Gloucestershire transforms access to archives

Gloucestershire County Council's archive team has delivered online registration and document order facilities that give its 10,000 users a year anytime, anywhere access to the catalogue of 800,000 items – delivering an expected £45,734 of annual efficiency savings along the way.

Digital Channel Shift Programme case study

The issue and context

Councils nationwide hold archives about the history and heritage of their local area which people can access to research the history of their family or house and other local studies.

Gloucestershire County Council's archive has millions of unique documents relating to Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire dating from the 1100s to the present day. These have been donated or loaned to them.

Each year around 10,000 people visit the council to use its archive service. For security reasons, every customer first has to register to use the service. Historically, customers would be asked to fill out a hard copy form on their first visit and provide supporting proof of identity. Staff would then manually transfer this data into the user database.

When customers wanted to view documents they had to order them either by filling out an online form which was then emailed to a generic mailbox, or by filling out a document request by hand and giving it to a member of staff. Regardless of which method was used, the staff would then have to manually transfer the data into the loans database.

Gloucestershire Archives wanted to transform the user experience and improve online access to its archive services, alongside a major building project to create a new Gloucestershire Heritage Hub that will hold twelve miles of shelving comprising several million items.

"We are transforming the archive service with the help of funding from the heritage lottery fund and others – and the idea is to make it a sustainable service that is very streamlined, very customer-friendly that will go on into the future with realistic funding. The LGA funding has enabled us to work on channel shift and to make things more efficient for both our customers and our staff."

Heather Forbes, Head of Archives

The team applied for LGA funding to help streamline and improve customer access to its unique documents and shift user requests to online channels.

In an ideal world Gloucestershire would have liked to offer customers access to digital copies of the collections remotely but given the scale of the collections at Gloucestershire Archives this would be a multi-million pound project and in the current financial climate this was not possible.

Overall the archive transformation contributes to Gloucestershire County Council's longer-term direction of travel where, since 2014, it has prioritised helping customers to help themselves.

Digital Channel Shift Programme

The work at Gloucestershire County 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 (LGA).

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 project, which had a targeted go-live of September 2017, had two key objectives:

- to enable customers to register online to access documents

- to enable customers to order documents online for viewing.

The LGA funding was to be used primarily to employ a member of staff for 12 weeks to implement required system changes at a cost of £11,250. This person would focus on:

- liaising with customers to ensure the new system is as user-friendly as possible so that the planned channel shift is achieved

- working with Axiell (supplier of the archives management software used to log customers and order documents) and the county's ICT staff to ensure smooth implementation of the system

- training staff on the new system

- writing user guides/help sheets/videos and training volunteers to help customers use the system.

The additional funding, £3,750, was to fund developer time to make changes to the online ordering system.

The project had delivery goals for both customers and staff:

For the customer

- to be able to complete and submit their 'new user' registration form online before their first visit, either from home, offsite or onsite

- to be issued with a County Archive Research Network (CARN) card quickly if it is the first time they have used a local authority archives service – registration data will be used to issue this card in advance of their visit and have it ready for collection

- all customers will spend less time queuing at reception and more time with original documents – regardless of whether they are first-time or repeat customers

"The project was to ensure that our customers could register online before coming to the archives and could also order documents from home in advance of their visit. The idea was to make it a more streamlined process for customers and for staff."

Heather Forbes, Head of Archives

- to be able to order documents right up to the point at which staff fetch a batch of documents (currently customers need to allow time for staff to manually process orders before each run).

For staff

- to spend less time on customer administration processes, particularly the task of rekeying information relating to documents that customers have ordered to view in our research room – this will be particularly beneficial since people often request multiple documents per visit as they can make digital copies to take away

- to spend more time on back-office functions, such as cataloguing which is vital for providing effective access to the collections

- to spend more time developing further self-service guidance – improving published information will help more customers to help themselves

- to improve data handling procedures, making it possible to proceed with plans for recruiting volunteers to help with reception duties.

Targets

Through meeting the project objectives, the team anticipated making efficiency time savings valued at £24,783 in the first year of operation.

The approach and progress to date

At the start of this project the team was aware of only one other council that was offering online ordering via Axiell's CALMView application and believed Gloucestershire to be the first council to offer offsite ordering.

Technology

Gloucestershire Archives is using Axiell's CALM and CALMView archive management software.

This provided limited functionality to digitise the two paper-based functions – customer registration and document ordering – but the team felt it did not fully meet user needs.

