

Digital Experts Programme Blackpool Council channel shift case study



The issue and context

Blackpool Council is a unitary authority located on the north west coast of England within Lancashire, serving a population of approximately 142,000. Like many councils, Blackpool are facing severe cuts to their finances, with savings of £35 million needed during 2016/17. This follows cuts of £25 million and 300 jobs during 2015, and a further £20 million in 2016. These cuts included cuts in resources to the contact centre, known in Blackpool as 'Customer First'. This has resulted in residents trying to get through to the contact centre experiencing significant delays and at peak times only 30 per cent of calls being answered.

In this environment, Blackpool Council investigated the opportunities that channel shift could provide as a means of moving some residents away from telephone and face-to-face to accessing council services via the website. In addition to saving money via lowering transaction costs, this also offered improved services for residents as they would be able to access these at times that suited their lives, 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

As a first step the council reviewed demand in their contact centre, and found that queries relating to waste management – including bulky collection requests and missed bin reports – were in the top ten of the volumes being dealt with. Between 1 March 2014 and 27 February 2015, the following volumes of waste management queries were received:

- 2987 bulky collections booked by phone or email
- 2804 missed bin collections reported.

They also found that fly-tipping was subject to duplicate reporting and users following-up on what they had already reported. The council therefore chose to make waste management the initial focus of their push towards increasing levels of self-service – starting with bulky waste collections.

The project objectives and targets

The overarching objectives were to achieve:

- Cashable savings – through shifting customers to cheaper to self-service channels
- Improved customer service – by increasing online self-service delivery to allow residents to contact the council at a time that is convenient for them without having to join a queue and experience delays. This would also free-up staff in the Customer First centre to focus on more complex enquires that cannot be answered via the website.
- Efficiency gains – by fully integrating web forms into the council's back-office systems, the project would eliminate the 'double handling' of information that is received from residents by council staff.

Initially the project set out to apply web forms to bulky waste collections, missed bins and fly-tipping reporting.

In particular, developing a 24/7 self-service system for bulky waste collection was prioritised as these were relatively high value and high-frequency transactions. Bulky waste collections are a revenue-generating service for the council and every missed call was potentially lost revenue. Furthermore, failure to handle the bulky waste calls was a potential contributor to increased rates of fly-tipping.

Alongside these work streams, and consistent with the Council's shift towards online channels, in autumn 2015 the project also tested the use of web chat to manage customer enquires relating to school admissions. School admissions was chosen, as they have a high demand during short periods of time. Calls are handled by a small number of staff within that team and it was felt that this may be an option to help them handle the demand.

The approach and progress to date

A project board was established to agree an approach for this programme and to ensure that ICT developments were compatible with channel. The board oversaw the development, approving the specifications and the implementation.

The project reported to both the Customer Service Group and the Channel Shift Group, both of which ultimately reported to the deputy chief executive. The core of the project team for the waste management initiatives comprised members from Blackpool's web communications team, the Customer First Manager and an Operations Supervisor from the Household Waste and Recycling Centre. Approval of process and policy changes was agreed by the member responsible - who in this case happened to be the deputy leader.

Bulky waste management

Starting with bulky waste collections, the project ran workshops to develop the requirements of the online service. The workshops involved waste management services, Customer First and other relevant stakeholders such as the street cleaning teams. The focus of the workshop was to bring people together to focus on the end-to-end process and the steps required to make the process easier from a customer's perspective.

As well as simplifying the process, the principal outcome of the workshops was to rationalise the number of categories of bulky waste items that could be collected in order to facilitate self-service. For instance, instead of multiple options for the same item, 'single bed, double bed, king-size bed', the system simply offers 'bed'.

Through these workshops, the participants outlined what was needed for a full end-to-end process for customers booking bulky waste collections online. This included:

- Displaying collection schedules based on location (postcode) and their availability (mornings, weekends etc.)
- Capturing the category of item
- Calculating the fees

- Taking payment
- Emailing customers confirmation of their booking
- Providing customers with specific instructions on how items should be presented for collection e.g. carpets should be rolled and kept dry
- Emailing customers with a reminder the day before collection

The final workshop included Blackpool Council's software suppliers - Pentagull - to ensure that what was requested for the customer would work with the software used within the processes given their existing functionality.

