

Case study

Kent Homechoice

March 2018

**Providing digital support for housing
and homelessness**

The issue and context

Kent Homechoice is a partnership of 39 organisations which includes all 13 Kent and Medway local councils and 26 of the housing associations that provide housing in Kent. The partnership is supported by a Smarter Digital Services team, which was created by chief executives across Kent and works with public bodies to improve and increase online services, drive down costs, and most importantly enhance the customer experience.¹

As of December 2015, there were just under 21,000 applicants with a housing need on the housing registers held by councils across Kent and Medway. Each month, these councils received around 2,500 approaches from customers, but only 1,000 of these applications were successful in joining the housing register. Only 30 per cent of homeless applicants were actually accepted as homeless.

Determining who qualifies to join the housing register or who is eligible to make a homelessness application makes significant demands on both housing and customer services teams. Applicants also invest a great deal of their time in providing information and waiting for a response, only to face disappointment and frustration when they realise that they do not qualify or are ineligible and should have been looking at other alternatives.

“People could fill in almost 30 pages of complicated information and then be told they weren’t eligible. And there were a lot of questions that weren’t relevant to most applicants. It wasn’t great for our customers or our staff.”

Chair, Kent Homechoice Board

The Kent Homechoice and Smarter Digital Services teams submitted a joint bid to the Local Government Association’s (LGA) Digital Transformation Programme for funding to transform the way in which people across Kent and Medway gain access to homelessness support and the housing registers.

¹ Smarter Digital Services was established in 2013 and is currently funded by a partnership of 12 councils in Kent, Surrey and Cambridge. The team is based in Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and operates as a responsive, not-for-profit consultancy with skills and expertise in business process redesign, website auditing and development, user research, user testing and behaviour change techniques. The team provides external challenge, expert advice and valuable resources to help partner councils achieve their digital ambitions. See www.smarterdigital.info

The bid for LGA funding aligned with three key ongoing collaborative projects across Kent:

- Kent Homechoice's aspiration to improve its online self-service option via the shared Locata housing system. An online housing application form had been introduced across Kent in 2009 but user testing (including videoing) during 2015 had demonstrated it was no longer fit for purpose. As one officer commented: "In theory, 80 per cent of our applications were done online. But in reality the form was so difficult that customer services staff or partner agencies ended up doing it for the applicant." A working group, comprising housing officers from each council, had therefore been established to jointly redesign the online housing application services across Kent.
- Smarter Digital Services' work programme, sponsored by Kent Customer Services Group, aimed at improving online services by placing the user at the heart of service design. A video of customers struggling to complete the existing online housing application process proved to be a highly effective driver for persuading housing and customer services managers and staff that change was essential.
- The joint Kent chief executives' vision to coordinate approaches to ICT systems and procurement to reduce the duplication in spending and effort on shared requirements. There was also a desire to share business intelligence, particularly around residents at high risk of developing greater needs in the future.

The project objectives and targets

The specific outcome envisaged by the Kent bid was to develop and implement three new online tools, all of which would be available in mobile-friendly versions:

A homelessness triage service – to enable staff and customers quickly to make an initial assessment of a person's circumstances and, where they seemed unlikely to be eligible for assistance, to signpost the customer to alternative advice and support available to them (including the pre-assessment form below).

An online housing application pre-assessment form – which, by asking a small number of key questions, would give the customer an early indication of the likelihood of their being accepted onto the housing register. The customer would not be required to give personal data at this point. The customer would be offered an 'action plan' on other local housing options tailored to their circumstances and updated in line with changing policies and procedures.

A redesigned online housing application form – this form would be a scaled-down and simplified version of the current form and would be 'intelligent' in the sense that it would only ask

for information relevant to the customer's circumstances and housing need and would pull relevant details from the pre-assessment form. It would not be possible to complete the form without having gone through the pre-assessment process first.

“Having mobile versions of the tools was really important. For people who are homeless, a mobile phone is often their only way of keeping in contact, so doing a lot of user testing on mobiles was critical. It's also easier and faster to do some tasks on mobiles, because you can swipe screens for instance.”

Website and Digital Consultant, Smarter Digital Services

The expected outcomes included:

- Easier access to council-designed self-assessment tools for customers, their families and their support workers (including voluntary agencies)
- Reduced levels of customer contact at council offices and call centres
- Less administrative work as staff process fewer applications
- Quicker decisions for customers and less wasting of their time
- Better and more tailored advice to customers on alternative options to public housing
- Better management of customer expectations
- Ultimately, more informed customers who can make better decisions on their housing options.

The partners' bid envisaged that the project would offer cost savings in two main forms:

- Cost-to-serve savings of around £150,000 per annum across Kent through reductions in face-to-face and telephone contact
- A similar figure of around £150,000 per annum through a reduction in back-office processing and assessment of ineligible applications.

