

Story: 'Digital and personalisation' – Newport case study

In the last five years, Newport City Council has dramatically shifted how its residents engage with it. Three-quarters of contact in 2012 was made by phone or in person and the other quarter happened online. Two years later, the split was half and half.

Some of this 'channel shift' came through natural progressions in technology, i.e. increasing broadband speeds. In an era of tight budgets, Newport worked hard to accelerate this process by making online approaches as easy as possible. First, it looked carefully at traffic on its website to identify the most popular pages. Then it concentrated its redesign work on these pages, developing new 'integrated e-forms' to make the user journey more relevant and easy to navigate. This made the website more user-friendly, and meant each person only had to engage with the council once.

On its own, this approach isn't necessarily a huge benefit to engagement. As explained in Pillar I, digital can actually mean less engagement between council and community.

However, it's what the Council did next that makes it such a good example of how personalisation and engagement overlap.

Using their data, Newport profiled every household across the city, using factors like the age of residents to gauge how e-savvy they were likely to be. Whenever someone called or visited the council, this estimate appeared on the council officer's computer screen.

Officers made an effort to encourage the people who were most likely to go online to do so. Those who were unlikely to were offered practical support. Officers were deployed in job clubs, community centres, libraries and care homes, where they gave the digitally excluded the training they needed. In buildings where the public could access computers, such as libraries and customer services offices, 50 front-line staff were trained to help people access council services online.

By improving its website, profiling households, and providing training for the digitally excluded, the council made a saving of half a million pounds in two years. Just as importantly, more residents experienced the speed and convenience of a well-built online environment. No service was solely available online. People were encouraged to use digital channels to when that was appropriate and supported when it was not.

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The Newport approach is an example of how digital and engagement overlap. By using data and by building services around people, the council was able to identify the hardest to reach and least confident, and develop meaningful relationships with them. A channel shift like Newport's could have meant less engagement by the council with residents. Instead, through adopting a more personalised approach, it became the vehicle for more.

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