The supplier, however, has been receptive to working with the team throughout the project in order to enhance the product's functionality for all users.

User research and testing

Two distinct user groups were identified: customer services and archive staff users fulfilling orders made by the public, and external customers who will be accessing the system remotely.

Engagement and testing was carried out with internal users via one-to-one interviews as well as at a group demonstration and feedback session, and with external users via Gloucestershire's Customer Focus Group meetings. In addition specific external users who had expressed an interest in helping with this kind of digital work were approached on a one-to-one basis.

A general call for help in testing the new system

> "The functionality existed but not in a very robust form [and there was only one other archive using that software at the time]… and when we had a look at it we felt there were some obvious shortfalls that could be improved…and because of the money that had been given to us by the LGA the two things dovetailed quite nicely."
>
> **Rosalind Farr, Archivist and Project Officer**

> "Part of that work was done in conjunction with our customer services team because ultimately they were the people who were going to have to use it and administer the new system. [They'd then enable] the archive customers who would be the end users and they would have to walk them through it."
>
> **Rosalind Farr, Archivist and Project Officer**

was made via the Heritage Hub newsletter which has a circulation list of approximately 9,000 archive customers.

During the development process the customer services team gave input into the product specification. This process was helpful in refining the product. For example, one colleague identified that assigning a customer number to a user – rather than letting the user choose a random user ID which then had to be changed later – would save staff time.

The project team was able to implement that functionality in the final solution.

Once the product had been delivered, Axiell and Gloucestershire's ICT team worked together to create a testing environment to allow a final opportunity for both sets of users to access and test the new development.

Digital exclusion

The team predicted that nearly 100 per cent of customers would be able to register online but this is not compulsory. Everybody will always have to show ID before a readers' ticket is issued – so for those people who are not able to use a computer, paper-based access to the system is still available.

> "This is the beauty of the new system .. we have the time to spend with people who just drop in or can't access the computer .. and it's not a problem we are very flexible – we always have been, but this has helped."
>
> **John Putley, Hub Facilities Manager**

Delays

The innovative nature of the project inevitably created challenges for both the archive team and their supplier. However, during the project the team was frustrated to find that the third-party supplier would release software that was not thoroughly tested.

This coincided with a change in the personnel within Gloucestershire's ICT department that was supporting the team.

The cumulative effect of these issues led to a delay in go-live and required repeat software testing.

Gloucestershire also found that the software at times did not meet the requirements set out in their specification, which involved working with the supplier to fix issues encountered as parts of the solution were released.

For example, the original specification stated that if customers wanted to see what they had previously ordered, the system would show it to them in a particular order – the date of the visit to the archive, and not by the date of ordering, because the two could be different. Initially that display functionality did not work. The team felt that this functionality was important and worked with the supplier to ensure the information was displayed in the date of order.

Another example is that, to help manage the service, customers are restricted to ordering only five items at once for a particular day, but the requested user alert when a customer reached the maximum did not work. This was very frustrating for the customer as there was no indication that the order request had failed.

Again, the team worked with the supplier to fix these issues and then re-test with users. However, this process delayed the anticipated service launch date of September 2017 to January 2018.

> "Every time a new piece of software was released we would have to test it from beginning to end – because one thing could affect another thing, so it was never as straightforward as we hoped."
>
> **Rosalind Farr, Archivist and Project Officer**

Training support

The team took the opportunity to test training materials with users, including a series of 'how to' videos that explained how to register for and access the service – the first of which has had over 1,400 views:

The Basics
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcMWa0SdmDg

Search Smarter
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8rjI-poLxI
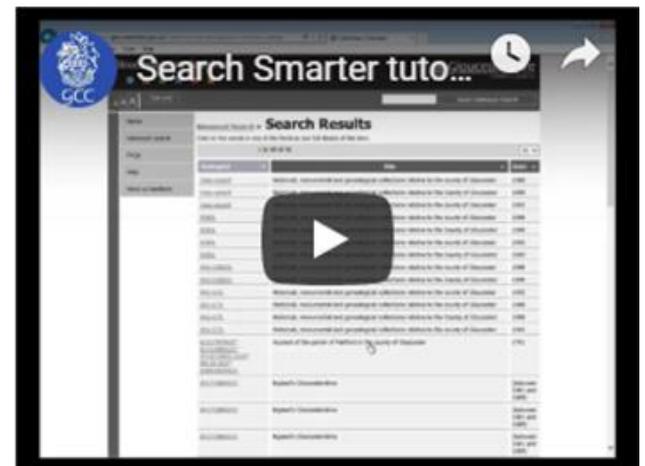
Discover More
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pyq2nW59O0E

Promotion:

When the beta service launched there was a limited promotional campaign via the council's own newsletter and that of their partner, For the Record (a collaborative partnership comprising the Gloucestershire Family History Society, Gloucestershire Constabulary, the council, South Gloucestershire Council, Friends of Gloucestershire Archives and other local organisations).

