

# Driving self-service in revenues and benefits

Harlow has proved that helping people to self-serve improves both service quality and efficiency and that understanding the local demographics and barriers to accessing services is key to encouraging channel shift.

## The issue and context

Harlow is a new town with a small physical footprint. The council's civic centre is the only point of face-to-face contact with residents who are accustomed to regular visits.

Approximately 500 customers visit the centre, which is open from 9:00 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday, daily. With over 35,000 dwellings, a third of which are council properties, almost three-quarters of these visits were being made to pay council tax, rent or other charges, and over 10 per cent related to revenues and benefits enquiries.

As part of a wider customer service review, Harlow was keen to reduce the volume of these contacts by encouraging people to self-serve via the website or at self-service points in the civic centre. This would free up valuable staff time to help the council's most vulnerable residents.

Harlow's Housing Options service had previously run a channel shift programme to transfer Homefinder applications from face-to-face or telephone to an online service. This resulted in 100 per cent of applications being received online, evidencing that the residents of Harlow are willing to deal with the council digitally if given the right tools and assistance.

Analysis of the enquiries received by the revenues and benefits service found that approximately 54 per cent were regarding information or forms that were shortly to be made available online.

The new online facilities would also enable people to view their benefit claim or council tax and business rate accounts online and notify

"We had a customer service review whereby we were looking at how we can get more people to self-serve and use the website. This project came at the right time. It was a great opportunity for us to work closely with the revs and bens team to see how we can try and move some of their users to self-serve."

**Simon Pipe, Customer and Media Services Manager**

changes directly to the back office.

This provided Harlow with an opportunity to drive channel shift and behaviour change. It applied to the LGA Digital Channel Shift Programme for funding to:

- upgrade the self-service area and equipment
- introduce a floorwalking service
- carry out a range of promotional activity to encourage use of the council's online options.

Harlow is currently not at an advanced stage in terms of digital service delivery, and whilst similar projects are ongoing across the local government sector, what makes this project unique is a local area that retains high cash dependency, is below national levels of literacy and educational attainment and above national levels of deprivation. It was therefore essential that these demographics were considered when designing and implementing the project.

### Digital Channel Shift Programme

The work at Harlow 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

This project would support the introduction, promotion and expansion of Harlow Council's My Revenues and Benefits service using Civica's OpenAccess and OpenChannel. Specifically, it would aim to drive take-up of the new online self-service options enabling:

- businesses and customers to view their council tax, business rate, sundry debt and housing benefit overpayment account information, such as amount due, payments made and future instalments
- housing benefit and council tax support claimants to access some of their claim and payment information, such as weekly entitlement, calculation details, payments made and the date of payments due
- landlords to log in and download housing benefit payment schedules
- customers to advise of changes to, or make claims for, a range of discounts, exemptions or reductions via online forms.

The new services were to be designed such that customers would be signed up for secure online billing and invoicing as the default position upon registration. Customer contact details, including email addresses and mobile telephone numbers, would also be obtained with customers' permission, enabling the service to increase their use as a method of communication.

Customers would have 24-hour, 365-day access to their accounts and historical information and would be able to quickly and easily report changes or apply for discounts and exemptions.

Meanwhile, automating the back-office processes would result in quicker processing times and reduced administration.

The switch to online would bring a reduction in calls and visits to the civic centre which would both deliver savings and free officer time to concentrate on complex cases and non-automated work.

"We had already started the service transformation and we were looking as part of that to make IT improvements to provide the services for customers 24/7 and the LGA project came along at the right time to enable us to focus on that through that project."

**Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager**

Online billing and e-notifications would also reduce printing and postage costs.

However, Harlow's existing self-serve area was not easily accessible and the equipment was not deemed fit for purpose in terms of encouraging customers to channel shift. The council planned to expand and upgrade the facility and move it to a more prominent location in the civic centre with the aim of optimising their citizens' experience with online services – helping to ensure that self-serve would be their preferred option in the future.

'Floorwalking' support officers would engage with customers and encourage them to try the self-serve options. These floorwalkers would use common consumer technology, such as tablets and smart phones, to demonstrate and champion the service and show customers how easy it was to use, how much of their time it would save and how it would reduce the need for them to contact the council.

In addition, Universal Credit was due to be introduced in Harlow from July 2017 and would require all claimants to manage their claims to welfare benefits online. This change would provide a natural opportunity to sell the benefits of self-service when customers approached the council for support in managing their Universal Credit claim.

