



Improvement

# Customer led transformation programme

## Case study – Fylde Borough Council

### Customer led e-service solutions

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## The Customer Led Transformation Programme

Fylde's work has been funded under the Customer Led Transformation programme. The fund aims to embed the use of Customer Insight and Social Media tools and techniques as strategic management capabilities across the public sector family in order to support Place-Based working.

The Customer Led Transformation programme is overseen by the Local Government Delivery Council (supported by Local Government Improvement and Development).

The fund was established specifically to support collaborative working between local authorities and their partners focused on using customer insight and social media tools and techniques to improve service outcomes. These approaches offer public services bodies the opportunity to engage customers and gather insight into their preferences and needs, and thereby provide the evidence and intelligence needed to redesign services to be more targeted, effective and efficient.

## About Fylde

Fylde is a coastal borough in north-west Lancashire, (close to Blackpool) one of twelve districts in the county. It has a geographical area of 166 square kilometres with the main population base residing in the coastal resorts of Lytham and St. Annes. The administrative base of the council is located in St. Annes and the coastal towns are popular retirement and second home locations.

The population of the borough in 2007 was 76,400 and is expected to continue rising, having increased by 2,400 between 2001 and 2006. In 2007 almost 23 per cent of Fylde residents were over the age of 65 which is significantly higher than the Lancashire average (17 per cent) and the North-West and England average (16 per cent).

Fylde is a relatively affluent borough and many of the residents are retired professionals, who are highly articulate and demand high quality services. The quality of the local environment is a high priority and the local population is very active when it comes to engaging in the local community. The borough is statistically one of the safest areas to live in the country and although lower than the regional average, the fear of crime remains a local issue.

## Background

Using funding from the Customer-Led Transformation programme, Fylde Council has researched, designed and developed a range of 'E-Services Solutions' including the Fylde Forum. The Forum is a customer-led online facility that provides users with a gateway to information and access to services from a range of local service providers – as well as the knowledge, insight and views of other forum members.

The online solutions have been designed around insight generated by a target customer group (older active residents), and seeks to offer customers a single point of access to both 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs) and a discussion forum relating to services from across the Total Place footprint. Hence, in addition to accessing information from public bodies, users also benefit from contributions – including views, opinions and advice – input by other users.



The service has been designed with ease of access and use, as a priority. Customers can log in to the forum and FAQs using existing identity services from Google, Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft and Yahoo. The service can also recommend content based on pre-selected user preferences, demographics and browsing history.

A number of factors drove Fylde Council to pursue the E-Services Solutions project. During 2009, Fylde Council participated in a regional project led by Chorley Borough Council that used the 'Circle of Need' methodology (see 'Circle of Need' in box ) to develop a better understanding of what customers need from local public services, and how these services can be better joined up around those needs.

The 'Circle of Need' exercise helps to identify services from across a range of local providers that could be called upon in response to a customer enquiry or request directed at any single public body. The E-Service Solutions project at Fylde sought to provide self service access to appropriate information and services that meet the needs of the target demographic – 'active elderly people living in pleasant retirement locations'. For further information on why the project focused on this demographic, see 'Approach' below).

The E-Service Solution sets out to recreate an online model that offers a comprehensive and seamless service to the customer at the first point of contact. Lessons learned from the 'Circle of Need' project were incorporated into the development of the e-service platform.

## Circle of Need

The Circle of Need model aims to give senior managers an understanding of how 'customer need' can be modelled to help them improve service design and provision and generate efficiencies.

Originally developed by Chorley Borough Council in 2007, the Circle of Need model stemmed from A H Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' but was simplified into a non-hierarchical model, which grouped together issues related to the same aspect of life.

The model identifies a list of needs, including:

- economic security
- physical security
- significant relationships with others
- education
- access to justice and democracy
- healthcare
- housing
- nutrition.

The circle concept focuses on a particular need and shows how other services – which are likely to be associated with the circumstances – can be accessed to meet the holistic requirements of the customer. The circle also incorporates relationships with the council's other customers (citizens, businesses, neighbourhood and public interest groups). In addition it is possible to map service providers to services and customer profiles to needs to create a circle of need focussed on a particular customer profile or a particular service provider. In Chorley, the profile used was 'families with low incomes and young children'.

