

Focusing on potholes to accelerate channel shift

Wakefield Council created a repeatable model for process and digital service redesign by focusing on a key problem area – complaints around pothole reporting and repairs – as part of the shift to encouraging citizens to use low-cost digital service channels rather than traditional face-to-face telephone contact.

The issue and context

Like all councils Wakefield has had to deal with the pressure of reduced budgets and headcount due to austerity and had recognised that it needed to find different ways of working that would improve efficiency and meet the needs of their customers better.

One of the main reasons that customers contacted the council, through all channels, was in relation to highways, planning and transport issues. These are universal and highly visible services, the performance of which has a significant impact on the council's reputation.

In particular, Wakefield Council's highways service was seeing a high level of 'stage one' complaints relating to the reporting and service status updating of category one defects – potholes.

Customers were contacting the council via telephone, email or in person yet there was no clear process to action these contacts and update customers on progress or to feed back the results of an inspection. These requests were effectively disappearing into a 'black hole' and customers were then putting in complaints about the service due to the lack of response to their initial service request.

This meant that the council did not have a complete picture of the number of open service requests and it was unable to accurately identify where all these requests and corresponding complaints were ultimately coming from.

A key corporate goal was to encourage a general shift in customer behaviour to use online channels for contacting the council on all issues. This would enable people to help

"We had a high demand of calls coming in reporting potholes and repeat calls. The LGA funding gave us the opportunity to fix a broken service and specifically fund a mapping solution so that people could pinpoint the exact location of a pothole. But we have other services too that require the customer to identify an exact location – so from the outset we planned this to be a repeatable asset for use across other services."

**Paul Taylor, Senior Project Manager,
Corporate Projects & Programmes**

themselves and free up staff time for the more complex cases.

The council also wanted to change the way in which the highways team and customer services worked together by creating an end-to-end digital service that would offer a consistent way of logging requests, repairing the potholes and keeping the customer informed at every step of the process.

Having identified a specific problem with a high-profile service the council decided to focus on potholes in order to:

- accelerate customers' use of the council's online MyAccount (supplied by IBM) to report issues
- create a replicable mapping capability for location-based service reporting
- re-engineer processes to improve workflows and customer service
- create a model process that could be applied to transform other service areas.

Digital Channel Shift Programme

The work at Wakefield Council to support its innovative use of digital technology has been funded through the Digital Channel Shift Programme, which is managed and overseen by the Local Government Association.

The Digital Channel Shift Programme was set up to help councils and their partners to promote greater use of online tools and technologies for the benefit of both their customers and staff.

The aim is for the digital tools and solutions created through the programme to be reused by other councils and contribute to the wider work to transform local public services.

The project objectives and targets

The pothole project aimed to deliver a fully integrated and automated system linking customer requests via Wakefield Council's website to the back office. This was to be supported through the use of technology and business process re-engineering. In addition, the project was to act as a pathfinder – developing new ways of working to enable the council to deliver further service and process improvements.

Development of a mapping capability for pothole reporting was core to the project. The council's MyAccount facility at this point provided access to 23 services that require a location for any service request.

Meanwhile a renewed focus on the customer and the customer journey would inform work to re-engineer the business process.

The project was developed in line with the council's People Plan, Customer Strategy, Digital First Strategy and District Outcomes Framework. Before starting the project, the team identified that:

- customers had no clarity on the level of service they could expect
- customers were not always informed when, or if, work would be undertaken or completed
- service requests were logged as complete on the council's customer relations management system (CRM) before the work had been undertaken
- duplicate complaints were subsequently raised by customers due to poor updates and communication.

Project objectives

Once delivered, the customer would be able to:

- log new requests more quickly and easily online
- clearly identify where potholes were located through the use of mapping technology
- track, and get clear and accurate progress updates, on their requests.

“As a council we have downsized by 30 per cent in response to austerity but our ways of working had not changed. With a larger workforce we could cope with an analogue approach to service delivery but now we needed to work differently.”

