management so as to deliver solutions that would meet customer needs and expectations, enable its workforce to operate more effectively, promote closer collaboration with partners and community groups and reduce costs.
Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council	Procuring a customer self-service portal for council tax and business rates.
North Warwickshire & Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Councils	Implementing a content management system based on the concept of 'responsive design', making the website easier for the customer to use regardless of device and increasing the online accessibility of services.
Nottingham City Council	Expanding the existing Contact Portal platform with the addition of a 'reporting' Speech Recognition Automated Agent to handle telephone missed bin collection reports, allowing citizens to 'self-serve' using their preferred channel – the telephone.

Reading Borough Council	Developing and recruiting to a digital volunteering scheme to provide support to Reading residents who need help with using public access IT. The project includes recruiting a digital volunteers coordinator to support and motivate volunteers and to engage local community and voluntary organisations to ensure the scheme reaches key excluded groups.
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	Procuring a live web chat facility as part of the council's approach to assisted digital and supported self-service. Engaging with residents to identify what digital opportunities they want and commissioning a developer to deliver these changes. Commissioning external professional services to provide project assurance on security and data matters.
Solihull Council	Driving forward the implementation of online self-service e-bookings and e-payment in 13 service areas.
Southampton City Council	Piloting the use of live web chat to support customer self-service.
Stafford Borough Council and Cannock Chase Council	Converting Cannock Chase Council's existing online forms into a new hosted solution, already used by Stafford Borough Council, that makes these forms available as a smartphone App.
Staffordshire County Council	Staffordshire County Council working in partnership with the district councils across the county to develop a MyStaffsApp, a smart phone App offering access to a range of services provided by both county and district councils.
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	Promoting a range of online preventative services using mobile technology to engage with over 50's, by developing their skills and confidence through training and promotion.
Test Valley Borough Council	Procuring and implementing the Northgate Citizen Access tool which will allow residents to transact with the council online.
Thurrock Council	Extending the council's online Parent Portal offer to provide new online self-service functionality for parents to check their eligibility and apply for free school meals or to check their eligibility for funded early education places, thereby improving both the customer experience and staff productivity and encouraging online take-up.

Tri-borough (Westminster City Council, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham)	Enhancing the Frameworki mobile application used by Adult Social Care teams across the three councils to allow users to add and amend case notes and view case documents while out of office, and developing document search functionality.
Wirral Council	Updating the council's content management system and website to make it easier for customers to use and accessible by any kind of device, thereby supporting increased levels of self-service and reducing the costs associated with traditional channels.
Wyre Council	Procuring Council Tax E-form software to allow residents to transact with the council online.



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