## Objective

Given the current financial outlook for local authorities, one of Fylde Council's overarching objectives for the project was to deliver 'more for less' through the use of online service channels. The council recognised potential savings arising from migrating customer to lower cost contact channels, and were keen to refocus their web-presence so that it is more centred on the needs of customer and the community.

The council and LSP partners also identified a number of themes in their Sustainable Community Strategy that online service delivery could support.

"We wanted customers not only to be able to access the website, the information, the services, but also through the forums and other mechanisms to tell us – day in, day out, easily in their own words or with each other in debates about community issues – about the sort of things they want us to be doing for their local community."

**Allan Oldfield, Director of Customer and Operational Services**

### **Increasing community safety and reducing the fear of crime**

The online platform offers police and other partners a means of directly engaging with customers. For example, Lancashire Fire Service identified the opportunity to use the platform to provide fire safety information and services with the aim of reducing the number of fires and fire casualties (see 'Benefits' below). The police have linked their national FAQ database to the site allowing a 'one stop' solution at the first point of access.

### **Health and well-being**

The Primary Care Trust (PCT) had identified Fylde as having an ageing population that

is expected to live longer than the national average which was one of the reasons the project team selected 'older active elderly people' as the target demographic. Hence the PCT saw the project as a means to help future-proof services against demographic trends.

The project team also identified a number of national indicators that the platform could support:

- NI14: Avoidable contact
- NI179: Efficiency and value for money delivered by the local authority
- NI 4: Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions locally
- NI27: Understanding of local concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police
- NI5: Overall satisfaction with the local area.

Significant changes in local government inspection and the national performance management framework since the project started in February 2010 has led to the Lancashire Local Area Agreement (LAA) performance framework being abolished along with the Place Survey and the national performance indicators. However, several of the indicators have been retained as local performance measures to help demonstrate the success of the project (results reported under 'Benefits' below)

"We wanted to start creating an online community that would give us a lot of natural and heartfelt feedback. But not just feedback on what we – the council – do, but also on what's happening in the community. When you read through the Forum posts, and look at the responses you get a feel for the local community. You get a feel for what Fylde is like."

**Allan Oldfield, Director of Customer and Operational Services**

## Approach

The project team agreed a series of clear steps to get from the conception through to the design and to the development of the e-service platform, including:

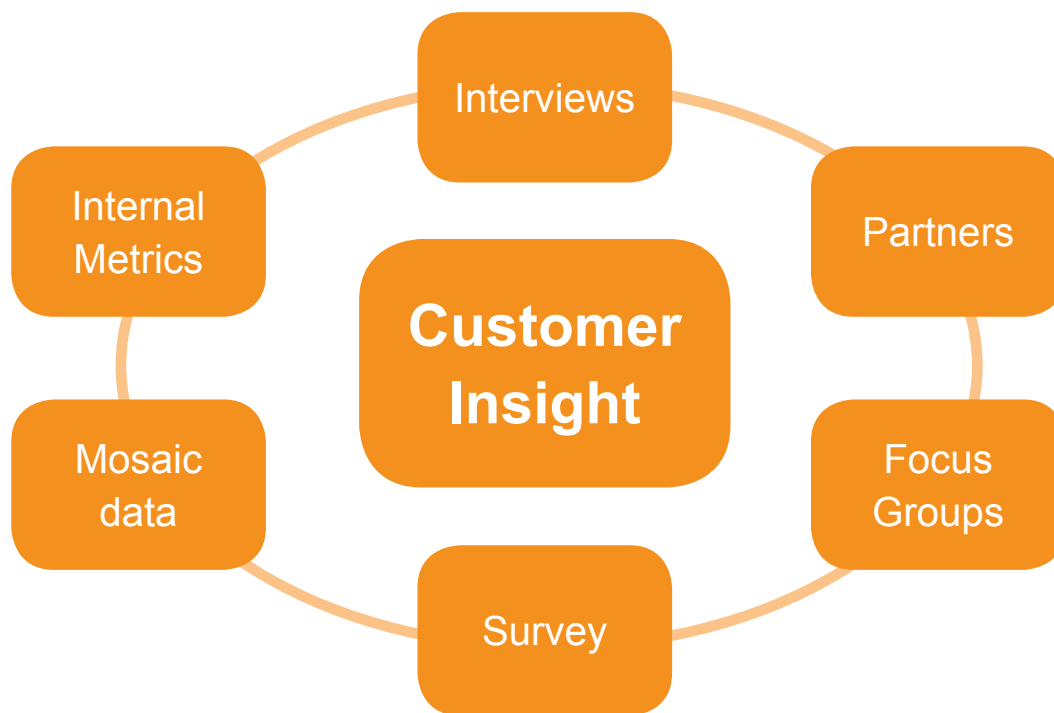
- selecting a target demographic group
- reviewing social demographic data
- facilitating focus groups
- conducting one-to-one interviews
- conducting a postal survey
- specifying the system
- developing the e-service solution.