Neil Rodgers, Service Director for Planning, Transportation & Highways

Project targets

- In the first year, the council set a target of reducing the number of upheld complaints about poor communication for potholes by upwards of 10 per cent.
- The number of complaints about the current process would be reduced.
- Staff resource (1.6 FTE) would be re-allocated from handling customer complaints to deal with new highway service requests, an asset management/risk-based approach shaped by a new code of practice 'Well-managed highway infrastructure'.
- In the first year, the project would drive traffic to the online MyAccount and increase online enquiries by 10 per cent, and by 25 per cent in the following five years, in line with the development of the council's digital offering.
- A replicable model and process would be created to transform other service areas.

A number of stakeholders would benefit from this work including citizens, councillors and MPs, planning, transportation and highways services, communications and customer services, the chief executive's office, and business and partner organisations. The learning would also be used to transform other council services such as culture and sport, environment and streetscene, revenues and benefits, and children and young people.

The approach and progress to date

As the project involved process improvement within an existing Microsoft Dynamics CRM and development within the new MyAccount, it required a multi-disciplinary team which comprised both customer services and the highways teams, with specialist input from communications and ICT services. The team reported to a digital and ICT steering group.

Agile working practices and an iterative approach were harnessed to develop the service with the aim of quickly building, testing and deploying elements of the solution. As part of this development, and in accordance with the Government Digital Service's design principle one, end users were involved in the mapping of user journeys.

Customer journey mapping included investigation of how customers navigate their journey, and the language that could best be used to help guide them. Earlier digital engagement at Wakefield had established a cohort of customers who were happy to be involved in the development of the council's digital offer. This cohort formed a fundamental part of the project, participating in workshops to map the new customer journey for reporting potholes and getting updates.

Internal user research for the project involved staff from highways and customer services participating in process-mapping workshops for the 'as is', facilitated by the project manager. The same staff were then involved in re-engineering each process, identifying status updates, allocating tasks to roles, removing excess work, and agreeing response times. The aim was to identify current workflows and optimal workflows running end-to-end from

"Culturally it's feeling really positive. We have a real handle on the business – engineers can now do engineering – and we have a clear systematic approach for dealing with our customers. Reputationally it's done us a lot of good and complaints have dropped off a cliff."

Neil Rodgers, Service Director for Planning, Transportation & Highways

citizen request through to engineers filling in a pothole, keeping the citizen informed from start to finish.

Live service

The new pothole process went live within the CRM on 14 July 2017 and via the MyAccount on 26 Sept 2017, while the new mapping solution, with a moveable pin enabling identification of exact location data to accompany service requests, went live on 1 August 2018. The key milestones are highlighted below.

On the day of launch in September 2017, eight pothole service requests were made online.

The new service has delivered a clear customer journey upon which the logging, reporting and actioning of all potholes is based, with the customer kept up-to-date with progress.

Customers can now interact with the highways service online and:

- report potholes more quickly and easily
- clearly identify where potholes are located via mapping technology from Pitney Bowes (their Spectrum Spatial Analyst product)
- track, and get clear and accurate progress updates, on their requests.

Highways services can:

- receive pothole reports directly from the citizen
- accurately see and identify multiple reports on the same pothole
- directly update the citizen on when actions have been undertaken and repairs carried out – or if an inspection has deemed the pothole not yet in need of repair
- add real-time updates to the pothole service request regarding the impact of severe weather events
- access data and management information to inform future service planning.

Promotion of online self-service

A focused communications campaign to promote the new range of online self-service options available via the MyAccount and encourage channel shift provided 'soft launch' support to the project from September to December 2017. The campaign included a range of elements.

- Messages highlighting the MyAccount service were used during physical or telephone queue management in service centres.
- Customer service advisors signposted the new service whilst on calls to customers.
- MyAccount was promoted on the council's website and social media channels (Facebook, Twitter).
- Councillors engaged directly with their constituents. Elected members attended a

"Feedback has been positive in that it's easy and intuitive to use. Complaints about lack of communication have gone down by 70 per cent and there is a considerable shift to people using the MyAccount online service. More than 90 per cent of pothole requests were previously done over the phone and that has dropped down significantly."

Paul Taylor, Senior Project Manager, Corporate Projects & Programmes

"We had a lot of complaints about lack of communications. That has now changed. We have built the messages into the CRM so that people get the information they need to stop repeat contact."