As well as helping to improve the council's self-serve area and equipment, the LGA funding would be used to support user engagement and

service promotion as required once the self-service channels were fully operational, including for example:

- floorwalking to engage with, help and get feedback from users
- email and text campaigns for claims or accounts where the council already held contact details
- leaflet campaign for annual billing, which is when the council sends out council tax, business rates and housing benefit notifications to all households
- signage in the civic centre to promote the ease of self-service
- posters in libraries, job centres, and the civic centre
- social media campaigns throughout the year
- engagement with the third sector including Citizens Advice (CAB), local Advice Centre, HarlowSave, and Streets to Homes organisations, to provide support to customers to self-serve.

## Targets:

Harlow was targeting a 10 per cent switch to online self-service. Based on this level of take-up in 2017/18, the council anticipated notional savings of:

- £37,561 from reduced face-to-face and telephone contact
- £16,090 from the switch to online billing and e-notifications.

“From a revenues and benefits perspective there are over 35,000 dwellings and a third of those are council properties and we have about 8-9,000 claims for housing benefits and council tax support.”

**Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager**

## The approach and progress to date

Harlow was not focused on delivering a full 'digital-by-default' service because of the demographic it serves. It wanted to create efficiency savings by enabling its more able customers to self-serve, which would also release officer time that could be spent helping more vulnerable customers to receive the support to which they are entitled.

Channel shift had been identified as an important part of transformation in a previous customer services review leading to a real commitment within the council to ensure that customers had the tools to self-serve.

Harlow uses Civica's revenues and benefits software, including its OpenAccess and OpenChannel online forms and portal. The resultant My Revenues and Benefits service would enable customers to access real-time information and services online or via an app on mobile devices.

The online forms are customisable to some extent by the council. There are some settings

"More and more people are used to using technology. People want to interact with us but they don't want to come in, they don't want to phone us up, if they can do it online rather than talk to us that's great. As a council we need to adapt to that."

**Simon Pipe, Customer and Media Services Manager**

"The main piece of user engagement was the floorwalking two-month trial exercise and that was where we got useful information about the fact that some of our forms were not actually designed correctly – where we felt it was written in the right way it was causing issues, so we were able to adjust some of the questioning and make it easier for customers to complete the forms themselves."

**James Straw, Senior Manager (Benefits)**

"We still have some paper forms as well. It's not digital by default at Harlow council – the political stance is that people need to be able to access services in a range of ways which we have to be providing and delivering."

**Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager**

that can be adjusted to requirements for automated processing within the back office and the team can make changes to wording.

However, the overall structure is quite rigid. This project therefore focused predominantly on making the forms as easy to use as possible, engaging and helping users to make the shift to self-service, and promoting the new service.

### User engagement

Workshops for staff internally provided awareness and training about how the online account and forms worked so that they were able to help customers. This capability was subsequently picked up in annual staff reviews.

Staff were invited to trial the service in a soft launch ahead of the public launch at billing time.

An assisted sign-up trial for landlords took

"As floorwalker, my role was to introduce myself as a benefits officer and reassure the customer that they didn't have to physically see the same benefits officer but that I could assist them in reporting their changes online. Overall it was positive. There were people who really appreciated my help in telling them about the service, especially as I was able to show them how it worked and actually do it for them so they could see for themselves how easy it was."

**Donna Bouzidi, Revenues and Benefits Officer at the time**

“Some of the feedback I had from the customers when they were trying to complete the forms themselves or as I was assisting them was the type of language we were using in some of the questions – our customers were interpreting them differently and I had to explain the questions to them so that was a bit of a negative. But I was able to refer that back to the team and we found a solution and we rephrased the questions so they were more user-friendly and we could also capture the information we needed.”

**Donna Bouzidi, Revenues and Benefits Officer at the time**

place over the summer of 2017 in the civic centre. Landlords were contacted in advance and advised that the paper schedules were to be phased out and that they should sign up online to receive them electronically. Those who were not confident in doing so were invited into the civic centre for help with signing up. Paper schedules were successfully phased out in February 2018.

From November 2017 to January 2018 receptionists in the civic centre ‘triaged’ enquiries and linked people to the floorwalkers who helped them to access the self-service features, showed them what information was available online and explained what services they could apply for or transact with electronically in future.