### Selecting the demographic group for the pilot

The partners chose to pilot the approach with a socio-demographic group containing – 'independent older people with relatively active lifestyles'. The project selected this group in consultation with partner organisations as it is the second most prominent group in the borough, and social demographic profiling indicated high levels of interest and engagement from this group in community issues. Furthermore the high number of professionally qualified individuals amongst the active elderly residents in this group meant that a large number would be more likely to have access to and use the Internet. These characteristics made this group ideal for piloting the proof of concept.

The PCT health profile illustrated that the borough had an ageing population who will live longer than the national average. Hence targeting this mosaic group would help to ensure that the project future proofed services to cope with increased demand as a result of changing demographics.

**Figure 1. Fylde's Customer Insight model**



The project team set about identifying the needs of the target customer group, building on the 'Circle of Need' work they had previously delivered in partnership with the North West e-Government Group and Chorley Borough Council.

The project used a number of different methods to collect further customer insight into the needs of this group, summarised in figure one.

#### **Reviewing social demographic data**

Mosaic data sets were used to profile residents. The data provides social, economic and demographic profiles based on geographical location – usually centred on the post code.

The mosaic profiles provide a generic picture of a local community based on the predominant attitudes and behaviours drawn from the various data sets. The project sought to use mosaic data to more accurately target groups of residents for consultation and engagement.

Mosaic group 'L' is described as 'active elderly people living in pleasant retirement locations'. The additional profile data highlighted the following attributes for this group:

- mostly contains residents over 65 years old whose children have grown up
- most are still married and live active lives with a high degree of mobility
- the majority are financially secure
- moved from their original family home to a retirement community
- the majority will be without mortgages and will have sold up elsewhere to relocate
- originally from professional vocations having commuted to the city to work
- familiar with the community from the past experience ie second holiday home or regular visitor in the past
- most locations are in coastal communities
- residing in bungalows, cottages or private apartments designed for elderly residents
- relocation provides opportunities to start new ventures, friendships and interests.

## Facilitating focus groups

Focus groups with residents from the chosen social demographic group were a cornerstone of the customer centred approach. The project team held six focus groups at the beginning of the project and a further six comprising the same attendees towards the close of the project.

“I would like to compliment the excellent service that is provided on this website, a great effort by all involved.”

### Focus Group Feedback

Each focus group was made up of 10 to 12 residents, and lasted about two hours. These focus groups were essential for the project to gain insight into the customer’s perspective, as well as their needs and expectations from all services but particularly online delivery.

The feedback gathered helped to shape the solutions developed as well as the marketing, communication and promotion of the outputs from the project. This was critical to ensure that the outcomes achieved identified customer need.

The customer insight generated by the focus groups revealed a fundamental issue with perception of the public sector’s online presence, and that the structure and language used by public service providers did not inspire customers’ confidence and trust online. This is an example of how the customer experience of using leading commercial websites shapes their expectations when using public sector websites.

This was evident from the expectations of:

- the availability of services out-of-office hours
- the speed of response to questions
- the style of language and communication.

Feedback from the target group highlighted that they preferred to use local and community-based social media and forums, rather than services such as Facebook and Twitter. The project had originally intended to focus on these platforms given their dominant market position.

Many customers are unsure about which agency is responsible for delivering which public services in their area. This finding was corroborated by a survey conducted by Saint Anne’s Town Council which discovered that two thirds of respondents did not know ‘who delivers what services’ in their local community.