Andy Bramall, Performance & Development Team Leader – Highways

marketplace-style event that provided them with information relating to the Digital Strategy 2020 and MyAccount.

- Word of mouth took place through employees and citizens.
- The council provided online registration functionality giving access to other key services.
- Council publications, bills and letters all carried messages promoting the use of the online service.
- Library services raised awareness of MyAccount and got customers on board by providing mediated access and assistance for self-service.

Reuse

The same methodology and digital product has also been applied to the gullies process. Similar benefits are expected as a result of a reduction in communication-related complaints in that area.

Milestone	Planned date	Actual date
Citizen and employee engagement (focus groups and comms)	March '17	Ongoing
Funding agreed	March '17	March 17
Supplier procured and engaged and specifications for work agreed	March '17	May 17
Highways customer journey implemented	April '17	July 17
New process live in CRM – including status update functionality	April '17	July 17
Process live in MyAccount	26 Sept 17	26 Sept 17
Go-live for the new mapping solution in MyAccount	Aug 2018	Aug 2018

The outcome – successes and challenges

The project has enabled the council to become more efficient and effective.

Complaints around lack of communication relating to pothole reports and service requests have dropped by 70 per cent since completion of the initial stages of the project.

Following launch of MyAccount at the end of September 2017, but before the launch of the mapping, the volume of negative comments relating to mapping averaged 21 per month. Once the new mapping element was launched this figure dropped to an average three comments per month – indeed, in September 2018 there were none.

Use of the online channels has risen to 47 per cent of contacts, compared to just four per cent through that channel in 2016. This has led to a reduction in the cost per transaction relating to potholes reducing from £2.80 to £1.41

There are currently 27,000 registered users for MyAccount.

Financial benefits

Savings from channel shift and staff time through digitisation of the service are just over £35,000 in year one. This is both expected to rise over the next two years and set to be replicated in other highways service areas.

The two main areas where quantifiable savings have been identified are around handling and reporting complaints and the redesign of the process which has released a significant amount of engineers' time, ensuring their expertise is focussed on activities that require it. Despite an increase in the numbers of highways complaints in 2018/19 due to the harsh winter, the online access provided via MyAccount has led to a reduction in the cost of handling corporate complaints and has reduced the volume of initial telephone calls.

Nearly 250 complaints have been handled using the new process, saving £9,647. This saving came from a reduction in the handling cost of a complaint by £40.03. Furthermore, there was a reduction in corporate complaints, which arose when an initial complaints about

Summary of Savings	Efficiency
Reduced cost of handling highways complaints	£9,647
Reduced corporate complaints	£1,563
Rekeying	£1,860
Engineer time saving	£18,553
Channel shift saving	£3,714
Total	£35,337

the highway was followed up with a further complaint about lack of communication. This reduction resulted in a further saving of £1,563. Previously engineers were involved in back-office tasks but these have significantly reduced because of changes in the process. Duplicate tasks have been removed from the process and tasks have been reassigned to ensure engineers spend their time on activities that require their expertise, thus freeing them up from administrative tasks that could be performed by back-office staff. This has contributed to an efficiency of £18,500. As the process embeds further and is rolled out across traffic management it is expected that staff time savings will increase to £25,577 in year 2 and £28,891 in year 3.

There are savings due to reduced rekeying of

Compliments received from customers relating specifically to mapping:

“Thank you for improving the litter location so that the pin can be dropped exactly where it should be rather than relying on typing in an address.”

“No problems. I thought the map location was excellent.”

“Great online customer reporting system. Very accurate and user friendly! Thank you.”

“The project enabled us to look at the way we manage our customers’ expectations. Under the new regime customer contact is fed directly to the person best placed to deal with it. The process is streamlined and manages the customer experience better.”

Donna Hodgson, Network Manager – Highways

information into different systems. Prior to MyAccount all online request for potholes were made via a web form which raised an email for customer services. These emails then had to be rekeyed into the CRM. Based on the average handling time and grade of staff involved this reflects a saving of £1,860 per annum.

MyAccount went live at the end of Q2 on the 26 September 2017 with an initial target of a minimum 10 per cent increase in online reporting of potholes year-on-year.