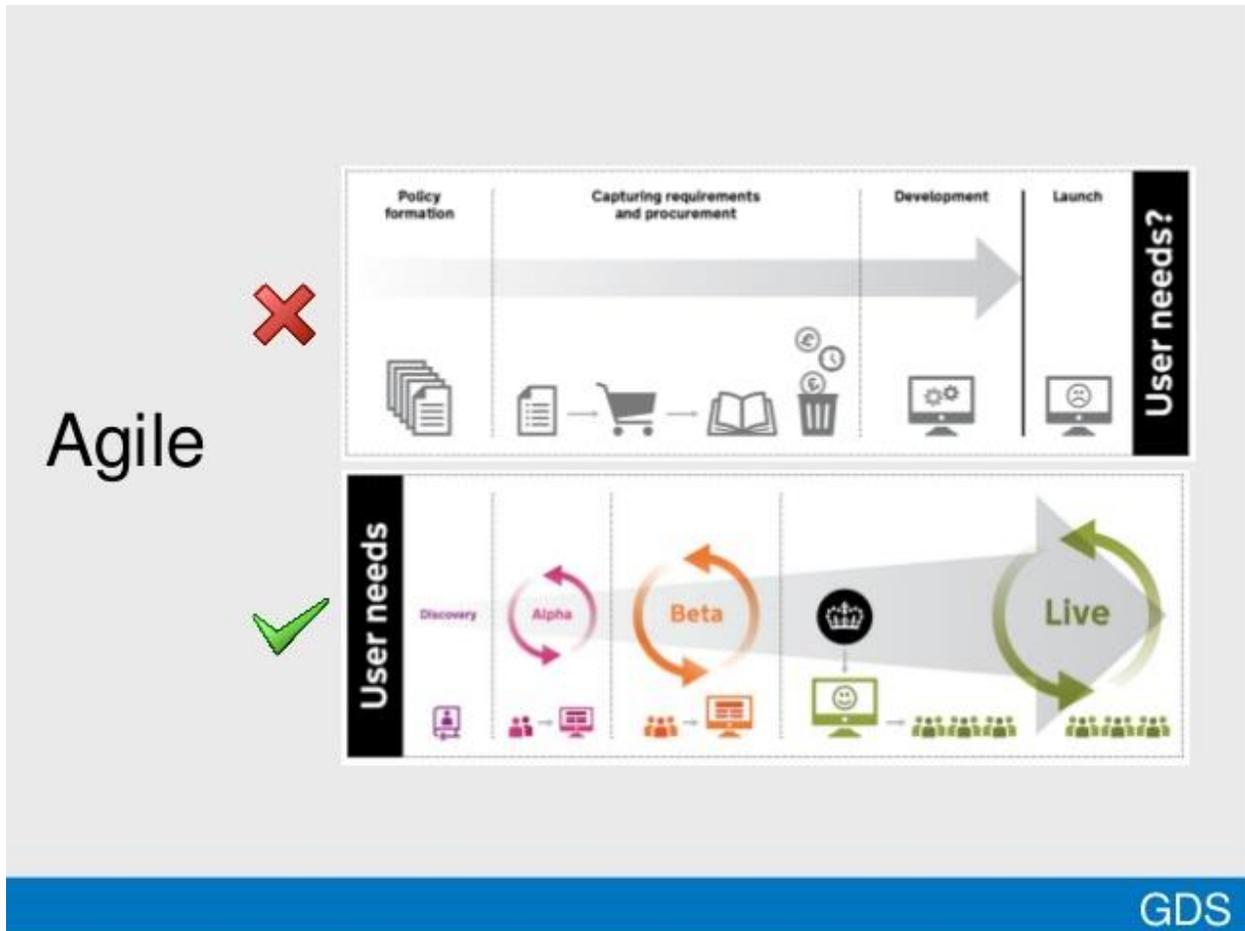
The project team proposed to follow an iterative, agile approach in line with the Government Digital Services method for digital service design. Each of the three developments would therefore go through a four-stage process involving:

Discovery: understanding user needs and the problem area that required addressing

Alpha: initial development to demonstrate how the solution might look

Beta: production of a more polished, feature-rich version of the solution for user testing

Live: continuous development based on changing needs and requirements



The agile v traditional development approach²

The overall timetable was envisaged to take around nine months to December 2016.

The partners committed to building the homelessness triage tool using open standards and making the technical components available to other councils, for example via LocalGov Digital Github, thereby ensuring the approach was replicable and reusable.

The pre-assessment tool and redesigned housing application form would be developed by two suppliers, Locata and Sector-UK, and made available to the Locata customer base of 65 local councils across the UK. Kent's approach to developing the pre-assessment and housing application would also be shared freely.

