



## Digital Experts Programme

### Breckland and South Holland Councils' online 'book and pay' and assisted digital case study

#### The issue and context

Breckland Council in Norfolk and South Holland District Council in Lincolnshire have a shared management model and have jointly launched a comprehensive transformation programme that involves aligning public services across different partners, organisational re-design and commercialisation. A fourth work stream, without which none of the others can succeed, is digitalisation, including the upgrading of the two councils' ICT infrastructures.

A key theme in the overall programme is providing 'the right services at the right time and in the right way'. Demand for services continues to grow and the number of visitors to the councils' customer services centres has increased by 47 per cent over a five-year period, so change is vital if costs are to be controlled.

From the outset, the councils recognised the need to streamline and modernise the complex, often manual, processes currently in place in key service areas, in order to make these services more efficient and doing business with the councils easier and quicker for customers.

Moving services online, both to improve the customer experience and to reduce the costs of serving residents through traditional face-to-face and telephone channels is therefore a major priority. It also reflects the way in which people increasingly organise their lives as digital – and particularly mobile – technology becomes all-pervasive.

At the same time, the two councils acknowledged that customers need to be digitally-aware, able and confident to carry out their business online. So a key element of the transformation programme is to encourage people to go online and to show them how to search for

information and to complete tasks digitally, not just with their district councils but also with the appropriate county council and other service providers.

*'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*

## The project objectives and targets

The councils' joint bid for Digital Experts funding had two main aims therefore.

First, they intended to provide a common online 'book and pay' facility which would operate across a range of services, including the existing garden waste collection service in Breckland and the proposed pilot scheme in South Holland. Residents and businesses would be able to access these services 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.

Like many councils, Breckland and South Holland had previously lacked a consistent approach to digitalisation, with the result that the customer experience varied from service to service. So while a visitor to the councils' websites could make online payments for council tax, business rates, invoices or benefits overpayments, important local services such as subscribing to and paying for garden waste collection still involved phone calls or visits and the use of printed forms.

The second aim of the project was to provide support for residents visiting the customer service centres in Dereham, Thetford and Spalding with online self-service terminals within the reception areas. Staff would be trained to encourage people to go online and to show them how to access services from a range of public and voluntary sector providers, not just the two districts. This engagement would also help to establish what residents needed and wanted and therefore to influence future solutions.

The Digital Experts funding would contribute to the purchase of payment software and public access terminals, support for internal web developers, training for staff and the creation of publicity material to promote online services.

# Do-it-yourself pods for district council offices in Spalding



One of the new self-service pods at South Holland District Council's offices in Spalding.

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- Public services at touch of a button as 'transformation' programme takes shape across South Holland

**An article in the local South Holland press about the new self-service pods**

The expected outcomes of the project included:

- Customers having greater access to online services at times and locations that suit them, with a consequent reduction in the need to call or visit the councils. For instance, reducing the number of customers visiting council offices by 25 per cent would save an estimated £23,000. The reduction in call volumes would also help to reduce call wait times and abandoned call rates.
- Common 'book and pay' processes that would enable easier navigation through the councils' websites and more online payments for key services, such as garden waste, thereby reducing the costs incurred by payments over the phone or by cheque.
- More customers having the confidence and skills to complete a wide variety of tasks online, while the reduced number of visits to reception areas would allow staff to devote more time to customers with complex needs.

The anticipated live date for both elements of the bid was November 2015.

One of the early project tasks in relation to the new book and pay facility would be to identify and prioritise the initial services to go live. Garden waste collection, in particular, was seen as offering significant opportunities to generate additional revenue for reinvestment while increasing customer satisfaction and reducing costs.

Meanwhile the training for staff on the new terminals in the councils' reception areas would focus on giving staff the skills to support customers in core tasks such as searching online and creating email accounts. The range of tasks would be extended over time to run in tandem with the launch of new online services supported by the project.

## The approach and progress to date

The Digital Experts project was an important part of a wider digital transformation programme across Breckland and South Holland which has included:

- Producing a digital transformation roadmap – a set of common principles and tailored plans for ongoing digitalisation approved by executive members at both councils.
- Recruiting a shared Digital & Customer Access Manager to work closely with the customer services, communications and IT teams in both councils.
- Creating customer 'personas' to underpin future development, using demographic information and existing knowledge about customers.<sup>1</sup> These have been complemented by user testing and engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Personas are fictional characters created to represent significant groups of people who might use services in a local area

- Establishing a team of digital champions at each council with officers from every service area and different levels of the organisation.

