Delivering excellent online forms

Waverley Borough Council undertook an ambitious project in 2017 to upgrade all existing online forms to drive channel shift – delivering £94,000 in savings, an 11.4 per cent reduction in calls, a 19.9 per cent shift to self-service and a 12 per cent increase in online payments over the following year.

Digital Channel Shift Programme case study

The issue and context

Waverley Borough Council has a track record in providing high-quality online services. In 2016 it was awarded Best Shire District Website in the SOCITM Better Connected Awards following the launch of its mobile-responsive website the previous year which focused on improving 'top tasks' making these easier to use by citizens.

However, the council is committed to continuously improving its website and customer services in order to meet the needs of its residents. A key priority in 2016 was to review, redesign and deliver fully mobile-responsive online forms for a range of services. To this end it applied to the LGA's Digital Channel Shift Programme for funding to support its plans to upgrade all online forms and develop digital services that are simpler, clearer and faster to use. The overriding goal was twofold:

- to deliver excellent online customer self-services to encourage residents to transact more online

- to create more efficient processes reducing both avoidable contact and costs.

Historically, the council's online forms had been developed in isolation from the website, with little input from the main website team. This had resulted in a range of existing forms that:

- were not written in plain English

- used a lot of jargon

- were not tested for usability

- were not customer-focused.

"This project is important as it fits in with our priorities around customer service. What we're interested in doing is making sure that our customer service fits the needs of our local residents and businesses at a time when of course we're all under quite a lot of financial constraints and increasing demands. If customers are getting what they want in an easier and quicker way then that's a win all the way round."

Tom Horwood, Chief Executive

This lack of usability was reflected in extremely low submission rates in a number of service areas. Overall, submission rates after viewing a form ranged from 15 per cent to just 42 per cent, ie at best less than one in two people visiting a form actually completed it.

Work had already begun on addressing the use of online forms and the council had already seen positive results from a new council tax

"One of the areas that was running successfully in the council was where we had existing web form interaction. When the opportunity came around to make further inroads into that area we wanted to take – it is a growth area for the future and something we wanted to build on as we matured our customer services offer."

David Allum, Head of Customer and Corporate Services

## Digital Channel Shift Programme

The work at Waverley Borough 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.

form, including a significant reduction in the number of calls to that service.

For example, in March 2016 new online forms for council tax were successfully introduced, delivering a subsequent 24 per cent decrease in call volumes:
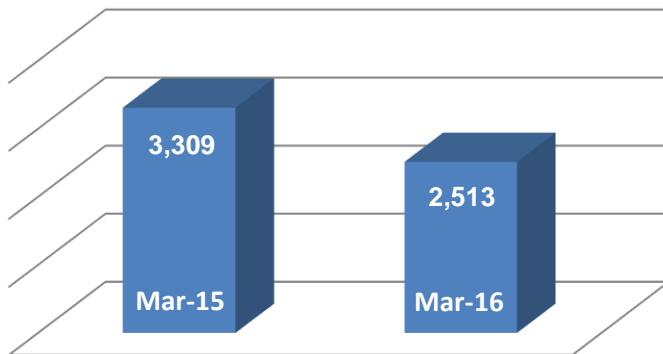
In 2016 Waverley received 574,000 calls relating to service requests.

By redesigning and improving its online form offering, the council believed that it could deliver a 10 per cent reduction in call volumes across the board. Channel shift at this level would ultimately deliver £153,000 in savings per year.

Given the council's concurrent plans to upgrade its legacy systems in planning, licensing and building control, the intention was to integrate the online forms wherever possible into back-office systems.

The LGA funding was to be used to fund a temporary post that would focus on:

- mapping customer journeys – setting up workshops with internal clients and reviewing the current forms

- setting up new forms using the council's new mobile-responsive platform

- testing forms to make sure they worked for the customer

- undertaking usability testing with customers to identify any improvements.

"The challenge we had was like all councils we have decreasing resources, increasing public expectation at the same time. Customers expect to be able to do things online – we all do in our own time, we expect to be able to interact with whatever services we want to interact with via their website and get either the same or hopefully a better level of service by doing so than by having to come into the building or phoning up."

Robin Taylor, Head of Policy and Governance

The project objectives and targets

Waverley Borough Council planned to upgrade all its existing online forms by the end of December 2017 and to set up new ones by March 2018 in order to develop digital services that were simpler, clearer and faster to use.

The aim was to provide excellent online customer self-service capabilities and encourage more residents to transact with the council online. By driving people towards self-service the council would be able to work more efficiently and thereby reduce both avoidable contact and costs.