² Taken from a Government Digital Services blog <https://www.slideshare.net/intscotland/tom-loosemoregovernment-digital-service> and reproduced under the Open Government Licence <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

In the workshops on the homelessness triage tool, the project team had to address concerns such as “we can’t make this fit our processes” and “This doesn’t work with the way we do things”.

There were also some technical and financial barriers to overcome. For instance, Locata proved not to have a suitable development platform for creating the pre-assessment and housing application forms and had to acquire new software. The company’s initial quotations for developing these tools were also well beyond the councils’ available budget and had to be negotiated down.

It was November 2016, therefore, before an order was placed and contracts signed with a local developer, Yoyo Design, to deliver the homelessness triage tool by late January 2017 within the budget identified in the original bid. At the same time, Locata was commissioned to deliver the pre-assessment tool – again by late January 2017 – and the new redesigned application form containing some 223 questions by June 2017.

“To get to this stage, with the complexities of working with multiple councils and very different requirements, took a massive effort and was a massive achievement.”

Project Manager, Smarter Digital Services

Key milestones from this point were as follows:

Homelessness triage tool

December 2016

- Work takes place on both the front and back-end development, Google analytics implementation, quality assurance and browser/device testing.
- An online demo of the new tool is created.

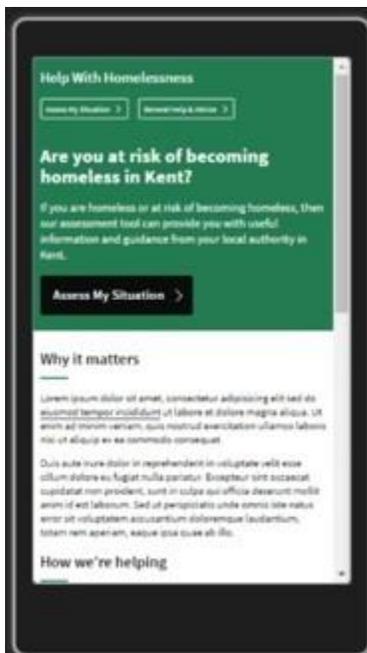
January 2017

- Nine user tests of Beta are delivered by the Smarter Digital Services team, involving both internal staff and external customers nominated by housing. Customer feedback includes comments such as “It is telling me things, but I need it to show a bit of empathy” and “It talks about next steps but I’m still not clear what happens next”.
- Members of the Smarter Digital Services team are trained on the content management system (Umbraco) so they can administer the tool once it is handed over from the developers, as well as eventually training the partner councils to update their own individual advice pages.³

³ At the time of preparing this case study, changes to the partners’ local information were still being made by the Smarter Digital Services team. However, the plan is to decentralise this capability to individual councils once their staff have been trained on the Umbraco content management system

February 2017

- A feedback report on user testing is sent to Yoyo. The improvements are largely non-technical and focused on usability and navigation.
- The Smarter Digital Services team choose a cloud hosting arrangement and the tool is migrated from the Yoyo development environment in late February.
- The Smarter Digital Services team facilitates a 'content design' workshop with the seven pilot councils to demonstrate the tool, confirm the wording of questions and answers, and develop a template for the information on local outcomes that each council needs to supply (for example, where to go for help). The councils are given ten days to deliver their content, which will be tested by the Smarter Digital Services team in line with design and usability guidelines.
- The Smarter Digital Services team also drafts a communications plan for linking the triage tool with local agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureaux during roll-out.



The mobile version of the homelessness triage tool

March 2017

- Local content is finalised and the tool goes live across six councils. One pilot council (Swale) decides not to proceed with implementing the tool because of uncertainty about future homelessness legislation and a view that the pre-assessment tool will meet most of their requirements.
- The pilot councils are asked to incorporate a prominent link to the tool on their homelessness web pages and to remove other content. Also to inform their customer services teams about the tool.
- An email is sent to housing leads in all other councils across Kent giving them a simple four-stage process for implementing the tool.

April 2017 onwards

- An article about the tool is included in the Smarter Digital Services e-newsletter for customer services managers across Kent.
- Statistics on the use and impact of the tool are gathered on an ongoing basis.
- Two additional councils implement the tool, making it live in eight out of 12 councils in Kent.
- The homelessness triage tool and housing application pre-assessment tool form part of the Smarter Digital Services team's presentation at the LGA Conference Innovation Zone in July 2017.

"A key feature of the triage tool is that it's very flexible and adaptable. That's going to be crucial when the new homelessness reduction legislation comes in."

Head of Digital Services and Transformation, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Housing application pre-assessment form

December 2016

- A first iteration of pre-assessment form is developed.
- Six days of user testing organised by the Smarter Digital Services team is carried out across all the councils except Medway and a full report compiled on the feedback.

January 2017

- Enhancements based on user testing are implemented.