The above-mentioned confusion was reflected in customers’ online behaviours in relation to service providers. Users were transferred from site to site, and said they would ultimately – and in fact quite quickly give up. This issue is exacerbated out-of-hours when the option to telephone or visit in person is not available.

Many of the target group were also frustrated at having an ever increasing number of usernames and passwords to log into various accounts. The customer insight indicated that having to have a new and different password for a council service would deter users.

One overarching finding was that a significant number of older people use computers regularly for day-to-day business and leisure but they were frustrated by the fact that local services cannot be accessed online easily.

Some customers felt they were ‘forced’ to use phone or e-mail because they could not access the service by their preferred method – online. Other members of the focus groups did indicate that they would not access some public sector services online because the subject matter or issue



is emotive which warrants a more personal method of communication. This underlines the inevitability of the need to retain high quality accessible face-to-face and telephone contact.

Ultimately, the feedback indicated that a poor experience of public services online has a detrimental effect on the customer's perception of a public body and their reputation. These insights influenced the development of the outputs of the project.

The project also cross-referenced data on web use with mosaic profiles and discovered the borough had three times as many mosaic group 'L' online users as the national average. Hence, although they were active online the focus groups feedback emphasised that older people were reluctant to engage public sector services online.

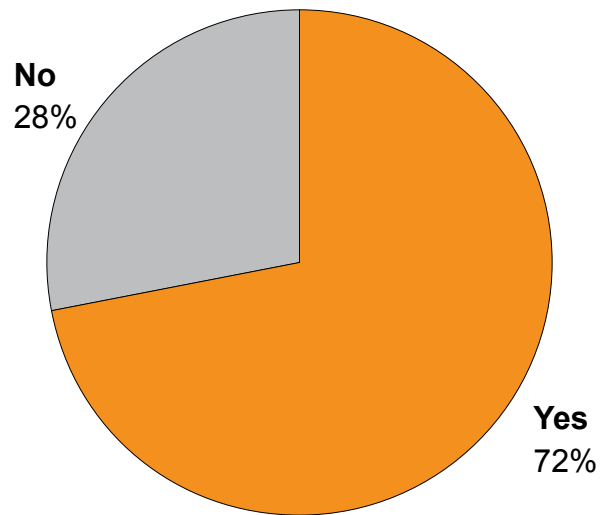
The project tested this by surveying focus group attendees and found that whilst 72 per cent have access to a computer and 83 per cent of those accessed private sector services online, only 22 per cent of those respondents accessed public sector services online (see figures 2,3 and 4).

### Conducting one-to-one interviews

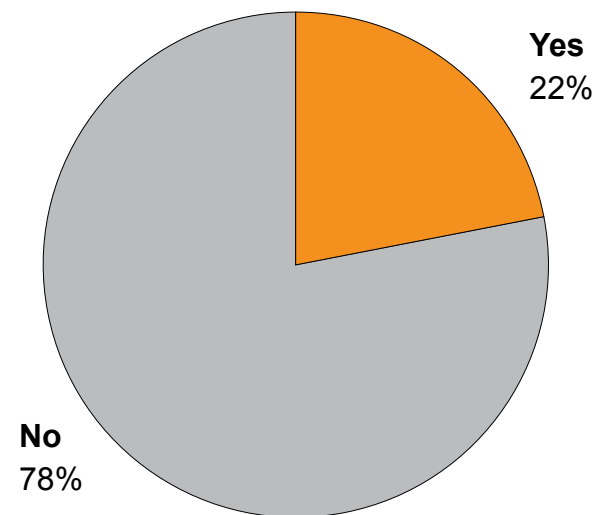
The project team also conducted a series of ten one-to-one interviews to corroborate the findings of the focus groups. The feedback was consistent with the outcomes from the focus groups. Respondents reported:

- a lack of understanding regarding 'who delivers what' in the local community
- poor navigation and access acting as barriers
- preference for dealing with the public sector face-to-face or over the phone over 'emotive' subject matter.