Waverley was aware of its ageing and diverse population and was keen to improve customer services by providing the self-serve option for those that 'expect to be able to do things online' at a time convenient to them.

Targets:

The targets were to:

- upgrade existing forms by December 2017

- create all new forms by March 2018

- increase the percentage of online forms started and submitted with an aim to meet 50 per cent submission rates for 80 per cent of forms

- to save £153,000 per annum based on a target of channel shifting 10 per cent of calls to online transactions – calculated on the following basis:

  o 10 per cent reduction in the 574,000 phone calls to the council in 2016

  o typical cost per call £2.83 (source: SOCITM)

  o typical cost per online transaction £0.15 (source: SOCITM).

- increase customer satisfaction with council services measured through Waverley's citizens panel surveys.

The approach and progress to date

When the council's original online forms had been produced the approach had been to 'take what was there in a paper or PDF form and recreate it'. This new project allowed the process to be revisited and redesigned to make the forms much more user-friendly and to underpin usage figures and customer journeys with Google Analytics.

Therefore, in addition to creating new forms, the project aimed to review and redesign existing forms in the following service areas: benefits, building control, car parks, communities, council tax, elections, environmental health, environmental services, housing, corporate forms, licensing, parks and leisure, and planning.

This would involve engagement with both internal and external users on a wide range of subject matters.

The project started in March 2017 with an initial three-phase delivery plan to March 2018. Due to some initial teething problems with the technology this was revised into a five-phase approach leaving the bulk of new forms until the final phase.

To deliver on time the team would need to standardise the process of engagement with the multitude of services needing either upgraded or new forms.

In order to improve accessibility and online transactions, the team developed a project plan aimed at improving the look, feel and usability of the forms and at reviewing the customer

> "We started in March and the initial first phase was due to go live in June but we had a few teething problems so that got delayed slightly.
>
> "The second phase was due in November, third phase in December and because the old forms were being switched off at the end of December that was our drop-dead date for moving all of the other forms. After December we focused on any new requests and internal forms."
>
> **Vanessa de Chazal, Website Manager**

> "We have a diverse customer base and so it is really important that we meet their needs at a time when actually our resources are getting tighter and tighter. It's important that we use the technology that we have already got, and that we listen to what our customer preferences are and then deliver products and services that meet those needs now and in the coming years."
>
> **Tom Horwood, Chief Executive**

journeys and interactions for specific services. Key elements of the plan were to:

- start with the high transaction volume services, meet service managers and web editors to define processes and key customer journeys in order to identify any gaps

- use analytics and feedback from customers and organise usability testing on key journeys where digital content existed, to identify areas for improvement

- use feedback from the usability testing to rewrite the web pages and create new mobile-responsive forms with any required integrations, in consultation with service representatives

- carry out usability testing on new customer journeys and tweak accordingly

- promote the council's online offering through appropriate communications channels.

As part of a wider customer service improvement and transformation initiative the project had the support of, and reported to, Waverley's strategic director for finance and resources.

Following advice from the LGA's productivity team, governance procedures were further strengthened with submission of monthly reports to the council's senior management team highlighting the project's progress, risks and issues.

User engagement and testing

The residents and businesses of Waverley – the people who live and work in the borough – are the ultimate users of the council's online services.

However, the Waverley staff who process requests and payments and deliver services are also users.

It was important that the forms and processes worked for both types of user in a seamless customer journey that was integrated into back-office service delivery wherever possible.

Both types of user therefore needed to be engaged and involved in the project in order to successfully upgrade or create each form, and the project team developed a range of different approaches depending on the type of form they were working on.

For example, when working on the new forms for council tax:

- volunteers working in the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) were asked to test the forms

- managers in the internal council tax team were engaged to design the scanning and processing of forms into the Civica council tax system

- three rounds of testing and making improvements were undertaken before the forms went live

- ongoing feedback is monitored via the forms and council tax officers, with tweaks made as an iterative process.

> "Wherever possible we did try to get external people involved with the user testing – one of the teams I worked closely with was licensing and we were able to get some drivers to test the taxi forms. Also with the temporary event form which, as you can imagine can be a quite a complex form, we tried wherever possible to get people externally to test it."
>
> **Henry Ascoli, Website & Digital Media Officer**

In another example, when creating new forms

> "A lot of the time you'd get the form created quite quickly but then you'd go through a lot of processes of testing and finding out how you could fine-tune that form, and that's probably the most valuable thing that we did."
>
> **Henry Ascoli, Website & Digital Media Officer**

for taxi licensing:

- relevant officers in licensing were engaged to explore the process and customer journey

- first round testing and iteration were completed internally

- taxi drivers from Waverley and another borough were invited to test these forms

- iterative changes were made as required following testing.