*‘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*

- Identifying and training teams of web editors and approvers for every service area.
- Developing a Digital Passport online training programme for all staff which covers a wide range of topics over the period of a year including the benefits of digitalisation, the customer perspective, social media, digital skills, web safety and security, and digitalizing services.

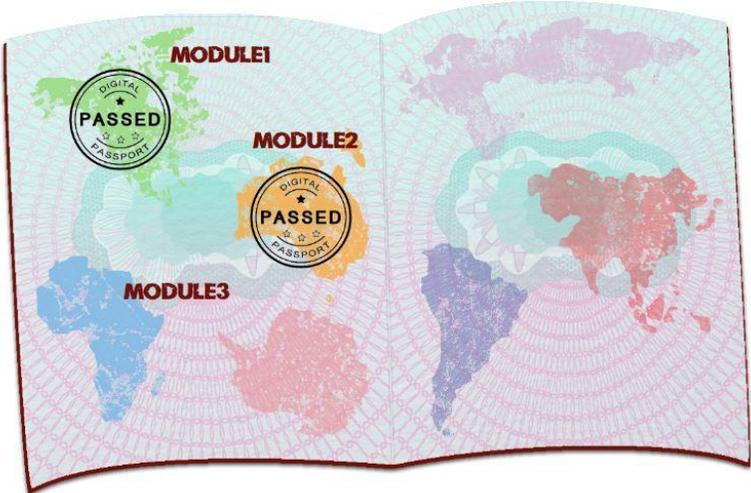
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**My Digital Passport** ▶ My Digital Passport

Welcome to the home page for the e-learning process.

**Digital Passport**



**Useful pages**

- Digital Passport Modules

In particular, both councils recognised the need to update their websites, refreshing the content and moving onto a new platform that would offer greater functionality (including the ability to book and pay for services) as well as being more user-friendly, efficient and accessible via a range of devices including mobiles.

While the Digital Experts project has benefitted from being part of this wider programme, it also made the project more susceptible to any delays in the larger work schedule. For instance, in South Holland's case, the transition to the new web platform was relatively straightforward, but Breckland's site required a root and branch review. The Digital Experts timetable also slipped as a result of resourcing issues, particularly the extended and unavoidable absence of the project lead.

Nevertheless, by the end of March 2016 the initial migration to the new web platform had been completed, with further upgrades planned at various points during the rest of the year. Meanwhile, common book and pay functionality was integrated into both websites in the period February to April 2016.

*'Although it was essential to get the right technical infrastructure in place, it was great to have the Digital Experts projects to focus on at the same time. They meant we were constantly being pushed to deliver something really practical'. Executive Manager*

South Holland went live with a pilot garden waste scheme covering around 2,200 residents in February 2016. The pilot featured the use of bins and exploited the new book and pay facility. Previously residents had to phone or visit to purchase garden waste sacks. Breckland then launched an improved online version of its full garden waste service, handling both renewals and new orders and using the book and pay functionality, in early April 2016. This replaced the previous arrangement where residents had to download and print a form and pay by cheque. In both cases, the emphasis in the new processes was on online delivery.

## 07/04/16: Spring online to get your garden waste bin

7 April 2016



It is now quicker and easier than ever for green-fingered residents to sign up to receive a garden waste bin, thanks to an online system which has been launched by Breckland Council.

The council's website now enables people to create or renew a subscription to the Garden Waste Collection Service and pay securely using a debit card.

The launch of an online option means people can sign up within minutes, whether at home or on the move, and at any time of the day. Previously, people could only subscribe by either posting an application form and a cheque or calling the council during office hours, though these options remain available for those who wish to use them.

"The new subscription tool means people can sign up to receive their garden waste bin at a time that's convenient for them," said **Cllr Lynda Turner, Breckland's Executive Member for Place**. "It only takes a few minutes to subscribe to the service and within a few days you'll have your handy garden waste bin delivered to your home.