Due to the ongoing building work, the service was operating from temporary accommodation – which people had to visit – and the team felt that there was not enough capacity available to promote the service more widely at that stage.

Further promotional activity and training sessions are planned to start on completion of the Gloucestershire Heritage Hub.

Go-live

Following the delays to development, the beta service went live four months later than planned, on the 18 January 2018.

The first independent customer registration came through the following day.

Following minor iterations the service has been fully live since March 2019.

Project milestones	Planned	Actual	Comments
Design/discovery phase	Jun 17	Jun 17	
External supplier (Axiell) commences work	Jul 17	Aug 17	Actual dates reflect delay in delivery from Axiell
Technical testing	Jul 17	Oct 17	95 per cent successfully completed – see comments below
User testing with customer focus group and staff	Jul 17	Dec 18	Two rounds of user acceptance testing (UAT) 1. internal (customer services team) 2. external (customers and focus group)
Pre-launch communication and staff training	Aug 17	Jan 18	Heritage Hub newsletter published. Training for different staff groups
Launch of live beta system for users of Gloucestershire Archives	Aug 17	Jan 18	Customer guidance published. Revised staff procedures implemented

The outcome – successes and challenges

Take-up of the live working system has been lower than predicted since January 2018, representing just 30 per cent of users.

The team still has some minor technical issues that are expected to be resolved in an update at the end of March 2019.

Once this final update has been completed the team expects to see take-up rise, to approximately 80 per cent of users ordering online.

Meanwhile, the online registration process has proved very successful – most people who come in have registered online before they visit. Staff are able to find their record in the system, check their ID and issue them with a visitors' card.

The collections at Gloucestershire Archives are used by over eight million people a year.

Customers are now able to explore the full catalogue online, at the time and place of their own choosing rather than being restricted to physical visits within office hours.

With the collections being available to search 24/7 they are now more accessible to a wider range of people. Indeed, Google Analytics suggest that 47 per cent of users look at the online catalogue website between 5.00 pm and 9.00 am and that use over the weekend – particularly on a Sunday – is heavy (see chart).

As much of the required material is now pre-ordered online and ready for customers on the day, staff have more time to help people with their searches.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that users are becoming more aware of the richness of the content in the archives – when they use search terms the results that are returned often open up new lines of research.

> "Those of us who do this stuff from a distance really appreciate this sort of online functionality."
>
> **User, MT, via email**

Users by time of day
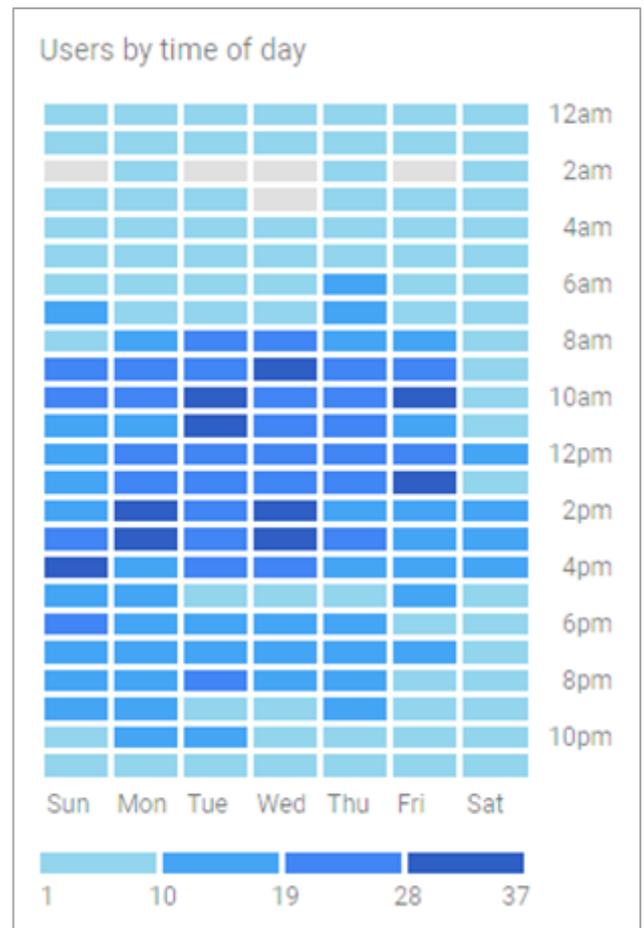
> "I have found things on there I would have never have found before because of the out-of-the-box thinking you can do – putting in different terms in different ways and seeing what comes up. You simply couldn't do that before and access things in the same way."
>
> **Steven Blake, local historian and Chairman of Gloucestershire Local History Association – user**