## Testing

Testing for the initial online forms (moving into or out of Harlow) took place over the summer of 2017. The first stage involved an internal soft launch to test the My Revenues and Benefits service via the intranet, asking staff to sign up for the service and feed back issues.

The floorwalking then provided an opportunity for further testing by taking customers through the self-serve process on four terminals in the self-serve area and gaining feedback on the usability and content of the online forms. Floorwalkers, equipped with iPads, would also intercept people in queues, asking whether they were there for revenues and benefits and, if so, whether they would like to see how they could ‘do that online’. The floorwalker

would then teach the customer how to transact their business via an iPad, phone or one of the self-serve terminals.

The response to this form of engagement and testing was very positive and valuable feedback was gained on content and navigation that was subsequently incorporated into future changes in the forms. For example, floorwalkers found that customers were interpreting questions differently and put forward a strong case for using more simple language.

As a result of the insight gained during the testing, a plan was also put in place, within a subsequent customer service transformation programme, to amend the website design further to help users find and use digital services more easily.

## Promotion

Harlow carried out a wide range of promotion.

### Online, email and TV

- regular posts on Twitter and Facebook
- adverts on the TV screens in the civic centre
- internal intranet engagement with staff to promote the use of automated forms instead of memos
- email signatures and auto email responses amended to encourage sign-up.

### Print and post

- a promotional leaflet announcing the launch of the online forms was included with the 2017/18 council tax and business rate bills delivered to all households and businesses in Harlow
- adverts were placed in the Harlow Princess Alexandra Hospital magazine
- articles were placed in Harlow Times, a council publication that is delivered to every household in Harlow
- promotional posters were placed in prominent locations – for instance, the library and doctors’ surgeries
- landlords were engaged via the monthly landlord schedules.

## Telephone

- a telephone script helped staff to discuss self-service during any related customer conversations
- call waiting phone messages encouraged residents to answer their queries online wherever possible.

## Face-to-face

- customer services staff discussed and promoted the self-service options during any face-to-face customer enquiries
- floorwalking in the civic centre reception
- assisted sign-up for users seen in appointments, on the counter or by floorwalkers
- ongoing work with local third sector support organisations and social

“It is essential for our vulnerable customers that we do provide paper-based forms as and when we need them. It’s a case of each customer is dealt with on his/her merits as we know the vast majority will be able to use the online service, there may be some that can’t and we have to be able to support them too.”

**James Straw, Senior Manager (Benefits)**

landlords to help raise the profile of the service.

## Measurement and performance

In order to baseline existing performance and gauge the project’s success. the measures in the table below are being tracked.

## Digital inclusion

The council was aware that it would be important to ensure an assisted self-service option was available via the civic centre. They also took the approach of encouraging customers to try digital services via the floorwalkers. This was informed by their understanding of the local population and the need to incorporate a variety of channels into their channel shift project to ensure a good uptake and that customers would not be left behind as the council placed increasing emphasis on online self-service.

Furthermore, to cater for those who were held back from using the online service by trepidation or lack of digital skills, the council created a partnership with local adult learning provider, ACL, for either free or subsidised digital courses to improve people’s skills and confidence.

Measure	Baseline	Future measure	Success measure
Face-to-face	Current number of revenues and benefits face-to-face enquiries	Number of revenues and benefit face-to-face enquiries	% reduction in face-to-face enquiries
Telephone	Current number of calls to the revenues and benefits service	Number of revenues and benefit calls received	% reduction in number of calls
Paper bills produced	Number of council tax/business rate bills produced per quarter	Number of paper bills produced per quarter	% reduction in paper bills produced
Housing benefit notifications	Number of paper notifications produced per month	Number of paper notifications produced per month	% reduction in paper notifications
Online accounts	N/A	Number of customers signed up to online access	Tracked alongside 5% target
E-bills/e-notifications	N/A	Number of e-documents created	5% month-on-month increase
Automated transactions	N/A	Number of automated transactions completed	5% month-on-month increase



“This wasn’t always the easiest of challenges. Harlow has a unique history and our users are used to coming in and dealing with us face-to-face or to deal with us on the phone. One the challenges was really to ensure we could work closely with them to show them how easy the services were to use and to explain the benefits to them of using the online services.”