"The service is useful throughout the year, whether you are clearing grass cuttings and plant prunings during the growing seasons, removing fallen leaves in the autumn, or tidying your garden in the winter ready for the coming spring."

The garden waste service can be used to dispose of hedge clippings, grass cuttings, leaves and shrub prunings, weeds and plants, cut flowers, and twigs and small bracken.

Garden waste collected from the 19,000 Breckland residents who already have a garden waste subscription is composted, with around 7,500 tonnes of garden waste sent to local composting sites in 2015.

The annual Garden Waste Collection Service subscription is £42 per standard sized bin and collections are fortnightly throughout the year. Find out more and sign up to our [Garden Waste Collection Service](#).

### Useful pages

- [Garden Waste Collection Service](#)

### Promoting the online garden waste service on Breckland's website

Subsequently an online bulky waste collection service using the book and pay functionality was launched in South Holland in mid-July 2016.<sup>2</sup> An online licence application and renewal service covering a range of licencing products, such as temporary event notices, also went live in both councils in early September.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, Breckland was yet to make a firm decision on launching a similar service as a result of resource constraints

As for the other strand of the Digital Experts project, self-service pods had been installed in the reception areas of both councils by early April 2016 and staff had been trained to encourage visitors to go online.



### **A self-service pod at South Holland District Council**

In addition to the pods, there are a further 8 PCs available for public use at 'assisted digital' desks in Breckland's office at Dereham, which the council shares with the DWP, while South Holland has a further dedicated PC for public use.

*Marketing of the new self-serve options has taken place via the councils' websites, local newspapers and traditional adverts, as well as through radio interviews and, in Breckland's case, the local residents' magazine. But getting information out on social media, such as Facebook, has also been important. Equally significant for the success of the project has been*

the internal engagement with councillors and staff via briefing sessions, updates at staff forums and the involvement of the digital champions. Staff continue to be encouraged to think 'digitally' about their services.

**Did you know...**

**Did you know...**

Since Whitespace was procured as the software for purchasing a brown bin, over 4000 payments have been made online since April.

This has made a saving of over 200 administrative hours.

Do you think you may have a service that could move online? Have you thought about how you could become more digital within your service?

One year on...

transformation moving forward

Breckland COUNCIL

An internal communication encouraging digital thinking among staff

Both councils now deploy ‘floorwalkers’ in their main reception areas to meet residents and encourage them to complete their business online.<sup>3</sup> The floorwalkers are equipped with tablet computers on which they can capture data on why and how often residents are visiting, whether they have internet access at home and their willingness to use online services. This information is being used to modify the councils’ strategies and to prioritise which services are added to the website.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, changes to the layout of reception areas are being made to encourage online interaction. At South Holland’s Spalding office, for instance, there is a proposal to convert two of the current four cash desks into self-serve areas equipped with both a phone linked directly to the council’s automated payment system and a PC.

All face-to-face staff continue to receive training and support to adapt to these new ways of interacting with the public.



<sup>3</sup> Breckland has multiple offices, so floorwalkers are deployed when resources are available, typically at peak times

<sup>4</sup> Following a change of devices, the floorwalkers are also able to help customers gain access to their digital accounts and pay online.

## **A self-service pod and assisted digital desk at Breckland Council**

### **The outcome – successes and challenges**

The Digital Experts project has played a major role in allowing Breckland and South Holland to successfully promote their garden waste services – in Breckland’s case as a relaunch of an existing service and in South Holland’s as a pilot for a new service.

The ‘book and pay’ element of the project, in particular, has supported the councils’ ambitions to encourage online take-up of the service and a digital-first ‘mindset’ among customers.

In financial terms, the approach has already achieved estimated savings of around £55,000 compared to alternative delivery methods, while generating almost £350,000 of revenue for reinvestment in local services. Further details are given below.

These figures can be expected to increase significantly if South Holland rolls out its pilot more widely and as the book and pay functionality is used for more services.

#### *Breckland garden waste service*

The relaunch of the garden waste service in Breckland in April 2016 has been tremendously popular, with 278 new subscriptions coming in the first week alone. By the end of September renewals and new bookings stood at 19,800, an increase of more than 25 per cent on the previous year.