February 2017

- A second iteration of the pre-assessment tool is released for testing. Councils are given five days to test the form before feedback is sent to Locata.
- The Kent Homechoice manager and Smarter Digital Services team work on developing a Kent-wide communications plan in preparation for the soft launch of the pre-assessment tool to housing teams and partner agencies during March. The plan is designed to link with Universal Credit communications.
- The project team also gathers baseline data against which to judge the impact of the tool after its implementation.

March 2017

- The form goes live. In its initial week, 816 applicants complete a full pre-assessment, but when they reach the set of questions about eligibility 130 people leave the online form without completing it. It is not clear why these applicants are giving up.
- A training session is held with housing officers. The form is also demonstrated to customer services staff.
- An email is circulated to all the Kent chief executives updating them on the availability of the pre-assessment tool/

April 2017 onwards

- A training video for customers and staff is developed by the design team at Dover District Council (launched on the Kent Homechoice website in June).

- Statistics on the use and impact of the tool are gathered on an ongoing basis. Councils across Kent begin to see a reduction in the number of housing applications compared to the previous year.
- The LGA queries whether the reasons for people dropping out of the pre-assessment process are captured – to distinguish, for instance, between customers who realise they are not eligible for housing and those who find the form too difficult. In response, the project team asks their developers to build a short exit survey (added to the tool in early July).
- Guidance on the information/documentation that customers require to complete the pre-assessment is added to the front of the tool in mid-July.
- The Kent Homechoice manager undertakes an exercise across five councils to map the time taken for back-office staff to register new applicants on the housing register using the old application form. This includes assessing eligibility and writing out for evidence. The average is 57 minutes.
- A survey is added to the Kent Homechoice website aimed at applicants who have applied to the housing register since the launch of the pre-assessment process. The aim is to gather views on how useful customers have found the personalised action plan included in the tool.

Kent Homechoice



Thank you for completing the Kent Homechoice pre-assessment form.
 Below are details of your personalised action plan created on: 2 August 2017.
 You are strongly advised to follow the advice given.

Social Housing

From the answers that you have given we would recommend that you complete a full housing application form.

The form will take you between 30 minutes and 2 hours to complete depending on the complexity of your circumstances and you will be required to submit additional information to verify and support your application. Alternatively you can complete the full online form at a later stage, however, you will be required to complete the Pre Assessment form again if you choose to do this.

There is no guarantee of receiving an offer of social housing and we therefore recommend that you also follow the advice in your personal housing action plan."

The following advice and actions should be followed to assist you with finding suitable housing.

Help to buy and Shared Ownership

We have a local Help to Buy Agent which is BPHA (Bedford Pilgrims Housing Association) who have been appointed by the Homes & Communities Agency as a one stop shop and point of contact for people looking for affordable homes to buy or rent in their area. Further information is available on their www.helpstobuyese.org.uk/

Affordable home ownership and HomeBuy

If you can't afford to buy a flat or house, you may be able to get financial help to buy a home. There are two types of 'HomeBuy' schemes to help people buy newly built homes:

- ◆ **Equity Loan** - these are open to both first time buyers and home movers on new build homes worth up to £600,000.
- ◆ **Shared Ownership** - these are provided through Housing Associations. You buy a share of your home (between 25% and 75% of the home's value) and pay rent on the remaining share. You will need to take out a mortgage to pay for your share of the home's purchase price.

HomeBuy schemes are a first step to fully owning your home. When you can afford it, you can pay more money, for example through savings or your mortgage, to own your home outright. You can find out more information on [affordable home ownership schemes](#) on the government's website.

HM Forces Advice

Armed Forces Community Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise by the nation ensuring that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly.

We have recently signed up to the Armed Forces Community Covenant, to ensure that we support those who serve, or have served and their family members.

This means that we, along with other organisations and charities, are working together to advise, assist and support current and ex-armed forces and their families to get jobs, access training, find accommodation, and receive the support and services they need in the community.

We are working together with the following organisations:

- ◆ Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA)
- ◆ Royal British Legion
- ◆ Royal British Legion Industries

Full application form

March 2017

- The timetable for production of the full form is reviewed. The main concern is around the development resources required. A revised delivery date of August 2017 is set.

April 2017

- A set of questions for the new form is circulated to all council partners for final sign-off. Responses are received within the agreed timescales. However, the partners request that a significant number of extra questions are included in the form to cover the full range of information on applicants' circumstances that housing officers may need to make an assessment.
- Although the 'intelligence' within the form means that applicants are only presented with the sub-set of questions relevant to their circumstances, thereby making it easier for users to complete, building this type of logic into the online form complicates the development task each time a new question is added. The housing association partners also highlight the need to add an affordability calculator.
- Work begins on building the first phase of the new form.