**Simon Pipe, Customer and Media Services Manager**

Project milestones	Planned	Actual	Comments
My Revenues and Benefits (OpenAccess) soft launch	Feb 17	Feb 17	Ability to view council tax and business rates accounts, tenants’ benefit claims and payments soft-launched internally.
Public My Revenues and Benefits launch	Mar 17	Mar 17	Launched on time during annual billing process.
Phase 1 forms (OpenChannel) testing	May 2017	May 2017	Testing of single person council tax discount (SPD) form successful.
Floorwalker trial start	Jun-Jul 17	Nov 17	Pushed back to November to accommodate feedback from testing.
Phase one forms launched	Sep 17	Jul 17	Testing was concluded quickly and the SPD form was launched ahead of schedule.
Expand self-serve facilities	Sep-Nov 17	Ongoing	Now linked with other corporate projects and timescales, including the new customer service transformation.
Phase 2 forms test	Dec 17-Jan 18	Oct 17	Ahead of schedule.
Phase 2 forms launch	Feb 18	Dec 17	Move in/move out forms for moving both into and within the district go live.
Although outside the scope of the project, an online form for applying for discretionary housing payments was also delivered and launched by the project team during this time frame.			

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Contact Harlow at the Civic Centre, is the team serving customers online, by telephone and in person open Monday to Friday from 9am to 4:45pm. Harlow Council is closed on bank holidays.



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**Pay Council bills online**

Alternatively you can pay using the 24 hour, automated telephone payments line: 01279 446600. Or you can pay in person at the Civic Centre.

If you have difficulty paying your Council bills please speak to an Advisor at Contact Harlow in the first instance. There are also a number of other independent organisations that may be able to give advice with not only Council bills but any other bills you may have.

**Report, Book or Apply**

**Report, book or apply**

You can report, book or apply for some things without having to find time to phone or visit us. This saves you time and helps save the Council money. You can use Self Serve for a range of services such as booking green waste or bulky waste collections, applying for allotments or garages and reporting noise or litter.

Also, if you sign up for a Self Serve account you can view the status of some of your reports and your details will be automatically entered in future every time you complete a form, thereby saving you time.

**General enquiries**

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Civic Centre

**Location**



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The online payments service is designed with accessibility in mind which means you will be able to access it from your computer's web browser, your mobile phone, screen readers for the partially sighted or blind or any other web browsing interface.

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View and manage your Council Tax, Benefits, Council Tax Support, Business Rates and Sundry Debt (including Housing Benefit Overpayment) accounts online when you want with a My Revenues and Benefits account.

It is free and easy to register.

For Council Tax, Business Rates and Sundry Debt (including Housing Benefit Overpayment) you just need your account number and an email address.

For Benefits and Council Tax Support you will need your claim number, National Insurance Number and an email address.

If you already have a My Revenues and Benefits account simply login to view your account.

This is best viewed on a laptop or PC.

[Register for My Revenues and Benefits](#)

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## The outcome – successes and challenges

Harlow was targeting a 10 per cent switch to online self-service. This overall level of channel shift has been exceeded in some areas but not reached in others:

- the landlords service has been a resounding success, with 100 per cent of landlords now using online self-service
- housing benefits has also been successful, with 10 per cent of the case load signed up and actively using the service
- council tax, however, has delivered only a 7.5 per cent switch and business rate self-serve adoption has been very low.

The team has found that it is easier to encourage channel shift in services that are used more frequently, such as the landlord and housing benefits services. Whereas council tax, where people receive only one bill a year, does not have such a great ‘time-saving’ incentive to switch as it is less time-consuming for the resident in the first place.

In relation to business rates, the team found that Harlow has many national chains who prefer to deal with business rates on a national basis and are therefore not willing to sign up to a local service.

Feedback from those who made the self-serve switch, however, has been positive. Landlords in particular are enthusiastic users of a service that they can access 24/7 and find the service more useful than the old paper-based system.

With 10 per cent of claimants signing up, the benefits area also exceeded the team’s expectations of take-up and enthusiasm because housing benefit “is an incredibly complex system”. However, clearly there is an appetite for people to have access to their information 24/7.

In the year prior to the project, annual footfall into the civic centre to deal with revenue and

“We are estimating that by the end of March 2019 the number of calls will reduce by approximately 23,000, the number of visits by 4,000. We are seeing a massive spike in the web hits so it’s clear that customers are starting to understand that they can deal with us in a different manner.”

**James Straw, Senior Manager (Benefits)**

benefits was just under 18,000. That dropped in 2017/18 to 16,500 and is on course to drop further, down to 15,000 in 2018/19. This drop has been mirrored by an increase in use of online self-service.