Based on these workshops, the project then developed the online self-service offer based on their existing systems. These systems already integrated with the outsourced provider of the bulky waste collections, Furniture Matters– and with the e-payments provider. So the task focused on developing the web-form based on the outcomes of the workshops.

Before launch, the new system was tested using data drawn from past transactions. The system went live in May 2015.

By August the project work stream was receiving reports by some customers that, although they had booked and paid for a collection, the collection had not taken place. Investigations revealed that some payments had taken more than the one hour to process with the banks but the booking system was set up with a one hour cut-off period. The project team worked with their software developers to swiftly resolve the issue by extending the time period allowed for transactions to be fulfilled.

Later, further customer feedback indicated that the outsourced service provider was not always able to make the collections as scheduled. This was due to a record number of jobs flowing through the system and the provider needed to adapt and ensure that they closed their schedule on the system once they had reached their available capacity. Once identified, the council worked with the provider to amend the system and to avoid further incidents of over-booking.

In terms of promoting this service to residents, the council adopted a discounted price model for those booking online. Customers who called the Customer First operation were advised of the offer and that "If you go online, you can save money" with four items for the price of three, £18, during May to August. The new service was advertised prominently on the council website, via Twitter, Facebook and an e-newsletter and bin stickers and high visibility vests were used to advise residents to "don't waste time, do it online".

**DON'T WASTE TIME,
FIND OUT ONLINE**

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Fly-tipping

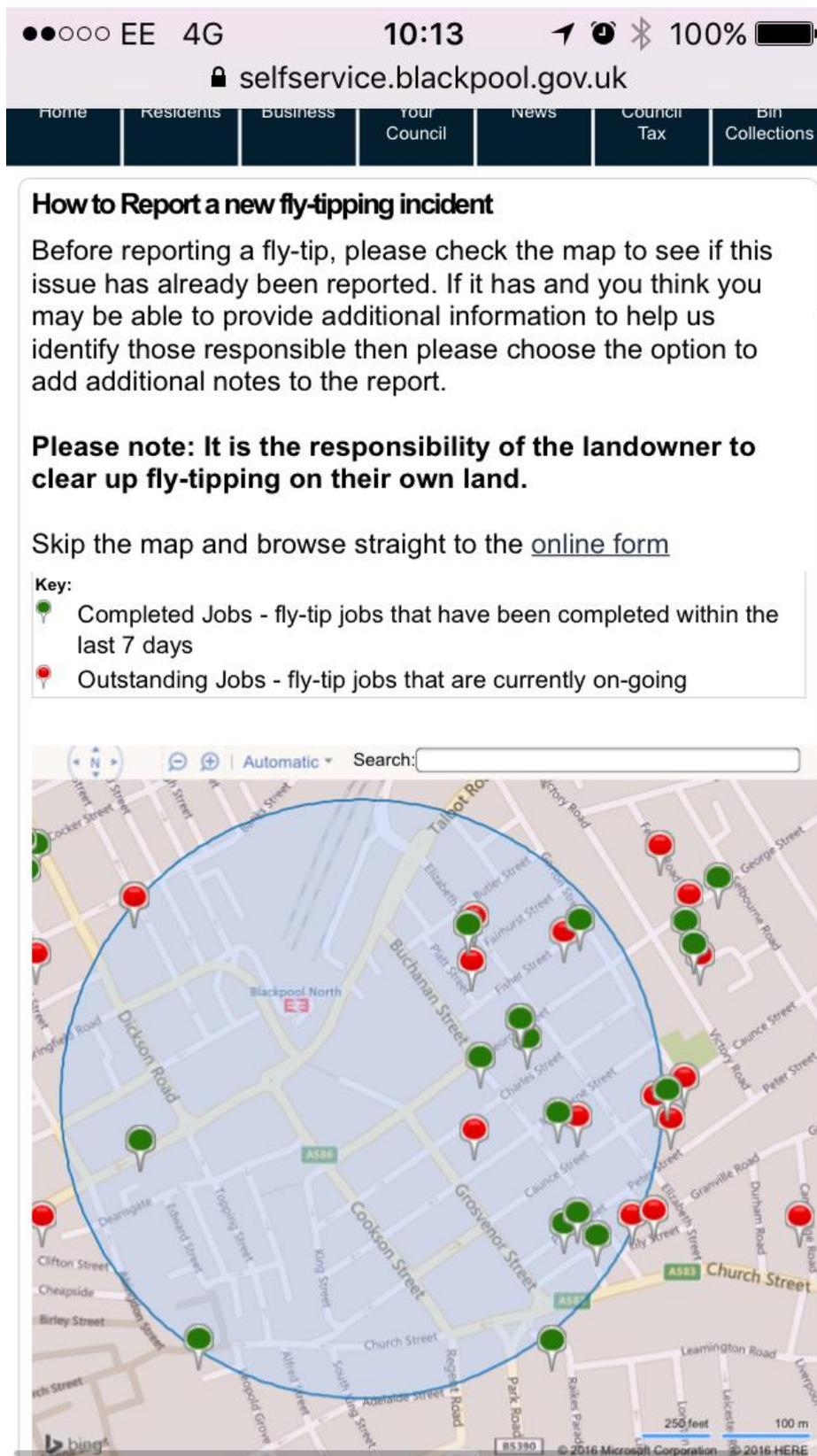
Blackpool wanted to reduce the number of duplicate and follow-up calls relating to fly-tipping, as well as streamline the reporting process. The previous system was reliant on either customers filling in a form that then needed to be manually re-entered onto the council's system by Customer First staff, or Customer First manually entering it during a phone call.