May 2017 onwards

- The developers push back the date for delivery of the form for testing until late June because of the number of additional questions and the complex functionality. Go-live is now planned for mid-September.
- Development of new form, including links to back-office processes, continues over the summer. User testing takes place in June, organised by Smarter Digital Services.
- The new form goes live in mid-September. Subsequently some amendments are made to the email verification process (to deal with customers who have no access to an email address either directly or via family and friends). The document upload facility, which allows applicants to send scanned information, is also enhanced to allow applicants to log back in and send further documentation.
- The training video for staff and customers is updated to reflect the new form.
- Statistics on the use of the new form are gathered on an ongoing basis.

Housing



Apply for social housing



Get advice about homelessness



Pay your council house rent

Finding a home

- Social housing
- Advice about homelessness
- Affordable home ownership

Benefits and support

- Find out if you can get housing benefit
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)
- Disabled facilities adaptations

Private rented housing and HMOs

- Standards for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)
- Apply for a HMO licence
- Report a problem with your landlord

Council tenant services

- Pay your rent online
- Request a repair
- Register for a mutual exchange

Canterbury City Council's housing landing page. The 'Apply for social housing' and 'Get advice about homelessness' links take the customer directly to the new digital tools.

The outcome – successes and challenges

The Digital Transformation project has generated a series of benefits, both financial and non-financial. These can be summarised as follows:

Financial benefits

Many factors affect the level of applications to join the housing register or to be accepted as homeless. The financial savings identified below are therefore based on applying reasonable modelling assumptions to the figures for the participating councils supplied by the Kent project team.

Also, given the increasing pressure on housing services, any financial benefits are likely to translate into extra staff productivity, or to result in additional support being directed to those customers who really need help (including applicants who are digitally excluded), rather than in pure cost reductions. However, the chair of Kent Homechoice estimates that cost savings equivalent to around 2.5 FTEs have been achieved across the council partners.

There are several areas where quantifiable savings can potentially be identified and modelled, as set out below. The collective financial benefits from reducing the number of applications to the housing register across the Kent councils can be summarised as follows:

Area of saving (housing applications)	Illustrative value per annum (£)
Reduced time processing housing applications	63,314
Reduction in face-to-face visits	13,740
Reduction in telephone contact	16,776
Total	93,830

The impact of the homelessness triage tool is more difficult to model as it has not yet been adopted by all the Kent councils and homelessness patterns vary considerably from authority to authority.

However, the experience of Canterbury City Council (see box below) indicates that implementing the tool as part of a wider set of digital and organisational changes could generate illustrative savings of around £11,000 per annum in just this one council.

Reductions in time spent handling applications to the housing register

Figures supplied by the Kent authorities show that, between April 2014 and March 2017 inclusive, the average number of housing applications across the county was 2,377 per month. Following the introduction of the pre-assessment tool in late March 2017, the average monthly level of applications fell by almost 17 per cent to 1,976 – or 401 fewer applications per month.

Analysis of the time taken to process a housing application indicates that each application requires 57 minutes of staff time. Since the average hourly cost for staff members (including on-costs) is £13.85, the reduction in volume represents a collective illustrative cost saving of £5,276 per month or some £63,314 per annum.⁴

As Kent’s original bid highlighted, there are also potential savings in the time staff spend helping applicants, either face-to-face or on the telephone. User research highlighted just how complicated it was to fill in the previous application form.

In the month following the launch of the new online application form in September 2017, the project team received 1,447 feedback responses. The form was rated ‘very good’ or ‘good’ by 84 per cent of respondents and ‘difficult’ by 14 per cent. Only 2 per cent of respondents rated the form as ‘very difficult’.

Detailed figures for the time spent by staff on advising applicants on their applications are not available. However:

⁴ (13.85 x 57/60) x 401 = 5,276.16

- If it is assumed that 25 per cent of the 401 fewer applications now being received each month would have involved a visit to a one-stop shop or other advice outlet, and a further 25 per cent would have involved a telephone call, the potential monthly cost saving using Socitm's figures of £8.62 per visit and £2.83 per call would be £1,145 or £13,740 per annum.⁵
- If it is further assumed that a telephone call can be avoided in even 25 per cent of the applications still being received (ie in the case of 494 per month), there would be additional illustrative savings of £1,398 per month or £16,776 per annum.⁶

“Previously our websites encouraged people to call us. Now they are designed to encourage people to use our digital tools as their first option.”

Head of Digital Services and Transformation, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

“I would say that the quality of applications is definitely better, which means that the same number of staff can process the applications more quickly, leading to fewer calls about applications. This also means that one member of the team has the ability to carry out more verification visits than we could previously, hopefully leading to less fraud.”

Housing Officer, Gravesham Borough Council

Reductions in time spent handling applications for homelessness

Local factors – such as decisions by a major private landlord – can play an important part in determining the level of homelessness applications in a council area. Also, in several of the Kent districts, the overall number of applications is quite small. The statistics therefore need to be treated more cautiously than those for applications to join the housing register.

