



## Digital Experts Programme

### Christchurch and East Dorset online licencing project report

#### The project objectives and targets

Since forming a partnership in 2010, Christchurch and East Dorset Councils have carried out a shared services review, which has included an analysis of the partnership's digital services to understand the demographics of their customers, the technologies they are using and therefore what can and cannot be delivered online.

One area of high demand and volume, with the majority of the process being handled offline, was licences. Historically, customers had two options:

- All licences were offered via the dorsetforyou website in PDF format, supported by information on how to apply. Customers had to download, print and complete their application by hand before posting it back to the partnership with their payment. A council officer then keyed the information into the licencing system and the finance team dealt with the payment.
- For some licences, such as temporary event notices (TENs), there was the option to apply and pay through the GOV.UK site. Although this route offered an end-to-end process for the customer, it still required the completion of an online PDF form (saving and then submitting). The licencing team would receive an email containing the data, which had to be re-keyed into the licencing system. Meanwhile, the financial element of the transaction, although arriving electronically, involved the finance team in carrying out a reconciliation to allocate the payment to the correct cost centre.

The process therefore took up a considerable amount of customer time and effort, potentially delaying the decision to grant a licence. At the same time, officers were spending a considerable amount of time re-keying data, while the finance team's need to reconcile payments added no value from a customer perspective.

Christchurch and East Dorset therefore bid for the LGA's Digital Experts funding to help introduce a solution that would offer customers full online functionality to apply and pay for licences via the dorsetforyou site.

The investment would allow the partnership to acquire software that would enable the creation of front-end forms (the customer view) which linked to the councils' existing business and payment systems. Initially, the partnership planned to buy specific licencing software, but on reflection they decided to opt for a more corporate platform that could be used in the future for other applications, thereby avoiding the piecemeal purchase of individual front-end solutions.

Christchurch and East Dorset anticipated a range of outcomes from the project, including:

#### *Customer benefits*

- Customers would be able to apply and pay online in one transaction, receiving immediate confirmation that their application had been registered.
- Through the online functionality, key groups such as taxi drivers could book an appointment for an interview, pay electronically rather than in cash, and upload all their relevant documentation in advance so that it could be checked before their visit.

#### *Partnership benefits*

- A considerable saving in officer time would accrue through the move to online processing, allowing licencing officers to spend more time with customers and finance staff to reduce the amount of reconciliation.
- Cost savings of around £11,000 per annum would also come from the removal of the support and maintenance charges for the current system.
- The new functionality would support greater mobile working by enabling officers to update applications and enter further information on location.
- The system could be extended in the future beyond the focus on taxi and private hire licences, annual fees, TENs and street collections to beach huts, moorings and dinghy park spaces, all of which require an annual licence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The original bid mentioned street collections but their volume is small and they have not been a priority in the initial stages of the project. On the other hand, it was discovered that the workflow for annual fees has already been mostly configured in the back-office system, and their volume is large, so they were brought into the project scope

The project was expected to be completed by January 2016, with the PDF application forms being removed where appropriate as each online licence went live.

## The progress to date

The partnership experienced a considerable amount of change during 2015, in particular with the roll-out to all staff of technology aimed at supporting more flexible and remote working. This limited the resources available in the Organisational Development and ICT teams and pushed other projects down the priority list. As a result of this and other factors, the Digital Experts work was delayed.<sup>2</sup>

However, by late March 2016, the partnership had procured, installed and started configuring a software solution that would allow for the application and renewal of licences online. Work had been completed on the TENS, vehicle licences and annual fees up to the point of testing the integration to the payment system.

Meanwhile the partnership had gone live with online statutory registers, which detail all licences issued by the two councils. Previously the registers had been held in the form of an Excel document, supported by publicly-available hard copies in reception areas, all of which were time-consuming to produce and out-of-date as soon as they were published. The new live lists are always up to date.

During April 2016, work proceeded on integration with the payment system. However, this proved more difficult than anticipated. At one point, for instance, the front-office system accepted a test payment, confirmed acceptance and passed the money into the payment system, but to the wrong account. And when payment integration was finally achieved, it was found that other elements of the solution had been knocked out of alignment.