Once a form has gone live users are invited to feed back on the process by giving a star rating or commenting at the end of the application.

These feedback mechanisms are closely monitored and if a form starts to receive negative feedback the testing and tweaking process restarts to identify and resolve issues. Indeed, the culture within the team is to see negative feedback as an opportunity to improve the form further.

Meanwhile the individual services have successfully been encouraged to take 'ownership' of their forms and to come forward with ideas for improving the process or refining data capture.

Communications and promotion

The project team recognised that driving behaviour change both internally and with end-users would be a continuous process of awareness and reinforcement. An ongoing communications campaign was designed to promote self-service and the new online services as they became available.

External

Once forms went live all references to old forms were deleted and final usability testing was undertaken. When the project team was satisfied that the forms were working to the

required standard, the new services were promoted via social media and in the council magazines, including Your Waverley for all residents and the Waverley Homes and People magazine for council tenants.

The plan was to run separate campaigns for individual services targeting users as appropriate. For example:

- encouraging residents to sign up to pay their council tax by direct debit online: this featured in council magazines, in the online magazine and in a social media campaign promoting the option during January 2018
- engaging with taxi drivers to encourage them to use the new taxi licensing forms: the licensing team encouraged and helped drivers as they saw them to complete applications online.

Meanwhile contact details on the council website – email addresses and direct phone numbers – have been removed for tasks where an online form is available. And customer service teams advise customers ringing in that they can complete tasks online.

Internal

Monthly reports are sent to the portfolio holder for the online forms project and the senior management team receives regular information on uptake, progress, feedback received and areas identified for further improvement.

Analytics are being used to audit and review how customers access and use the website and the online forms. There are also regular meetings with managers, customer service representatives and communications officers from each service, to ensure that:

- all staff are directing people to the relevant sections of the website and that all service-based communications direct people to do things online
- key services requested by phone or in person are available via online forms.

A rolling series of meetings with all relevant heads of service provide feedback on transactions made online and identify forms that are or are not being used, cross-referencing with telephone and email data to identify further opportunities for online transactions.

"Those people who use the online forms that we've improved have given them good feedback – we've got 4 out 5 stars now from people using our online forms and also we give people the opportunity to specifically feed back on that form and we've followed up where people have given us specific ideas we've then improved the forms."

Robin Taylor, Head of Policy and Governance

Technology

A Firmstep forms solution had been in use at the council for some time and the original forms had been developed using this platform. The toolset simplifies development of online forms and enables configuration of workflow processes. Where possible, it can also be integrated into, for example, the council's payment system or service back-office systems.

Unfortunately the version of Firmstep that the council was using was due to be retired by the end of December 2017, which placed a hard-stop on project deadlines.

The team also encountered issues at the start of the project, mainly due to insufficient training and support from the supplier to set up the forms, workflows and testing environment properly. These issues were resolved but slowed progress at the outset.

Team members, including the new digital customer experience officer, received training on the platform and the council is now self-

"We used an old version of Firmstep forms that was being retired by the end of December 2017, so we had a big deadline to recreate all of the forms.

"Historically they weren't always written from a customer perspective and weren't that easy to fill in. We used this as an opportunity to assess whether those forms were required and also rewrite them from a customer perspective and make sure they were written in plain English."

Vanessa de Chazal, Website Manager

sufficient in creating and testing forms. A steep learning curve saw creation of a template approach to common elements across all forms, for example standard user registration and contact details, which significantly sped up the process.

Monitoring data

Monthly statistics for each council service are maintained, including:

- phone calls
- web visits
- online forms statistics.

An annual citizens' panel survey is undertaken with residents every November. In future this will provide comparable information, but as the project spans two survey periods direct comparison will not immediately be available.

The intention was to monitor and compare submission rates on the forms. However the project team has encountered issues with differing monitoring methods.

The old Firmstep platform provided statistics on the number of forms started versus the number of forms completed – a feature not available in the new version of the product. The team is therefore now using Siteimprove analytics to capture this information for the new Firmstep forms.