Figures supplied by the Smarter Digital Services team for the period 1 April 2017 to 14 September 2017 and for the comparable period in the previous year suggest that a higher proportion of councils saw a reduction in homelessness applications among the eight Kent councils using the homelessness triage tool than among the five councils that have not yet implemented the tool.

However, there are variations in both groups and even within the eight councils using the tool there have been different degrees of implementation.

The most impressive reduction in applications has been seen at Canterbury City Council, where the new digital triage tool has been implemented as part of a wider set of changes (see box below).

Applications fell from 560 in the period 1 April 2016 to 14 September 2016 to 362 in the comparable period in 2017 – a reduction of 198 or 35 per cent. Since it is estimated that processing a homelessness application takes two hours of staff time at £13.85 per hour, there is an illustrative saving over the period of almost £5,500 or an annual saving in the region of £11,000.

⁵ $100 \times 8.62 = 862$ and $100 \times 2.83 = 283$ giving a total of 1,145

⁶ $494 \times 2.83 = 1398.02$

While not all the Kent councils may be able to achieve this level of saving, the Canterbury figures illustrate how the triage tool could contribute to significant cost efficiencies if implemented as part of a comprehensive and carefully planned approach to digital transformation.

It is also important to remember the savings to the public purse offered by preventing even one person from becoming homeless. For instance, a study by the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York, published in 2015, suggested that intervening to help people when they first become homeless can save between £3,000 and £18,000 for every person helped.⁷

Canterbury City Council's use of the new housing tools reflects the council's commitment to active digital leadership that fully exploits the potential of new digital approaches and technologies.

The tools have helped to provide digital support for a council-wide review that has led to the creation of an embryonic community support team. The council is in the process of developing the new model and expects the team to be fully functioning by April 2018.

The aim of the team is to identify and intervene at an early stage to assist those people on the housing register who are most vulnerable – for instance, where there is repeated pattern of homelessness. As the head of community services at Canterbury commented:

“We've been able to reorganise our resources and target them differently, so we put more focus on preventative work. The digital solution went hand in hand with the reorganisation.”

To complement the work of the community support team, Canterbury's communications team is looking at how best to 'nudge' customer behaviours and the council will be carrying out more research with customers who have limited digital skills. This research will be used to further simplify processes and systems.

“People are not going to use digital if it's more difficult.”

Systems and Improvement Officer, Canterbury City Council

Links to the new digital solutions feature prominently on the council's website and the contact centre is fully aware of the housing processes and actively signposts customers to the homelessness triage and pre-assessment tools. Canterbury's website has itself been subject to extensive user testing across a range of devices. The web team has used a series of user experience techniques including tree testing, card sorting, eye tracking using special glasses, and testing by the council's ePanel.

⁷ See <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2015/research/crisis-homeless-research/>

Non-financial benefits

In addition to the financial benefits above, the new tools have generated a range of non-financial benefits. Many of these contribute to time savings for council staff and therefore productivity, or they make life easier for either partner agencies or customers themselves. They have been included here because their impact has proved difficult to quantify precisely.

They include:

Clearer and more effective online processes

The new tools have been designed to take account of national best practice on accessibility and usability. They are available on both PCs and a range of mobile devices.

“I’ve used the homelessness tool with rough sleepers. The language is straightforward and it’s as easy to use on a mobile as on a PC. It also seems to cater for a whole range of situations and groups. So it’s short and sweet.”

Assessment and Resettlement Worker, Porchlight⁸

The processes are linked, saving applicants’ time and avoiding mistakes from rekeying. For instance, a completed pre-assessment form will populate the full housing application form with relevant details the customer has already entered.

The full application form is also ‘intelligent’ meaning it only asks people for information relevant to their specific circumstances. Applicants provide verification upfront, whereas before the verification processes were patchier, so there is now less opportunity for fraud.

“It was great to be involved in the design process. We were able to collapse several forms into the new application form and the built-in intelligence really helps. Previously we would get cases where people said they were claiming child benefit, but there were no children on their form. Now the system picks up these sorts of details.”

Homechoice Team Leader, Medway Council

Applicants now have the option to scan documentation and send it with their application form, rather than sending hard-copy separately. This means that there is more chance of staff being able to assess an application in one go, whereas previously they might go back through an application several times and potentially have to contact the applicant multiple times to get the right information.

As in several other LGA Digital Transformation projects, the Government Digital Services style guide and templates proved an invaluable resource for designing the tools. As one respondent commented: “GDS have done all the hard work. Why not take advantage of it?”

⁸ Porchlight is a charity that works across Kent and the south east of England. It helps vulnerable and isolated people to get support with their housing, mental health, education and employment

Quicker responses to customers

The smoother online processes and the reduced flow of potentially unsuccessful housing applications has allowed housing staff to focus their time on more productive activities, including home visits for particularly vulnerable applicants.