Work on addressing the various technical and process issues continued over the summer and included consideration of:

- Whether DBS checks for taxi licences could be done online<sup>3</sup>
- How the system would distinguish between the two different councils
- How permissions would work for people or organisations who wished to comment on a TEN.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the partnership had originally hoped to make use of an existing system, employed by the Environmental Health team, as a solution for licensing, but this did not prove possible

<sup>3</sup> Applicants for hackney carriage or private hire driver's licences must obtain a disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) both for new licences and for renewals

A live date for launching online TENs, annual fees and taxi licences was now set for early October 2016. In the event, the TENs and annual fees went live as anticipated, but vehicle licences only went online in both councils in early-mid November and driver licences went live at the end of that month. By the 28 November, the councils had received 33 TEN applications and 1 annual fee renewal online.

Legally, councils have to enable people to apply on paper for temporary event notices if they wish. However, the partnership no longer makes the forms available online in PDF format and now expect people to complete an electronic application, only supplying a PDF or paper form if someone specifically requests it. The partnership's customer services team is also set up to support visiting customers to complete the applications online, where previously they would have been given a paper form. All annual fee applications are now handled online.

## The outcome – challenges and key learning points

The Digital Experts project in Christchurch and East Dorset faced a number of challenges from which other councils can learn.

### *Balancing resources*

Like other councils which are undertaking a wide range of transformation work, Christchurch and East Dorset found it difficult to balance their resources across their different projects. The Digital Experts project suffered from having to compete, for instance, with parallel work on implementing flexible and mobile working.

This underlines the importance of councils maintaining a strategic overview of their different projects through an appropriate top-level programme governance structure, both to ensure that each project gets the resources it requires to meet its objectives and timescales and also to understand the interdependencies and pressure points. It also underlines the necessity to have constant involvement from senior-level decision-makers, so that individual project managers are fully supported to resolve any resources issues.

### *Resolving technical issues*

Some of the technical elements of the project, in particular integration with the payment system, proved much more complicated and time-consuming than originally anticipated. The project was also set back by the inability of the existing Environmental Health system to meet the needs of licencing, as the team had originally hoped.

The partnership was also frustrated by their lack of knowledge and ability to change the intricate details of the various systems they wished to link together. This put them in a weak position to solve problems or influence the direction of remedial work and left them dependent on their suppliers (who had their own internal priorities) to resolve the technical issues.

Technical challenges are always likely to arise in projects such as these, and suppliers can always be expected to know their systems better than their clients do. There are, however, ways of mitigating these risks:

- By taking a realistic view of a project's likely timescale. In retrospect, Christchurch and East Dorset may have been over-optimistic in some of their initial assumptions.
- By having contingency plans in place from the outset in case a particular piece of technology does not perform as expected or proves difficult to integrate into other elements of the overall solution.
- By ensuring the Senior Responsible Officer is kept up to speed on any problems so that they can help in discussions with the suppliers if necessary.
- By drawing, where possible, on independent expertise and advice – for instance, from other councils that have pursued a similar path.

## Where next?

Now that major elements of the project have gone live, the partnership will be collecting data on online usage in order to analyse take-up, improvements in customer service and internal efficiency gains.

Experience from other projects suggests that there are a number of areas where cost savings can be achieved, including from:

- The shift in contact from more expensive face-to-face or telephone contact to cheaper online channels
- Administrative savings from staff no longer having to manually enter or re-key data
- Other process efficiencies such as reduction in the costs involved in cheque processing or in printing forms to send out to customers.

In total the new system is expected to handle volumes in the region of:

- 400 annual licence renewals
- 750 driver and car licences for taxis and private hire vehicles (renewed on a three-year cycle)
- Anywhere between 1500 and 2000 TENs per annum.

The aim is gradually to extend the system to cover other processes. For instance, bringing in street collections and licences for beach huts, dinghy park and mooring spaces (currently processed offline) would add around another 850 transactions and therefore increase the partnership's efficiency savings as well as significantly improve the customer's experience.

The LGA plans to keep in touch with Christchurch and East Dorset as they continue their Digital Experts work.

## Contact for further information

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