The workshop convened comprised Customer First staff and the street cleaning teams. The purpose of the workshops was to make the process resident-friendly, by taking out the service terminology and jargon.

Their objective in developing a self-service option included creating the capability to display a real-time map, so when customers check the website they can see what incidents have already been reported. For customers reporting a new incident, they can simply drop a pin onto a map to identify where the fly-tipping has occurred.

The map is presented to customers based on their geo location, using location services on their mobile device or PC/laptop. There is also the option of skipping the map-based reporting and going straight to a form and entering the address.

Figure 1. Screen shot of map-based reporting



Whilst there were no major delays to this project ensuring the mapping function worked as needed took longer than expected and required an upgrade to the Pentagull system which Customer First use. This service went live in January 2016.

Missed bins

The missed bins work stream followed a similar workshop approach to bring stakeholders together, principally staff from Customer First, waste management and the service provider Veolia. The objective identified was:

1. to give customers information regarding their bin collection, dates, types of collection due etc.
 - Customers were often unclear about what bin was due for collection and therefore incorrectly reporting a bin missed when it wasn't due for collection
2. to give customers real-time data on when their bins was due for/had been collected
3. streamline the missed bins process to only take genuine missed bins reports
 - The new system would not allow people to report a missed bin if it in fact had been missed due to a legitimate reason, such as not being presented properly.

The principal change needed in order to enable this was the sharing of data between the Veolia cabin crews and the council's self-service system – called Enterprise Service Builder and supplied by Pentagull, Blackpool Council's IT supplier. This would allow capturing of bin collection data directly from the crews onto the self-service system, allowing real-time updates for customers.

Progress on the missed bins work stream of Blackpool's work was delayed by a sequence of issues including:

- The national elections in May 2015. The project team decided to delay the work stream to avoid it becoming a political issue during the May elections as the new service could be interpreted as preventing residents from reporting a missed bin.
- Reliability of the connections with Veolia's in-cabin data systems, partly caused by a Veolia firewall issue.
- Reliability of data being entered by the cabin crew.

The technical issues with the firewall were investigated and resolved over time through collaboration with Veolia's security team.

The project team worked with waste management and the supplier, Veolia, to understand where the issues of data reliability were arising. They undertook a period of testing on the system which revealed that there were discrepancies between data being provided by the Veolia crews and what the customers were reporting or querying via the council's Customer First operation. Inconsistencies in bin collection reporting methods was identified and to improve this, training was provided for the Veolia cabin crews and delivered during the autumn. Following further testing, the new system went live in January 2016.