Project milestones	Planned	Actual	Comments
Recruit digital customer experience officer for six months	May 17	May 17	Internal secondee.
Set up Firmstep environment for new form creation, testing and publication	May 17	Jul 17	The environment that had been set up was not fit for purpose and there was no test site. The team was trained at the end of June 2017 but were unable to progress as quickly as they would have liked. A long time was spent working out the best way of setting up and testing the forms.
Phase 1 forms: - 8 x council tax - 6 x environmental health - 16 x environmental services - 3 x parking	Jun 17	Sep 17	It took a lot longer to set up the forms environment and processes for working than anticipated. User testing, making changes and getting sign-off also took longer than anticipated.
Phase 2 forms: - 10 x housing - 8 x licensing	Sep 17	Nov 17	Recognised a need to improve internal processes before working on two complex housing forms – these were moved to Phase 5.
Phase 3 forms: - 8 x planning - 7 x building control - 8 x corporate forms	Oct 17	Dec 17	Delays in final sign-off on a number of forms – see challenges.
Phase 4 forms: - 1 x elections - 4 x leisure and parks - 2 x communities - 16 x internal forms	Nov 17	Jan 18	Delays in Phase 3 impacted on timescales in Phase 4 and 5.
Phase 5 forms: - 7 x new forms	Jan 18	Mar 18	Delays in Phase 3 impacted on timescales in Phase 4 and 5.

The outcome – successes and challenges

The project has covered enormous scope and delivered against tough deadlines. It is viewed internally as a great success, delivering:

- £94,000 savings
- 11.4 per cent reduction of calls
- 19.9 per cent increase in online transactions over 2017 and 2018
- 12 per cent increase in online payments

Between 2017 and 2018 Waverley Borough Council has delivered an 11.4 per cent reduction in the number of phone calls coming into the council's service centres – ahead of its targeted 10 per cent for the project.

The council has also seen an increase in the number of online forms submitted – a rise of nearly 20 per cent over the last two years as more people choose to self-serve using the new and upgraded online forms.

There has also been a 12 per cent increase in the number of online payments made with service transactions incurring fees or payments.

Average customer satisfaction ratings now run at 4.4 out of five stars.

Financial benefits

The council delivered savings of just under £94,000 in the first twelve months.

An 11.4 per cent reduction in phone calls coming into the council in calendar year 2018 compared to 2017 gave a saving of £73,445.

The figures have been calculated using SOCITM cost figures of £2.83 per call, minus the cost of a web transaction (£0.15), and a reduction of 27,405 calls to 212,144 in 2018 compared to 239,549 in 2017.

> "We have the web forms done, so they are now much more accessible to the public and we're beginning to see the impact of how they are being used which is going to be important going forward as we think about things that aren't currently automated."
>
> **David Allum, Head of Customer and Corporate Services**

> "The main benefit for the council is that it's a more efficient way of managing customer interaction. We're no longer spending as much staff time responding to queries – it's automated so this clearly frees up resource to do other things."
>
> **David Allum, Head of Customer and Corporate Services**

In addition, two officers in council tax services were freed up to review and improve service delivery instead of answering phone calls. This avoided the need to provide additional resource at a cost of £20,283 pro rata.

Non-financial benefits

Lessons, new skills learnt and experience gained during the project will be used to inform and improve future channel shift projects. This is a real benefit for the council and leaves it better placed to do more with the forms product, including linking into back-end systems.

The learning process has identified new areas for potential innovation and improvement as the council moves forward in its customer services transformation.

It has made it easier for customers to report issues and apply for services online, and then to order and pay for council services. And for