Wakefield, however, experienced a big increase in overall demand when the service went live online and especially from January 2018 onwards. This was partly seasonal and partly due to the availability and ease of reporting potholes via the new channel. This increase in demand would have cost the service an additional £2,700 had the contact been via phone rather than online. In spite of the increased demand the service also saw a reduction in the contact received via phone. This resulted in an additional efficiency of over £1,000.

Figures show that there has been a 37 per cent increase in the proportion of requests received via the web (MyAccount), from 9 per cent in Q4 2016/17 to 46 per cent in Q4 2017/18, and a 34 per cent decrease in the proportion of requests received via phone, from 82 per cent to 48 per cent.

“Feedback has been positive – engineers have even received direct 'thank yous' from customers, which is great for job satisfaction and morale.”

Donna Hodgson, Network Manager – Highways

Applying SOCITM’s channel shift figures of £8.62 face-to-face / £2.83 phone / £0.15 web would equate to a £3,714 savings due to a combination of a reduction in phone calls and an increase in online contact that would have previously been via phone.

Non-financial benefits

Previously the engineers had to go through a number of processes to deal with customers. As these have now been significantly reduced this has meant they now have more capacity which is now being used on fee-earning activities. As this is a very recent development the full value of this unexpected financial bonus has yet to be calculated.

A strategic management tool has been created with the additional data available and the system’s enhanced management information which is now being used by the service director to look at the condition of the highways network and plan future delivery.

Customer feedback has been very good with 50 per cent of those customers who participated in the survey since go-live rating the service as ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’. Just five per cent found the process ‘very difficult’.

Now that members of the public have a direct ‘digital connection’ to the engineers who actioned their request they have been sending thank you messages to the team, which has had a very positive impact on morale.

Meanwhile, the mapping solution with its associated benefits has subsequently been extended across 23 other MyAccount services that require a location.

Challenges

While the new processes and software have brought many benefits there were also a number of challenges, some of which contributed to the delay in implementing the new mapping capability.

- Improving the quality of software and the testing process would have helped in order to avoid the introduction of faults to the system from new developments/updates from suppliers.

- Supplier management – not running over the agreed of days budgeted, especially when this additional work is being used to correct faults that the supplier caused.
- Planning resources effectively – allocating people to work on the project whilst keeping the ‘day job’ running requires juggling.
- Giving customers better access made it easier for them to report issues, which significantly increased demand and led to some duplicate reporting during severe weather events.

“Top challenges included working with suppliers – supplier management is key. We had a number of difficulties with the quality of the software and had to be careful to track the number of service days we had purchased from the supplier which were being used to rectify problems they had introduced.”

Paul Taylor, Senior Project Manager, Corporate Projects & Programmes

The screenshot shows the Wakefield Council website interface. At the top left is the Wakefield Council logo. To the right are links for 'Newsroom' and 'MyAccount'. A search bar is located below these links. The main navigation path is: Home > Roads and transport > Highway maintenance > Potholes and damaged pavements. The main heading is 'Potholes and damaged pavements'. Below this is a section 'Before you start' with the sub-heading 'You will need to tell us:' followed by a list of requirements:

- Street name and area
- Location on street - is it near a house number or road junction?
- Description and detail of the defect or damage
- Your name and a contact number
- If reporting damage, the date and approximate time the damage occurred
- Persons or vehicle registration responsible for damage (if known)

 A 'Start now >>' button is positioned below the list. On the right side, there is a 'Highway maintenance' section with a list of reporting options:

- Potholes and damaged pavements (highlighted)
- Kerb crossing, kerb lowering and access requests
- Highway drainage - flooded roads
- Highways and pavements obstructions
- Report a problem with a footpath or bridleway
- Report a damaged gully or manhole cover
- Bridges and retaining walls

Key learning points

The project team has identified a number of key learning points from this project – all of which are being used to inform future projects.

Engagement

- Ensure all stakeholders are bought into the project at an early stage and that managers are clearly cascading and communicating through teams as to why the project is being undertaken.
- Clear and strong communication and delivery of the new 'to be' process to all operational staff is essential, with clarity early on over who are the key owners and contacts for help.
- Use simple and accessible language both internally and externally, not jargon – talk about roads, not carriageways.