Web chat

Aligned with the council's digital strategy of maximising the opportunities to make services available online, the web team approached Blackpool Council's school admissions teams about testing web chat as a way of responding to customer queries. It was mainly felt that this would be a good service area to test web chat due to the demand they experience at specific times.

Following this a web chat solution was identified for a trial and 'Click 4 Assistance' software installed at the end of August in time for the peak period ahead of the academic year. This was added to the school admissions landing page and both the primary and secondary school admission pages.

Work was carried out to set up answers for frequently asked questions and training was provided to the school admissions staff involved with the trial. The trial went live on 7 September in line with the opening of new school admissions period.

The functionality offers school admission staff the option of providing generic answers to common questions, and they can edit these to suit particular situations. Initially four staff were trained via a teleconference with the software supplier but in the event the volume of web chats was low and only two members of staff used it during September/October.

Hence, the five licences the council holds for the web chat tool are currently being shared by school admissions, the Family Information Service (FIS) and the VisitBlackpool team. The FIS team use web chat to answer general queries, and the VisitBlackpool team intends to begin using the system from the end of April 2016. The licences could also be shared across other departments and the council are looking at adding in democratic services over the election period.

An issue identified during the trial related to Data Protection as staff answering a web chat could not verify the identity of the enquirer. The council added a disclaimer next to the web chat box stating that "We cannot discuss the details of a child's application". This had the effect of discouraging anyone from using web chat as it lowered their expectations of how much help it could be in answering their questions. This message has been modified to read "Please note that we are unable to deal with specific enquiries through this service, please telephone us on 01253 476637 or 476829. Please do not identify your child." However, even after this change, volumes of web chats remained low.

The outcome - successes and challenges

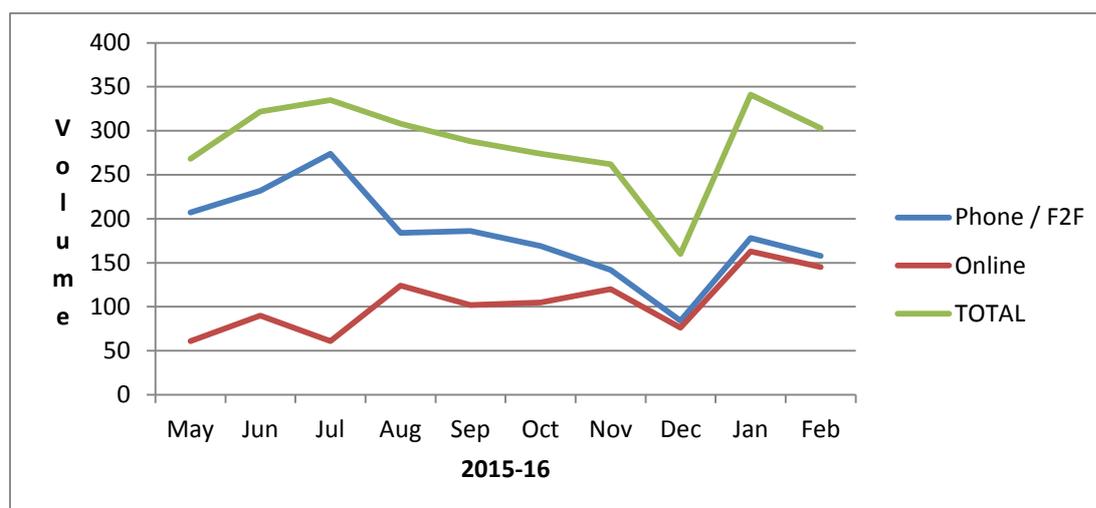
Bulky waste transactions

Having gone live in May 2015, the new bulky waste service has the longest track record of the new services launched.

The deployment of the online self-service system has delivered all of the initial project objectives, displaying collection schedules, capturing user-friendly categories, calculating fees, etc. The project has also ensured that the self-service system can be accessed via both the Customer First systems through Pentagull and the bulky waste operator's Helping Hands system, ensuring for example that their system is updating their availability in real-time to avoid overbooking. The system also provides an automated reminder to customers the day before collection.