> "Today's customers are so used to the online shopping experience and they know how these things work. It's nice to 'drag' the archives into the 21st century... and it's only going to go from strength to strength.
>
> "We have always prided ourselves on our customer service at Gloucestershire Archives and I think this has just helped it."
>
> **John Putley, Hub Facilities Manager**

Financial benefits

In the first year of operation since go-live in January 2018, the new service has generated a total of £17,150 in time savings.

With take-up expected to increase during 2019 from the current 30 per cent to 80 per cent, the team predicts that this savings figure will reach £45,734 annually.

Savings are being generated from removing the need to rekey registration and order information.

For example, from January 2018 to January 2019 there were 870 new online registrations – each of these would previously have taken three minutes to rekey into the system.

During that same period there were 7,778 online document orders made – each of which used to take two minutes to process.

In addition, time has been saved from a reduction in pre-order email enquiries. In the calendar year 2017, 1,186 such communications were received and required a response – in 2018 just 591 were received.

Non-financial benefits

All customers now enjoy an improved and streamlined customer experience, with 24/7 access to the archive catalogue giving customers the choice to use it whenever they wish.

Remote customers have greater access to the service while onsite customers also enjoy a faster, more streamlined booking-in process.

Staff time has also been freed up as they no longer need to rekey registration and order information, leaving them with more time to either help those who are unable to access the online service or who prefer to use paper forms.

"It is so convenient. I split my time between many different places and especially being a university student I can be in Birmingham and still research the catalogue and order these items the same day – and know that I can predict in two weeks' time they will be sat there at the desk ready for me to view and use."

Christopher Barnes, PHD student – user

"It has saved all that staff time in a dead task which doesn't add anything to the service. And staff are then able to use that time for either doing catalogue enhancement tasks – which improves the catalogue for everybody – or can spend more time with customers in the search room helping them out with their enquiries, guiding them into other sources which they may find useful in their research."

Claire Collins, Digital Reservation and Access Officer (Project manager)

Staff also have more time available to ensure that the 'search room' is working efficiently and that all equipment, such as printers and scanners, is in full working order.

Partner organisations will also be able to benefit. For example, Gloucestershire Constabulary will able to access its own information at all times without having to come into the archive office to wait for documents to be found. This could save significant officer time during the approximate 46 visits a year to the archives.

The team is confident that there are also wider benefits to the archive profession in general. Approximately three-quarters of council archive services use Axiell's CALM and CALMView. The improvements implemented in Gloucestershire have been included in the base build of CALM and are now available to all users of the software.

"We currently have nine miles of shelving and in terms of our online catalogue about 800,000 items that people can choose from. As a result of this project people will now be able to sit in their dining rooms at home, look through the 800,000 documents, and think 'I'm really interested in that Winchcombe Priory cartulary from 811' and then they can order it up and say I'd like to come and see it next Thursday – and then if they come in next Thursday they will be already registered and the document will be produced for them."

Heather Forbes, Head of Archives

Challenges

Being a pioneer is not always easy: many of the teething problems encountered by the team at Gloucestershire were because they were first to embark on this type of project in the archive world.

Supplier management, software and support: the project encountered unanticipated technical difficulties with the software, which caused significant delay in rolling out system improvements. The number of iterations needed to resolve these glitches adversely impacted timescales. The team found it a particular challenge to coordinate testing and development with the third-party supplier and in-house ICT.

Building project: the project ran alongside a major building project to create a new Gloucestershire Heritage Hub. Disruption from this building work meant that the public research room service had to be temporarily re-housed and impacted the facilities available for the launch of the new service, training events and promotion. Building work is still ongoing.