Resources

- Time must be created within people's workloads to enable them to engage in business process redesign 'outside of the day job' otherwise it will never happen.
- A key role is having someone available to capture the overall process while others are doing the day-to-day work.
- It is important to have resource on the project team from different skill sets eg supporting roles in communications to draft correspondence, check plain English and in ICT to help consider the art of the possible regarding technical solutions.
- It is important to plan, prioritise and coordinate resources to accommodate

"It was people who do the job who designed the new processes – and that's why it's a success. We engaged with everyone from operational and admin staff up to the service director and my role was to facilitate that process."

Sarah Morgan, Business Change Manager

"As a learning exercise we have taken a lot out of it. We have gained an understanding of how to pick a process apart, how to get the right people involved and put it back together again. We know how to make the most of the CRM enabling us to provide an effective digital service."

Andy Bramall, Performance & Development Team Leader – Highways

potential impacts of wider departmental and organisational initiatives on key staff. A key highways resource was side-tracked by another project (street lighting) resulting in another person having to pick up the business process re-engineering work some way down the line.

- Tolerance needs to be built into plans for unexpected sickness or absence of key individuals.
- Use existing systems to their full potential and in better ways.

User research

- Operational resource input is crucial for sense-checking eg workers at the depots.
- Involve all members of the team in customer journey research eg highways team leaders looking at the website for potential improvements to reduce avoidable contact.
- And vice-versa, involve the web team in the learning process for highways.

"During the user research when you get people sat in a room and everybody has been in the job for a period of time, they assume they know the process from end-to-end. A degree of understanding comes from these conversations and staff really gained clarity of the entire process."

Andy Bramall, Performance & Development Team Leader – Highways

- Customer insight – focus on capturing insight about avoidable contact and the supplementary questions that are being asked by customers.

Change management

- The need to focus on, and properly resource, the change management of significant projects cannot be overemphasised.
- External help to question and challenge existing practice, and not be hamstrung by existing ways of working, was essential.
- Highways staff found it challenging to look at transformation but became keen to adopt the new system once they had seen the benefits.
- Having a customer services CRM expert delivering key training messages and translating these messages for service areas was essential to support go-live.

Suppliers

- Manage suppliers closely and escalate issues early.
- Specifically develop digital elements, eg mapping, for reuse.

“It was all about changing the way we worked. It was important to get the right people involved so they could review the current process and redesign it. Engaging with all levels of staff and nurturing those relationships was key so we could get the right skills and knowledge for the project to be a success.”

Sarah Morgan, Business Change Manager

“You need the key people with the right knowledge to inform the process. The challenge is how you keep the day job going while having the time to develop the project and this needs to be considered right from the outset. You need senior management backing either to release staff or get acceptance that external support is needed to back-fill on the day job.”

Andy Bramall, Performance & Development Team Leader – Highways

Next steps

The project has provided a model for Wakefield to use to transform other services, in both highways and the wider council, and deliver both service improvement and channel shift.

For example, the proven process has given the customer services and highways teams confidence in tackling other areas. This approach has already been used to improve traffic management and gully cleaning services – historically the two highest areas of complaint after potholes.

Transformation of more services will be tackled using the templates, documents and lessons learned. Staff that have upskilled in areas such as using Microsoft Visio to map processes are sharing its use in other service areas – for example street markets – to identify service improvements. The team has also shared learning internally in a series of innovation labs, while the creation of a council-wide learning portal has provided a range of self-development learning tools, tips and techniques in a variety of different formats that link to the council's competencies.

Meanwhile, the idea and outline business case for a new asset management system also came directly from the experience and learning from the process re-engineering element of this project. This business case is now being taken forward.

“We have delivered something repeatable. The model was initially used to deal with potholes but is now being used to deal with gullies, traffic management and our market service.”

Sarah Morgan, Business Change Manager

“We had a set way of working and we weren't looking at it from the customer perspective. The LGA Digital Channel Shift Programme gave us the focus to examine and reinvent our service delivery – not only with regards to potholes but across the entire organisation.”

Neil Rodgers, Service Director for Planning, Transportation & Highways

Contact for further information

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