Overall, some 35 per cent of these transactions were carried out online rather than face-to-face or over the telephone. This percentage is expected to increase over time for several reasons:

- As this was an existing service, residents were used to the previous way of doing things and may take time to shift to the online option. This was reflected in a ten percentage point greater take-up of the online option by new subscribers as at August 2016 compared to people renewing.
- The initial marketing of the online option was tentative because of concerns over whether renewal rates would be adversely affected, leading to continued high levels of cheque payments for instance.<sup>5</sup> The South Holland experience suggests that the online service could be promoted more vigorously in future.
- The council has now simplified the information it requests. Previously residents were asked for their full address and postcode, which often did not match exactly and was

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<sup>5</sup> As at August 2016, 28 per cent of people renewing paid by cheque, as opposed to 6 per cent of new subscribers. Breckland is aiming to cease accepting cheques for the garden waste service by April 2017

identified as causing a high drop-out rate; now they are only asked for the first line of their address and postcode.

- As yet, Breckland does not offer an option to pay by credit card.<sup>6</sup> This policy will be reviewed at the end of the year.

Based on figures from previous years, Breckland has estimated that 57 per cent of renewals and new bookings would have involved visits to Breckland offices or equivalent contact handling time (e.g. sorting and dealing with post) while 43 per cent would have been dealt with by phone.

By applying Socitm's cost per contact figures of £8.62 for handling a face-to-face transaction,<sup>7</sup> £2.83 for a telephone transaction and £0.15 for an online transaction, the council has made indicative savings as follows:

Total renewals and new bookings = 19,800

35 per cent now online = 6,930 of which 3,950 would previously have been handled face-to-face or equivalent and 2,980 over the phone

$3,950 \times £8.47 (8.62 - 0.15) = £33,457$

$2,980 \times £2.68 (2.83 - 0.15) = £ 7,986$

Although these figures are estimates, they suggest a significant reduction in cost of over £41,000.

To this one can add administrative savings from taking payments online. Although much of the process is handled by an external contractor, the savings from follow-on administration are estimated by the council at over 200 hours (or £4,000 at a conservative staff cost of £20 per hour). If one assumes that 50 per cent of the online payments would previously have been made by cheque, there has also been a reduction of over £3,500 in the cost of bank processing charges.

Meanwhile, the purchase by residents of 4,293 bins at £42 per bin has generated over £180,000 of new revenue for Breckland for reinvestment in local services.

The impact of the new process has also been felt in the council's contact centre. The period May to July 2016 saw an almost 6 per cent reduction in call volumes compared to the same period in the previous year (with a 19 per cent drop in July 2016). This gave Breckland the

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<sup>6</sup> Debit cards are accepted. South Holland accepts both credit and debit cards

<sup>7</sup> This is likely to be an underestimate of the cost of providing a face-to-face service in certain Breckland offices that are isolated geographically

chance to reduce staffing in the contact centre by one person to part-fund an additional web developer.

Through a mixture of fewer calls being placed and more efficient call management, abandonment rates have also dropped dramatically, from an average of 32 per cent in May to July 2015 to an average of 14 per cent in May to July 2016 (and to only 8.6 per cent in July 2016 against an internal target of 10 per cent).

#### *South Holland garden waste service*

South Holland's new garden waste service, launched as a pilot in the main towns of the district in April 2016, quickly met its initial targets, with 2,216 households signed up and a further 600 from areas not originally included in the pilot currently on a waiting list.

The council promoted the new initiative as primarily an online service and 81 per cent of the bookings in the pilot were done via the internet. Based on its experience of other services, had the online option not been available, the council would have expected 75 per cent of these bookings to come via telephone and 25 per cent via visits to council offices.

By applying once again Socitm's cost per contact figures of £8.62 for handling a face-to-face transaction, £2.83 for a telephone transaction and £0.15 for an online transaction, the council has made indicative savings as follows:

Total bookings = 2,216

81 per cent online = 1,795 of which 449 would previously have been handled face-to-face and 1,346 over the phone

$449 \times £8.47 (8.62 - 0.15) = £3,803.03$

$1,346 \times £2.68 (2.83 - 0.15) = £3,607.28$

On the same assumptions, these figures will increase by around £2,500 if the scheme is rolled out as anticipated to the 600 households on the waiting list.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the new service has generated almost £166,000 of revenue for the council for re-investment in local services, which will increase by more than £38,000 if the scheme is extended to the households currently on the waiting list.<sup>9</sup>