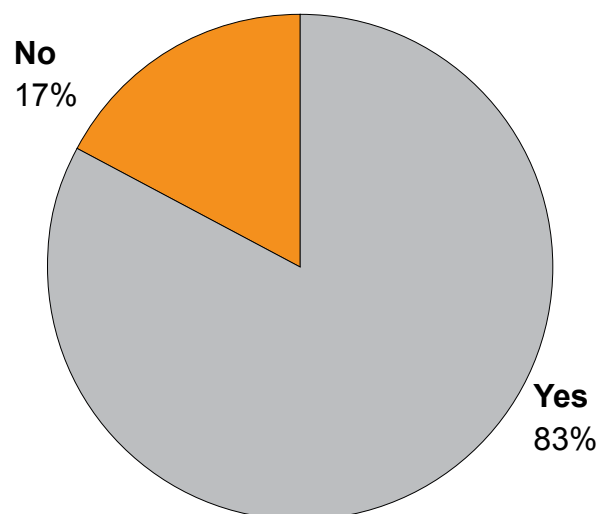
**Figure 2. Do you have access to a computer?**



**Figure 3. Do you access public sector services on-line?**



**Figure 4. Do you access private sector services on-line?**



### Conducting postal surveys

The project team conducted a postal survey to gather data on the use of social media by members of mosaic group 'L'. The project team had assumed that the group's use of social media would be based on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. However, feedback from the postal survey illustrated a very low level of interest in the most popular social media platforms and a high-level interaction and interest in online discussion relating to local issues.

Figure 5 illustrates, the reasons stated for using social media are consistent with the behaviours and interests demonstrated by the target group when using other engagement channels. This evidence

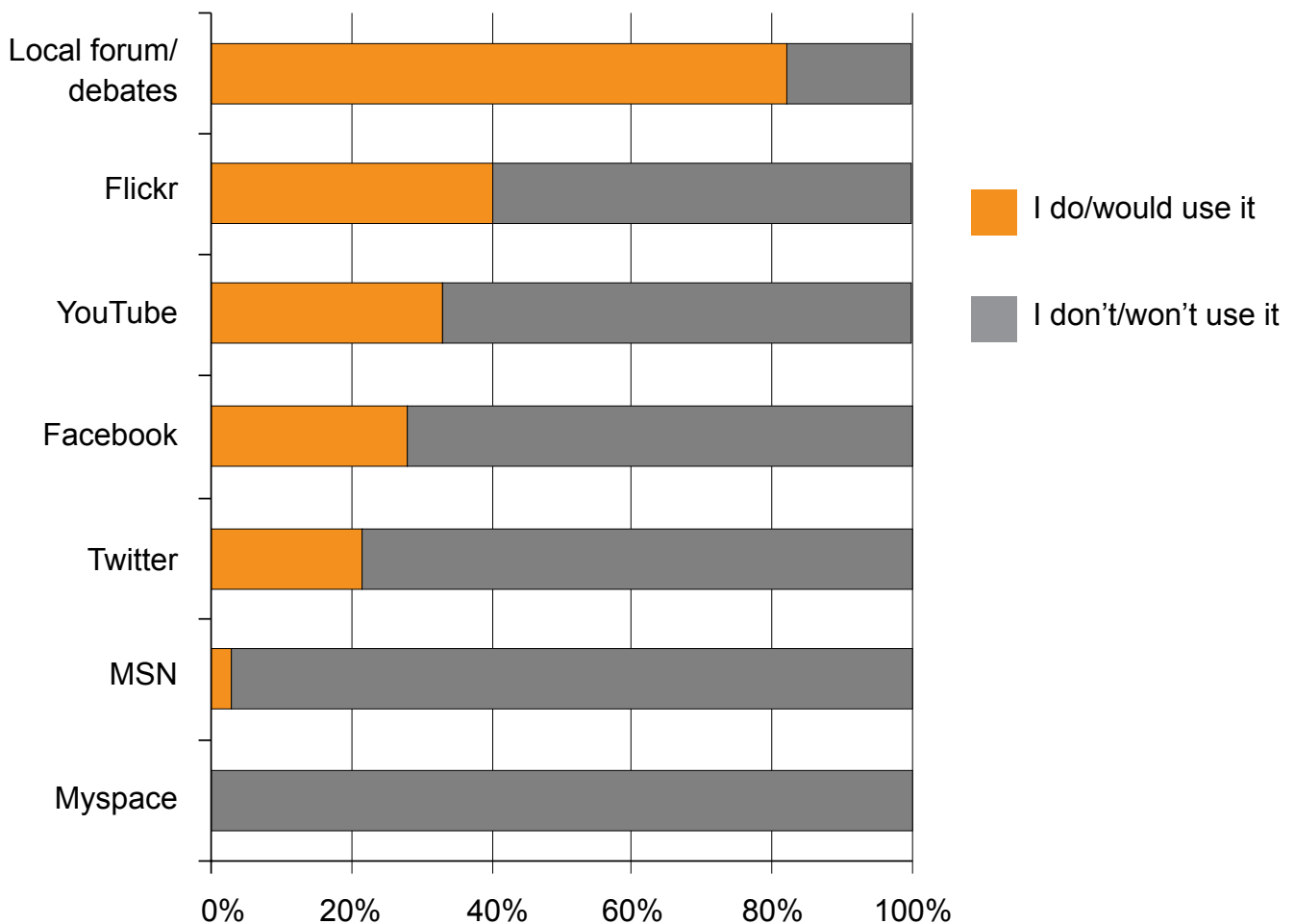
corroborated the view suggested by the demographic profiling that the target group is relatively well-educated, receptive to community engagement and that take an active interest in their local community.

