User-research and exploring the need case

What this means

The evaluation of the first Local Investment Programme outlined the importance of a discovery phase to help ensure that the proposed digital intervention appropriately responded to the defined need. This involves identifying the problem and testing whether and the extent to which proposed solutions are the most appropriate to meet the user need. A discovery phase was introduced within the second programme to ensure that all projects tested their proposals with users. Significant learning can be drawn out from how projects have adopted user research principles in different ways.

What we've learnt

It's important to continually test the need case

In some instances, a solution was proposed which responded to the user research findings, but it was only through implementation testing that it was discovered not to meet the need case. For example, in **Bracknell Forest**, a digital kiosk was implemented as a result of user research, which revealed that digitally excluded individuals could benefit from a physical facility to find out about community events taking place. Throughout the project, data collected from community groups was limited and inconclusive given the challenge of engaging multiple groups in the research. As a result, there was no evidence to show that the new physical kiosks were more effective at reaching digitally excluded individuals than hosting information online.

Another finding of this project was that some people who used the kiosks suggested that they were better suited to delivering a different service: accessing and submitting information to the council. The service is being re-adapted using this finding. Taking an iterative approach to testing digital transformation solutions can allow for user needs to be considered better as the project unfolds.

In **Sunderland**, thorough research uncovered the main challenges that individuals faced, and what the technology would need to address. Through this research, four themes emerged: Medication Support, Nutrition & Hydration, Mood Monitoring and Moving Around the Home. However, following the introduction of the technology there was little time for repeat and iterative testing, which limited the potential for programme outcomes. Some users found that on receiving technology, it did not prove to be appropriate to their needs.

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User research should be done with anyone involved in the service

It is crucial to do user research at all stages of the service. This includes not only the end users, but also staff implementing the service, stakeholders and anyone who would be impacted by the change (for example end users' families). In **Stockport** they developed a strategy to collect continuous feedback from multiple perspectives, primarily through surveys, as well as deeper qualitative interviews and workshops.

Usability testing

Some projects conducted usability testing of the new digital product / platform that they were working to implement – this explores the experience of using the digital technology itself (features, buttons, images, etc.) and not the wider context of where it is used. In **Lincolnshire**, usability testing was crucial to reveal technical issues, including potential errors due to the system not taking leap years into account. They tested the results of using the digitised systems for financial assessments vs. the existing system to understand any inconsistencies, why these occurred and how to resolve them. Through this thorough testing, it was possible to significantly reduce the variance between using the digital platform versus a written form for financial assessments, supporting the business case for the new platform.

For projects that did not do thorough usability testing, challenges emerged at the implementation phase. In these cases, it would have been more cost effective to make changes during the development phase.

Considering the wider context

As identified by some projects, the usability of a service cannot be considered in isolation; the end-to-end service (including the digital component) must be considered in full. This includes processes for implementing the new approach, including eligibility criteria and training. For example, in **Wirral**, staff worked to understand how feasible any project outputs would be in a residential setting. Ideas were tested in specific settings, for example at home, to see if they were acceptable in these environments.

Ensuring user buy-in

User engagement has also ensured user buy-in to the projects. For example, in **Havering** testing prototypes with relevant users ensured that workers, service providers and senior leaders felt more engaged and enthusiastic about the project and its potential as a result.

Recommendations

- Uncover the user need through research with service users, delivery staff and stakeholders.
- Work iteratively, testing any assumptions, the need case and usability of the service / product as you go.
- Be flexible and willing to adapt projects based on research findings.
- Collaborate with any project's partners, including procurement and IT teams whose buy-in is necessary to support the project.

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