The time applicants spend waiting for a decision has also been reduced in many cases, meaning they are able to investigate alternative housing options at an earlier stage.

“We had a standard of 33 working days to process a housing application and often it took that long because of work pressures. Now we process most applications within five days and applicants get a decision letter a few days later giving them their banding.”

Head of Community Services, Canterbury City Council

Better customer understanding of rehousing criteria

Most customers, and indeed many partner agencies, are unclear about the criteria for making a successful application for homelessness or for inclusion on the housing register.

The new tools make the criteria much more explicit, making them particularly suitable for people who do not have a lot of specialist knowledge. This reduces the chance of people or their advisers making unsuccessful applications.

Even where people still choose to go ahead with an application, they do so with more realistic expectations. For staff, it means no longer having to say ‘no’ so often, with a potentially positive effect on morale.

“The questions are much better than on previous application forms. The pre-assessment tool helps to filter out applications that won’t acquire active status and it gives people an immediate decision. Some people will apply anyway, but you get fewer speculative applications.”

Homechoice Team Leader, Medway Council

Having a consistent approach to housing applications across the county also makes it easier for people when they move between councils, as they are no longer faced with significantly different forms and processes.

More tailored information on local housing options

The personalised housing plans created by the tools make people aware of options that they might not otherwise have known about or considered. Customers can get access to their tailored housing plans whenever they need to, including outside of working hours.

“The action plan information is really useful, particularly as it’s tailored to the individual council areas.”

Assessment and Resettlement Worker, Porchlight

While many customers still want to discuss their options with a housing specialist, there is a saving in staff time as officers no longer need to go through very basic information.

The partners can keep their locally-defined pages up-to-date in line with changes to their policies and procedures, so applicants always have the latest information.

A new working and digital culture

The project has been part of a wider cultural shift within the housing teams across Kent, moving away from 'doing things' for people towards supporting people to help themselves wherever possible.

"It's all about providing a better service and changing the way staff work. The project has really helped us prepare for the Homelessness Reduction Act."

Chair, Kent Homechoice Board

The joint work has also served to promote digital ways of working across the Kent authorities. Several councils have now established digital teams in a way that did not exist before (although they still use the Smarter Digital Services team for short-term resourcing or specialist expertise). Canterbury City Council has also recruited a user experience team.

As the head of digital services and transformation at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commented: "The Smarter Digital Services team has shown us the light. The digital capabilities of the Kent councils in 2014 were in their early days. This project has helped to up our digital game".

Key learning points

Key learning points from Kent's Digital Transformation project include:

- Housing legislation, like the legislation governing many other areas of council business, is detailed and each council interprets the rules in a different way. The challenges of getting agreement on both the interpretation of the legislation and how a collectively developed digital solution might look need to be recognised from the start. In retrospect, the Kent timetables were probably over-optimistic.

"You need to foster a willingness in the group to collaborate and compromise. As a project manager, try to get as full an understanding as you can of the legislation and rules that might impact on the development before you engage with the specialist teams."

Project Manager, Smarter Digital Services

- Forms development can be expensive and suppliers may perceive council requirements as complex and costly. The initial commercial estimates for building the pre-assessment tool and new application form were initially well outside Kent's budget, although the

homelessness tool was delivered within the original cost limits. Early market engagement is essential to understand developers' capabilities and likely charges.

What helps and hinders – a supplier perspective on developing the homelessness tool

What helped:

- Councils doing their homework first, particularly user research.
- Co-designing the brief with the agency. “Don’t go to your agency with a shopping list of requirements or functional brief. Work with your agency to understand user needs, define the problem and agree a solution”.
- Focusing on user needs not council needs and applying best practice design guidance.
- Planning ahead for hosting and content management – all councils in the project have access to the content management system and can edit their own content, but the Smarter Digital Services team retains ownership of the domain name and coordinates permissions and access.
- Providing strong digital leadership – the Smarter Digital Services team based at Tunbridge Wells was able to engage internal stakeholders and advise the other councils on digital best practice.
- Communicating well within the project team – everyone involved used Trello as a simple way of managing tasks and making them visible.

What was challenging:

- Overcoming the desire to create lots of individual solutions rather than a collective one.
- Understanding user behaviour across a range of devices.
- Taking a multi-channel approach to promoting and using the tool.
- Making sure to involve partner agencies such as homelessness charities, Citizens Advice Bureaux or debt management agencies at a sufficiently early stage in the project.