New form submissions from Aug 2017:
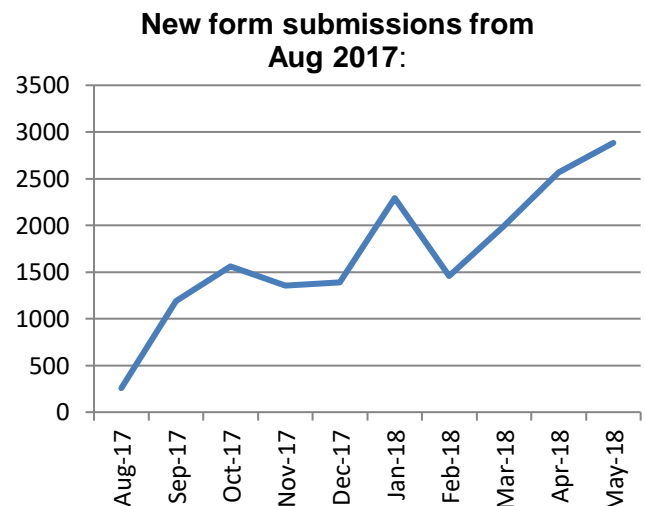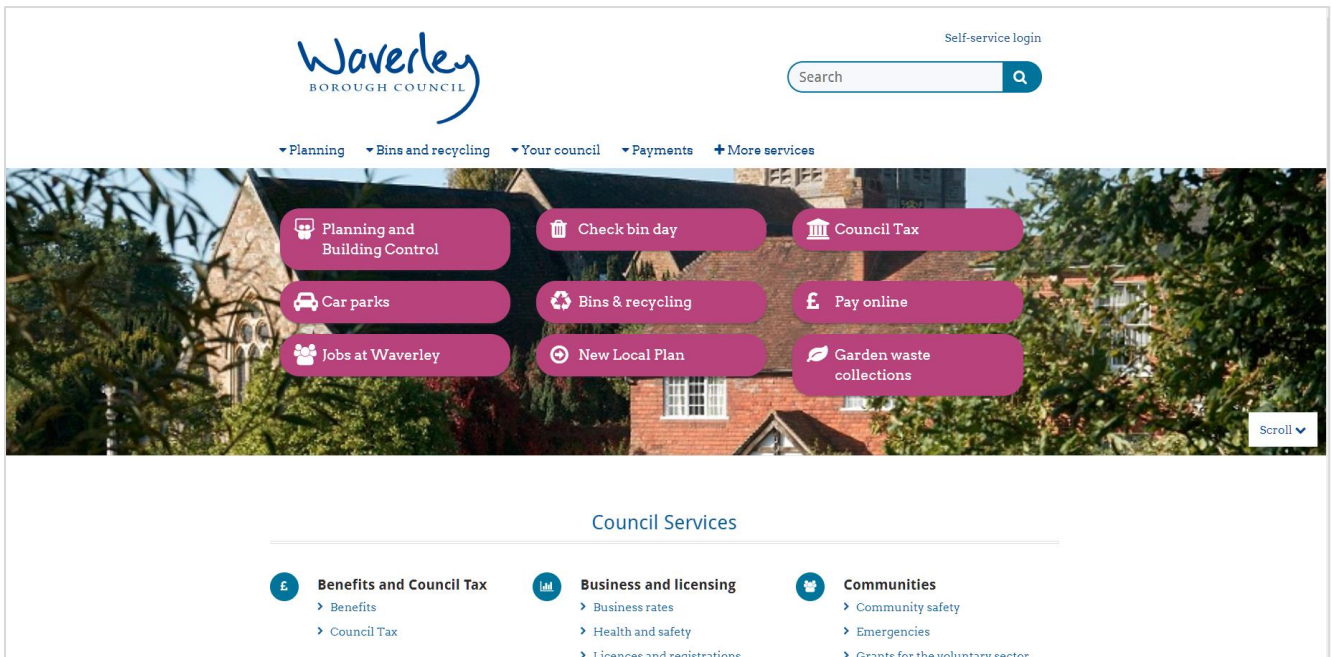
those customers that prefer to call, the project has helped to reduce call waiting times.

Strong relationships have been built between service areas and other teams, breaking down the traditional silo cultures.

The council tax service has been able to embark on an 18-month review of service delivery and systems integration thanks to the reduction in administration time.

Feedback suggests that the council's reputation as a provider of modern, 24/7, online services has been raised with residents. As of December 2017, average customer satisfaction sat at 4.4 out of five stars.

Staff can now devote more time to helping those customers who need more support.

Challenges

A key challenge for the project was making sure that it had buy-in from all the services involved and staff. Some resistance was encountered at the prospect of examining existing processes for improvement opportunities and reassurance was needed to help highlight that this was a process of continuous improvement – that the project 'was taking a set of services that provide a good customer service and just making them even better'. However, as soon as the first batch of forms went live and generated higher volumes

of online submissions, the evidence was there to prove how the process can really drive improvement.

A related issue, which delayed the live roll-out of forms, was getting time from service representatives to test and sign them off. The project team started forward planning and booking in appointments for the relevant people to test forms in order to get back on schedule.

The complexity of some of the forms, for specialist service areas, had also been underestimated in the original project plan. For example, the temporary event notice form took longer to get right than anticipated.

The LGA grant funded a temporary digital customer experience officer, with the initial six-month secondment due to finish on 4 December 2017, by which time the final phase of forms would not be completed due to the initial delays. This was remedied by a two-month contract extension.