In 2018/19 the service saw increased take-up, across these online services with 42 per cent of customers self-serving overall, with a total of 16,036 logins to the service.

The team has also noted some interesting anecdotal examples of how the system is being used. For example, like many councils, Harlow shuts down between Christmas and the New Year and previously people would not have been to contact the council, check on their accounts, or see when their payments were due. However, there was a spike in online transactions over the period and a rise in online forms completed – showing that people are keen to complete their business with the council even if officers are not there to answer their queries in person.

Another anecdotal example is the ease with which family members, once verified, can help their relatives gain online access at home to their revenues and benefits services.

“When it’s working well it frees up team time and it’s cost effective because we’re not dealing with paper forms.”

**Gayle Bishop, Revenues and Benefits Officer**

## Financial benefits

**A total of £43,879 in notional savings was delivered by the project over the financial year 2017/18, and a further £61,053 in 2018/19.**

However, as the 10 per cent take-up target for self-service across the board was not reached in the first year of activity, the project did not meet its anticipated savings of £53,651 within the original time frame.

This emphasises the difficulty of predicting unknowns and also reflects the discovery during the project of differing behaviours and

needs in different customer segments – for example, the real monthly time-saving incentive for landlords compared to the ‘once a year’ use of council tax.

However, the project has created a solid evidence base, which will feed into Harlow’s new customer services transformation programme and enable the council to make further progress in promoting self-service take-up.

Type of saving	Per transaction calculated by Harlow	Volume 2017/18 and 2018/19	Saving 2017/18 and 2018/19
Postage and printing – notification letters, bills etc.	£1.50 per e-notification	21,811	£32,717
Online SPD forms (539 completed/242 processed automatically)	£1.37 per form processed automatically	242	£332
Online move forms (2,097 completed/863 processed automatically)	£0.46 per form processed automatically	853	£397
Reduction in phone calls	£2.30 per transaction	17,731	£40,781
Reduction in face-to-face enquiries	£11.44 per transaction	2,684	£30,705
Customer time saved: assuming an average waiting/face-to-face time of one hour per enquiry at the rate of the national living wage the team estimates that customers have collectively made notional savings of £10,219 from switching to self-serve.			

## Non-financial benefits

The project team has identified a number of significant, but non-financial, benefits from the project:

**Ease of service access:** customers self-serving via My Revenues and Benefits have access to their account history and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

**Faster decisions:** payment is made faster or the customer has more time to make payments to clear their account, helping to reduce financial hardship. For example, the single person discount processing times for online forms are 6.5 days on average compared with 13.4 days manually. The time taken to process moving in changes reduced from 25.5 days to 5.3 days and to process moving out forms from 25.5 days to 4.5 days on average.

**Officer time:** automation of forms processing has freed officer time to help more vulnerable people and complex cases.

**Improved council reputation:** anecdotal evidence from floorwalking suggests that providing a more flexible and accessible service has enhanced the council's reputation.

**Assisted digital:** online services mean that family members and support organisations are able to provide more effective support and help to residents who need it.

**Experience sharing and learning through participating in the LGA programme:** the team attended a number of LGA workshops and conference calls with other councils which it found helpful.

## Challenges

**Universal Credit:** the timetable for Universal Credit roll-out was changed meaning that the full Universal Credit was launched in July 2017. This unexpected change caused a significant amount of issues and absorbed resources.

**Single sign-on:** a corporate decision regarding a move to single sign-on was delayed because of the complexity of delivering this function across different back-office systems. The team therefore opted to progress without a single sign-on capability in order to meet the project timescales.

“We encountered challenges getting the software up and running and delays in upgrading some of our network servers – which impacted on the project. A corporate decision about single sign-on or not – actually single sign-on is quite complex. We got to a point with the project where we had to make a decision as to whether pursuing a single sign-on was actually going to enable us to go live with the products in time for the annual bills and we decided to go without it because we weren't able to achieve that in the timescale.”

**Donna Beechener, Revenues and Benefits Manager**

**Corporate priorities:** as part of the customer service transformation and review, the civic centre cash office was due to close. However the cash office still remains open. This has had an impact on the project because customers are still going to visit the civic centre. In addition, the project had planned a relocation and expansion of self-serve facilities in the civic centre. However, this became tied in with other corporate objectives during the project time frame and subject to a change in timescales beyond the project team's control. However, a self-serve area was still available to users and was successfully promoted during the project.