*In addition to its financial benefits, the new online service has offered a range of operational improvements. For instance, the new system has provided data described by the service*

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<sup>8</sup> There is currently a 99 per cent conversion rate from waiting list applicant to subscriber

<sup>9</sup> The service costs £49 per annum and there is a one-off delivery charge of £15. A number of households have purchased a second bin, which costs £30 with no delivery charge

*manager as 'second to none'. This has allowed staff to map take-up and demand, including people on the waiting list, and plan routes in a way that otherwise would have been very difficult. The data will also help to inform any decisions about future extensions of the service. South Holland has also made it a requirement (with very few exceptions) for residents signing up for the service to provide an email address. Not only does this make it easy for staff to send people on the waiting list details of how to subscribe, it potentially offers a cost-effective channel for related communications such as Christmas bin collection dates.*

A decision on whether to extend the scheme more widely across the district is likely to be made in early 2017. South Holland estimates that a further 24,000 households could potentially take advantage of the scheme, generating significantly greater revenue for the council (although it may not prove cost-effective to offer the service in some of the more isolated areas of the district).

In the meantime, the council has agreed to order 550 more bins to meet the current demand from residents on the waiting list. These bins can be accommodated within the existing structure, whereas a wider roll-out will require further analysis of the costs of leasing extra vehicles and the one-off purchase of bins.<sup>10</sup>

As for the impact on South Holland's contact centre, garden waste was a new service and it is difficult therefore to do a before and after comparison. However, the council believes that the scheme has only proved viable because of the very high online take-up by residents.

*'It's doubtful whether the new garden waste service would have been possible without the online focus. It would certainly have had very different results. But now it's become a benchmark for future digital services'. Environmental services & asset manager*

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<sup>10</sup> Bins typically last eight or nine years



**A vehicle banner advertising South Holland's garden waste service**

#### *Other services*

The online bulky waste collection service launched in South Holland in mid-July 2016 has had relatively limited take-up both in terms of number of applications and the percentage completed online (13 per cent). Staff at South Holland attribute the slow take-up mainly to the fact that this is an ad-hoc service, which has not been fully marketed.

Nevertheless, the time spent in the contact centre handling bulky waste transactions has reduced slightly, allowing staff to concentrate on more complex cases. The online service also forces residents to be much more specific about what needs to be collected and from where.

The online licence service has also experienced low initial volumes. A particular issue is that despite close liaison between the system supplier, the website provider and in-house development staff and a few complimentary comments about its functionality, the current back-office system has limitations which mean that the user journey remains poor for anyone not using the service on a regular basis.

As for the self-service pods installed in the reception areas of both councils, it has proved difficult to get reliable data on precisely how they are being used, because for security reasons they have not been connected to the main council networks while the system resets after each transaction and these resets are counted in the statistics.

However, the feedback from the councils' reception staff and floorwalkers suggests that the pods have been well received and customers are finding that they offer appropriate levels of privacy and are easy to use. Take-up remains lower than originally anticipated, but the councils plan to address this by a variety of actions including better signposting, more pro-active

steering of customers to the pods by the floorwalkers and increased marketing. It is also anticipated that as more processes are made available online, usage will grow organically.

## Key learning points

Both councils feel that they have learnt many important lessons both from the Digital Experts project and their wider transformation programmes.

A key point is that if you can promote a service as 'online' from the outset, as South Holland was able to do with its new garden waste service, take-up via the internet is much higher. This suggests that the marketing and support for services that were previously delivered 'off-line' need to be carefully designed and vigorously pursued to encourage a 'digital first' mindset among residents.

Second, it is important to recognise and plan for the fact that not all partners will be fully up-to-speed with digital transformation and many existing legacy systems have been designed to facilitate back-end processing rather than smooth user journeys. The licencing service at Breckland and South Holland is an example of this, while linking the new 'book and pay' functionality to the finance systems in both councils proved challenging.

The two partners are now exploring the feasibility of joining up their ICT infrastructures and having one platform that delivers the bulk of their system requirements, rather than a series of individual applications.