> "All of that work was extremely time-consuming so what we found that if a niggle was fixed quite often it would be fixed in isolation which meant we would get some code back and to apply the code we would have to test everything all over again to test that the fix had worked but also that nothing had broken in the meantime – and then do the whole thing again when the next fix came through. And this caused quite a lot of delay."

Claire Collins, Digital Reservation and Access Officer (Project manager)

> "The thing that was unexpected was the number of iterations we've had to take with some of the software glitches. Some of them we hadn't anticipated and then it's also the length of time that it takes between working with your third party supplier, your county council supplier and then us doing all the testing – and it's allowing time for each of those circles to go through and planning it well and to actually allow for more glitches than you'd ever imagined."

Heather Forbes, Head of Archives

Search the Gloucestershire Archives website

Building works affecting Gloucestershire Archives

Before your visit, please check the latest information about opening hours and parking. You will need to order your documents before you visit.

Gloucestershire Archives > Plan your visit > About Us

About Us

What we do and who we are

What we do

We gather, keep and share historic archive collections relating to Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire - and local and family history resources relating to Gloucestershire.

The archives are kept at our main Alvin Street site in Gloucester and you can use them in our public research room.

The local and family history resources are spread across Gloucestershire. The core collection is kept at our main site and area-specific collections are kept at Local and Family History Centres based at libraries in Cheltenham, Cinderford, Cirencester, Stroud, Stow and Tewkesbury. You can use them in the relevant venue.

Who we are

Gloucestershire Archives is a Gloucestershire County Council service. We also provide an archive service for South Gloucestershire Council. The geographic area that these councils cover used to be a single county. Today, we call it the historic county of Gloucestershire.

Our main site is also home to Gloucestershire Registration's copy certificate service.

What is an archive?

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If you haven't used Gloucestershire Archives before you'll need to register with us. You can do this online, although you'll still need to bring some proof of ID with you on your first visit. A driving licence is ideal.

Register by clicking through to our ⧉ online catalogue

If you'd like some help, ⧉ have a look at our guide (PDF, 481.1 KB).

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Catalogue FAQs ⌄

Key learning points

Avoid co-dependency on building programmes: in an ideal world the team would not have run this project alongside a major building project as the late running of this project has adversely impacted the availability of facilities available for launch, training and promotion events.

Plan for things not going right: the best laid plans can be disrupted by factors outside your control – so allow contingency time to cope with the unexpected.

Get partners up to speed early on: make sure you build contingency time into the project plan you agree deadlines with your suppliers and partners, recognising that they will have competing pressures on their time.

Speak to the software developers not the sales team: the team had been discussing the project with sales people and the software supplier's helpdesk. On reflection they feel it would have been more helpful to have been able to speak direct to the developers as they would have had a better understanding of what Gloucestershire was trying to achieve.

Manage user expectations: the unexpected technical glitches negatively impacted the customer service team's experience of the product during development. This should have been addressed earlier with reassurances of the ultimate quality of the product.

"Plan for things not going right and also allow lead-in for each of those partners because there will be things that will not work and you won't necessarily be top of everyone's priority list so you will have to wait your turn and that actually does take time if you are doing it several times."

Heather Forbes, Head of Archives

"One thing we found disappointing was that we had a fabulous product to sell to our customer services team who really wanted to work with it – but at the point when we were trying to engage with them the technical glitches arose. We would approach this differently next time and postpone engagement until the glitches were fixed."

Claire Collins, Digital Reservation and Access Officer (Project manager)

Next steps

Drive take-up: a final upgrade to the system will give the team the confidence to put promotional activities into action and drive better uptake of the system – and deliver targeted savings.

Share the benefits more widely: the work undertaken at Gloucestershire Archives has the potential to bring benefits to all other council users of the CALM software. The developments have been built into the base build of the software and are available to all users via the usual update process at no extra cost.

Training: the team is keen to offer drop-in training sessions for users to ensure that people gain the most from their interaction with the archive. Additional training videos are also planned and both these resources will be widely advertised.

A sustainable archives service: working in partnership in the new Gloucester Heritage Hub the team will further explore how best to make the archives a sustainable service for the future.

"The specifications drawn up as a result of the LGA funding have been built into the base build now of the new version of the CALM software – so that will roll out automatically to any user who updates their software. Once that has happened we can be used as an example – so people will be able to look at our website and see the service in action."

Claire Collins, Digital Reservation and Access Officer (Project manager)

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Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

Claire Collins
Collections Development Manager
Gloucestershire County Council

Phone: 01452 426240
Email: claire.collins@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Local Government Association
18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk

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