Source: Experience director, Yoyo Design

- Capturing users' current experience and testing out solutions with both staff and external customers is essential. The Smarter Digital Services team organised user testing from the very earliest stages of the project and at each key stage. Working with a range of partners also offers opportunities to try out different website design styles to see which proves most popular with customers.
- On the other hand, the amount of user testing needs to be carefully considered. The team found that testing the pre-assessment form with 22 different users was excessive – five to eight tests for each version would have offered much the same insight. It is also important to consider who is going to do the testing. It may be inappropriate to use

people who are already housed, for instance, or who have never claimed benefits, and yet they may be the people who are most readily available.

“Our videos of customers trying to go through the existing online housing application process were really powerful. It’s easy to make assumptions about customers. But we found they were confused by terms and questions that we thought were perfectly clear. And it took them much longer to fill out the forms than staff expected. In the end, although there was some initial resistance, everyone realised we had to change.”

Website and Digital Consultant, Smarter Digital Services

Comments from users on the test version of the homelessness triage tool included:

“I like the teal colour – it’s very calming”

“It’s clear and uncluttered”

“I’d like the form to be more personal and friendly in the way it ‘speaks’ to me”

“I want to put a tick next to the item that applies to me”

“I don’t actually know who my local authority is”

“I didn’t realise there was a continue button at the bottom”

“There aren’t many pleases and thankyou’s”

- Particularly where multiple partners are involved, it is vital to keep tight control of the specification and development process. The addition of a significant number of extra questions at a relatively late stage in the project pushed back the implementation timetable for the new housing application form. On the other hand, setting tight deadlines for the participating councils to produce the user-defined content for the triage tool and pre-assessment form helped keep the project on track.

“We were lucky because the Kent chief execs are really keen on partnership and we’d had working relationships across the county for ten years. We didn’t have our communications team involved at the beginning and that would have helped because sometimes information didn’t get cascaded down from the project group.”

Kent Homechoice Partnership Manager

- It is vital to consider how best to communicate with council partners and other agencies and keep them engaged. The project team used a variety of communication methods including workshops, newsletters, press releases and so on. However, because of the number of potential users of the tools and the limited resources within the team, they were dependent in many cases on their main contacts cascading information to colleagues. This did not always prove completely effective.

- Similarly, the project team was hoping that the partner councils would collect baseline data on telephone and face-to-face contact against which the impact of the new tools could be measured. The results were patchy, however, with some partners finding it difficult to distinguish between the different types of housing contact received by their contact centres. There was often only one queue for housing enquiries and little systematic analysis of demand.

“A big issue is finding time to do things. How do you create the space for digital transformation, particularly in a service area where processes are complex and emotional?”

Head of Digital Services and Transformation, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

- Finally, as the example of Canterbury City Council suggests, the digital tools are only likely to be effective as part of a wider approach to implementation, involving staff engagement and training, process and documentation review and website redesign among other changes.

Simple things can make a difference: one council discovered, for instance, that it had left open a backdoor route to the main housing application form on its website, allowing customers to bypass the pre-assessment tool. Closing this option helped improve its performance.

Next steps

A formal review of whole project is planned for summer 2018. In the meantime, certain enhancements are being considered. It would be useful, for instance, for applicants to be able to log in at a future date and see their action plan once again. At present, a copy is emailed to them.

The pre-assessment and housing application tools require an applicant to have an email address for verification. A handful of (often vulnerable) people cannot supply an address, whether their own or that of a family member or friend.

Following the implementation of the full application form in September 2017, the email verification process was amended to enable staff members to resend the verification or, in exceptional circumstances, to verify on behalf of the applicant via the back-office system. The project team is continuing to monitor how best to handle these applicants, for instance by linking them to care navigators or advocates.

The Kent partners recognise that more work needs to be done to encourage applicants to view and make use of their personalised housing action plan. Survey figures from October 2017 show that only around 30 per cent of applicants answered 'yes' to each of the following questions:

“Did you view or print your Housing Action Plan?”

“Did you contact any of the organisations that the Housing Action Plan suggested could be of assistance to you?”

“Did you find the Housing Action Plan useful?”

On the other hand, by mid-October 2017 the video on the Kent Homechoice website had been viewed 1,659 times and had received very positive feedback.

Given the pressures on housing services nationally, the tools developed by the project are potentially a valuable resource for councils throughout the UK. During 2018, the LGA will therefore be funding a follow-on programme of work that will help a small number of nominated councils to adopt and develop the work undertaken by the Kent team.

The Kent councils have also recognised that the new tools could be adapted for use in other service areas where pre-assessment or eligibility checking is required, for example adult social care services. Discussions are underway to explore new areas of activity.

Tunbridge Wells is one of four councils that have been match-funded to carry out a second round of innovative behavioural insight projects. The Tunbridge Wells project will examine how behavioural insights can support singles and couples, under 60 years of age and with no dependent children, to gain access to private rented housing, rather than relying on the depleting council or housing association stock. It will also look at how behaviour change can be used to help guide and change the nature of the housing options team's advice and messaging.

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