*'Our view now is that as far as possible we need to be in control of how the front-end of our systems links to the back-end via connectors or application programme interfaces'. Executive Manager*

Third, some very practical lessons emerged from the launch of the online garden waste service in both councils, including:

- Don't under-estimate the amount of work involved in getting the online service right for residents. In both councils, forms and processes were being refined until a very late stage in the project (and work continues still) in order to simplify the user journey and cut out local government jargon.

*'You've got to make the online service as smooth and easy as possible, especially if it's competing with existing face-to-face and telephone services that are already very efficient.'*  
*Customer services manager*

- Do test widely with residents, councillors and staff. The earlier this can be done, the better – get people involved at concept stage rather than presenting them with a ‘finished’ design that then has to be unpicked.
- Don’t publicise the new service before the design has been completed and tested – people will try it immediately and may not come back if their initial experience is not satisfactory.

*‘We’re used to setting fixed deadlines in the public services, but with these sorts of projects we’ve learnt that you need to be a bit more organic and flexible with your go-live date.’*

*Executive director*

- Do try to avoid peaks in contact by spreading out the promotion of the service over a period of time. In Breckland’s case some 75 per cent of the phone calls and web traffic came on the first day.
- Do put in place appropriate systems to allow you to track usage, take-up and the customer journey effectively after launch, as the basis for future improvement.

Perhaps the more important message, however, is to ‘be bold and go for it’. The experience of Breckland and South Holland’s Digital Experts project is that online service delivery is now accepted as a way of doing business by a far higher proportion of residents than many councils may imagine.

## Next steps

At the time of writing, a number of specific initiatives were underway, all of which will help to develop the partners’ online services even further:

- A ‘My Account’ function was being developed at South Holland which would allow a resident to see all the services relevant to him or her. A similar function will be implemented in Breckland following a planned upgrade to the council’s current website.
- A workshop had recently been run with the digital champions at both councils where a list of seven or eight ‘personas’ representing key segments of their populations had been developed.
- Meanwhile, a ‘customer audit’ had been carried out, where staff were asked to log any contact with residents, how that contact had been made and whether it was avoidable. The initial results from Breckland have identified at least £50,000 of potential savings.

The personas and audit will be used to shape the partners’ future digital strategies.

On a wider front, the councils are going through a series of root and branch service reviews, during which a multi-disciplinary team will work with the service area to look at how the

customer experience could be improved and significant efficiencies achieved. Digital approaches will play a major role in any changes.

*'The beauty of the book and pay functionality is that can support anything – not just a range of systems but a range of agencies too'. Executive Manager*

Meanwhile, the positive take-up of the online options in the garden waste services in both councils has prompted a real debate about how other services could be reshaped, particularly those that generate significant footfall. For instance, in South Holland, questions have included:

- Could the recycling bags currently available at the council's offices in Spalding be distributed on the rounds instead? Initial research with residents suggested this would be a popular move and a decision has been taken to cease distribution of the bags at the Spalding reception desk from early 2017.
- Could cash payments be removed completely from the Spalding offices on at least a cost-neutral basis? Although there are some practical issues here, this option is now under serious consideration.

These moves would complement another transformation project, linked to the One Public Estate initiative, where other agencies and partners would be encouraged to use the councils' reception facilities as public service hubs.<sup>11</sup> As these ideas develop, the importance of floorwalkers and self-service pods is likely to become ever greater and both Breckland and South Holland will have taken a further step forward in their shared ambition to become digital councils.

*'Councillors were rightly cautious about how the new online services would be received. But the success of the garden waste initiative and the fact that we've had no complaints and received a lot of positive comments has encouraged them to be more ambitious. So the Digital Experts project will act as a catalyst for a much wider set of changes.'* Executive Director

## Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

Andy Prior  
Digital and Customer Access Manager  
Breckland and South Holland District Councils

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<sup>11</sup> For information on the One Public Estate Programme, see [http://www.local.gov.uk/onepublicestate/-/journal\\_content/56/10180/6678286/ARTICLE](http://www.local.gov.uk/onepublicestate/-/journal_content/56/10180/6678286/ARTICLE). South Holland's office in Spalding is under particular review. Breckland closed its cash office some time ago and already shares its main office with the DWP, but it too continues to explore ways of working with partner organisations and evolving its customer service functions

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