Technical issues were encountered during the project relating to the Firmstep software. For example, PDF attachments on forms started disappearing. This was fixed but the forms provider could not explain how this had happened. Other issues encountered included address fields not populating, email confirmations not being received and difficulty integrating the payments solution. To help track

and fix future issues, if these occurred, the provider was asked to enable proper audit trails on forms and processes. However, these technical issues meant that testing and making changes to forms took longer than expected and the sign-off of some forms was delayed.

The tight deadline imposed on the project in response to the proposed retirement of the old Firmstep platform was challenging in light of the technical issues encountered. However, Firmstep pushed back the retirement until the 5 February 2018.

"Upskilling for the comms team and some of my team has happened throughout the project. They are definitely more skilful now than at the start. This is a real benefit for the council and makes us feel better placed to do more within the product and to do more with linking into back-end systems than we ever were before."

Linda Frame, IT Manager

Key learning points

Get buy-in from all involved. Working with the services is very important and it is essential to get their buy-in from the outset because resistance can act as a brake on delivery. It is essential to create enthusiasm and the willingness to make change happen in order to explore existing and potential processes and improvement opportunities.

Understand that each service within the council is specialist and slightly different. There will be commonalities in service delivery and process requirements, but you cannot have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach – so tailor your approach to different service areas/forms.

Do not go into every meeting expecting the process to be exactly the same. Retain flexibility and draw on the common elements, but appreciate that 'this one might involve a little bit more work'.

Testing the forms with both end users and internal service staff is absolutely invaluable. Test, iterate and test again. Everything can be improved and ongoing feedback monitoring is important, as is identifying and agreeing product owners in the services that can keep track of legislation or service changes that require form updates.

Managing expectations and setting deadlines with internal customers is key. They need to understand the processes and timescales involved in setting up and testing the forms and the time commitment they must give to getting the end result right. Agreeing this process at the outset keeps delivery on track.

Having a multi-skilled team worked very well. The team had a mix of content and technical

"It's key to have buy-in from senior management, but you also need buy-in from the staff to be able to succeed, because if there is resistance from the services then it's really hard to make progress. You really need their feedback, for them to tell you what their processes are and suggest improvements. You need their buy-in and willingness to make it happen."

Vanessa de Chazal, Website Manager

skills that complemented each other to deliver the best outcomes possible. Building and extending those skills during the project will be of real benefit to the council moving forwards.

In light of the technical issues encountered in setting up the Firmstep environment it would have been cost-effective to request that the supplier set up all test / live sites and configured workflow properly at the start. A couple of days' consultancy and subsequent training would have been beneficial.

Do not be seen as an IT project. Creating a customer-focused and service-led approach was core to gaining buy-in across the services.

Be ambitious. The team initially felt that the task was too big and the technical deadlines too short, but by successfully delivering this project the team has gained confidence in the deliverability of new complex projects.

"Be ambitious. We looked at this initially and thought the task is huge and are we going to manage it, are we going to cope with it. Just have the ambition and by completing this project we can now see the customer services project and future projects as achievable."

Linda Frame, IT Manager

Next steps

This project has been one of the enablers for a new customer transformation programme within the council to create a service model which costs less in the future but delivers a better customer service. This is a much wider project focussed on improving the customer journey and integrating processes into back-office systems to give one view of the customer.

Supported by new political leadership and a new management board, Waverley has now embarked on this two-year customer services programme which is expected to deliver significant savings. Digital transformation and channel shift are key elements.

Meanwhile, the housing service is looking at ways to further streamline processes and add value by integrating back-end systems with the Firmstep platform and enable housing tenants to check their housing rent account online.

"The customer service project has been something we have wanted to do for a number of years. Because we have already done this channel shift work in terms of the forms, that's been an enabler as we've proven that we can do it and we've been successful – so we're now starting that journey through the whole customer services transformation project."

Linda Frame, IT Manager

"It is important for public services to recognise that the customers themselves are on a journey – their preferences are changing and technology is changing – and we have got to work with them and respond to that as well."

Tom Horwood, Chief Executive

"The LGA funding has been an important catalyst to our overall customer service and channel shift journey which we were really just at the start of. It has given us the platform from which to work, we have taken all of our online forms, made sure they are working and we've taken a number of processes that weren't online and put them online. What we haven't done is reengineer many of our processes but actually having gone through this process we now as an organisation have more confidence in what channel shift means for us – and that's got us ready for the much more ambitious customer service programme we're starting now."

Robin Taylor, Head of Policy and Governance

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