In terms of volume, between July to December the trend saw a switch from bookings via the council's Customer First operation to online, with January and February rates showing a stable 48 per cent of bookings made online.

Figure 2: Blackpool bulky waste booking volumes 2015-16



Blackpool Council estimates that online self-service saves an estimated 10-15 minute ‘phone call and there has been a switch of 1,047 calls in total since the self-service was launched.

Applying the SOCITM figure of £2.83 per call avoided through self-service demonstrates a total saving this financial year of nearly £3,000. Forecasting based on a conservative estimate of 48 per cent of bookings continuing to be made via online self-service potentially represents over £4,500 per annum savings if booking volumes remain at their current levels based on calls avoided alone.

Fly-tipping – number reported online

Although online reporting of fly-tipping is in its early days, having been launched on 18 January 2016, volumes are already moving in the right direction – with 188 reports into the new system between launch and the end of February versus 124 report via the web site for the same period last year.

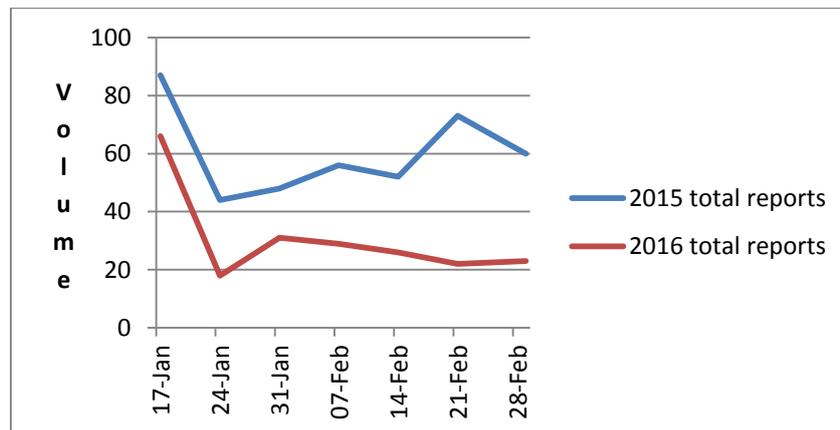
Table 1: Blackpool fly-tipping reports for February 2016

Reporting	% difference from February 2015
Total reports	↓ 16%
Customer First reports	↓ 11%
Online reports	↑ 72%
Duplicates	↓ 56%

Missed bins – reduction in number of missed bin reports

The new system for missed bin reporting went live on 18 January 2016 and by the end of February there had been a 54 per cent reduction in missed bin reports compared to the same period during 2015. This reduction is primarily due to the change in policy. Customer First staff now have access to data so that only valid missed collections are reported.

Figure : 2015 to 2016 comparison of Blackpool missed bin reporting volumes



Web chat

During the period of September 2015 to February 2016, the school admissions team began 147 web chats – with September being the busiest month with 39 web chats.

One of the challenges in assessing the success of web chat is that calls to the council regarding school admissions go direct to the schools admissions team rather than via the council's Customer First operation, so they do not have any baseline numbers for call volumes. Moreover, it is difficult to assess customer satisfaction from the web chats as whilst post web chat surveys were conducted the response rates were low.

Key learning points

- In order to identify and target the development of online services, you need to understand the top transactions for the council.
- To design an online solution that will improve the customer's experience and save money, you need to map out the 'as is' process before redesigning a streamlined process.
- After they have been launched, online digital services need to be constantly monitored – even after extensive testing. Often, it is only possible to identify issues once the systems go live – as the bulky waste project learnt when it made discoveries regarding the issues making a booking.
- Baselining is key to understanding the benefits of digital services. Blackpool Council have extensive data relating to their waste management services, which is important as it helps demonstrate the progress achieved and to make the case for future initiatives

Next steps

In addition to continuing to drive transaction volumes for bulky waste, missed bins and fly-tipping the Customer First and web teams are also now working with highways to add fault reporting and related services to the self-services available online.

Contact for further information

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