**Technology:** the team encountered challenges getting the software up and running and delays in upgrading some network servers which had a negative impact on progress. They also found that they did not have as much control over customising the forms as they had expected and that the workflow automation was more complex than had been suggested. Based on the user experience there was a requirement to simplify language and form navigation which was therefore difficult to achieve.

“We can change the branding and we can change the wording of the questions but in terms of the way the form works our options are currently limited.”

**Toby Bowler, IT systems Administrator and Project Officer**

**Workflow automation failure:** whilst there was flexibility over automating processing this was more complex than expected, such that ‘the most simple things were failing’. The team felt it had no option but to turn much of the automation off as it was taking more time to fix the issues caused by poor automation than the previous manual process had required. This had an obvious impact on delivering efficiency savings.

**Keeping it simple:** the team felt that the forms they were implementing had been designed based on council tax legislation. This was not helpful in terms of customising the forms to meet local need.

For example, when someone completes a moving out form there is a question on the form asking who is moving into the property. In brackets it says ‘if you don’t know please leave this blank’. But people do not always understand and will enter ‘Don’t know’. Unfortunately the system then creates a council tax account for Mr Don’t Know and unless accounts are checked manually a council tax bill gets raised for Mr Don’t Know. “It should be a simple solution to solve but this has not proved to be the case.”

“The forms are very reliant on people filling them in correctly which has proved quite difficult. The two main sources we get information from – we have a request for information form and a change of address form and they carry quite a lot of information in the paper version of it and the online forms just haven’t collected the same quality of information. So it does involve a lot of checking and going back to people who have registered because we’re just not collecting the quality of information.”

**Gayle Bishop, Revenues and Benefits Officer**

## Key learning points

**Don't underestimate complexity:** software providers often advise that issues are easy, but actually due to the local environment these can be complex – for example, single sign-on and security.

**Internal skills:** in future, if in-house skills exist or can be developed, the team would recommend in-house development rather than the use of external products. “Whilst not always feasible it provides more control over the service you provide.”

**Leverage supplier project management:** ensure that you have supplier project manager support throughout the entire project, and make sure that both sides understand the expectation.

**Get a full understanding of everything you are purchasing:** the team encountered issues relating to different processing approaches between the generic product and local practice.

**Digital-by-default is not always appropriate:** the introduction of Universal Credit, a central government digital-by-default service, has proven to the team that some customers are not capable of dealing with things digitally. It has reinforced Harlow's belief that choice of access should always be available and people should not be compelled to transact online.

**Capacity planning:** the project was adversely affected by annual billing runs and annual holidays. More contingency time should be built into schedules to accommodate known events.

**User research and testing:** engagement and testing are essential and should be done as much and as soon as possible. For example, through user engagement it was found that one of the barriers to some customers accessing services was low literacy. This in turn impacted the council's ability to implement automated services. This understanding of local demographics was vital to the success of the project.

“Try and use the supplier's project manager as much as you can. It was noticeable the drop in support we got and our confidence with the implementation thereafter, once that project manager role had ended.”

**Toby Bowler, IT systems Administrator and Project Officer**

“Don't think of it as efficiency savings but think of it as moving resources across so that you are supporting those people that will otherwise fall through the cracks – so essentially you are providing a better service all round. That's what we should be doing.”

**James Straw, Senior Manager (Benefits)**

## Next steps

A new customer service transformation programme has started, which will address the issues discovered during this project, and leverage the insight and learning which have been gained on promoting channel shift. For example, the website is to be redesigned to help users find and use digital services more easily, and self-service will be introduced to other council departments and services.

The revenue and benefits service is currently hosting a product called OpenAccess, developed in 2003 which in technology terms is significantly dated and has impacted project delivery. The service is therefore now planning to upgrade to Civica's new OpenPortal product. This should provide the capability to deliver more personalised information and notifications to customers including, for example, payment reminders.

The project has highlighted the importance of conducting user research and testing to understand the needs of the local population when redesigning a service. As a result of this engagement, Harlow Council is exploring working in partnership with the county council to offer more digital skills training locally.

Following on from the success of the floorwalking pilot, there is an appetite for providing a permanent floorwalking self-service champion. However, as a result of staffing issues and the start of a new customer service transformation programme, this is still to be decided.

"We have a project which is part of the customer service board which is looking to replace the website – brand new starting from scratch – and that should be up and running in summer 2019."

**Simon Pipe, Customer and Media Services Manager**

## Contact for further information

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