### Specifying the system

In the light of the customer insight, it was necessary to respond to demand and adjust the prospective system's requirements. Based on this customer insight the project team set themselves the following implementation objectives. The project sought to:

- provide an online community forum as a platform for self-service based on user generated information and peer support

**Figure 5. Do you contribute to any of the following social media?**



- enable a single sign-on facility using existing and established online mechanisms that would also provide customers with a personal record and services based on their individual usage history
- create a knowledge bank of frequently asked questions (FAQs) covering a range of service delivery organisations that is also populated through the forum and accessible to other platforms
- present content to individual customers based on their historic use, expressed preferences and socio-demographic profile
- present an easy-to-use and easy to navigate online service environment that would build customer confidence and trust and ultimately enable the delivery of almost all services to online channels.

### **Developing the e-service solution**

To meet these requirements, the project team developed an e-service solution comprising:

- a 'self-help' community forum
- a logon account
- a community database of FAQs
- a system for automatically recommending content.

### **The self-help community forum**

The partnership has piloted fyldeforum.co.uk, using an online customer service platform.

The Forum works as follows: once a question or topic is posted on the Forum by the customer; the system alerts other registered users including; officers from partner organisations and elected members who are then able to post a reply. These alerts are sent out based on subject matter topics that the recipients have signed up to.

As more topics and questions are posted, and more responses gathered, the content on the forum accumulates into an extensive knowledge and community opinion bank covering a range of issues and partner responsibilities. Two examples of discussions supported by the platform include:

- 161 replies to a posting regarding the provision of overnight parking facilities for motor homes in the borough. The discussion had 78 participants, and input from two council employees. (For further information, see Vox Pop with Allan Oldfield of Fylde BC available on the LG Improvement and Development Community of Practice)
- 53 replies to a posting regarding the closure of a recycling centre in St Annes, generated by 22 participants in the discussion and three council employees. The debate helped to clarify that the recycling centre was being closed by the county council rather than the borough council, and galvanised support for the centre's staff. (For further information, see Vox Pop with Councillor Tony Ford available on the LG Improvement and Development Community of Practice).

The forum is serving to:

- signpost customers to information and online services that they can access directly in the future
- provide customers with relevant answers based on past questions, preventing the need for them to post another question or contact the council
- provide out of hours information, as well as responses and updates from officers and elected members out of hours – thereby increasing confidence and trust in online engagement

- provide customers with information specific to the context and locality, provided by their peers
- provide a link to the FAQ search tool, and generating content for the FAQ database, see figure 6
- capture the views, opinions and ideas of the community on the most topical issues of the day.

Though these approaches and tools are used extensively in the commercial sector, they are rarely used in such a transparent manner in the public sector. This approach requires an open and inclusive culture that is centred on the customer (see ‘Lessons learnt’).

### The log-on account

The customer insight work found that having to create an additional username and password to login to accounts frustrated and deterred potential users. Hence, the project sought to enable customers to login and register through other major social networks

including Facebook, Twitter, Google and Open ID (figure 7).

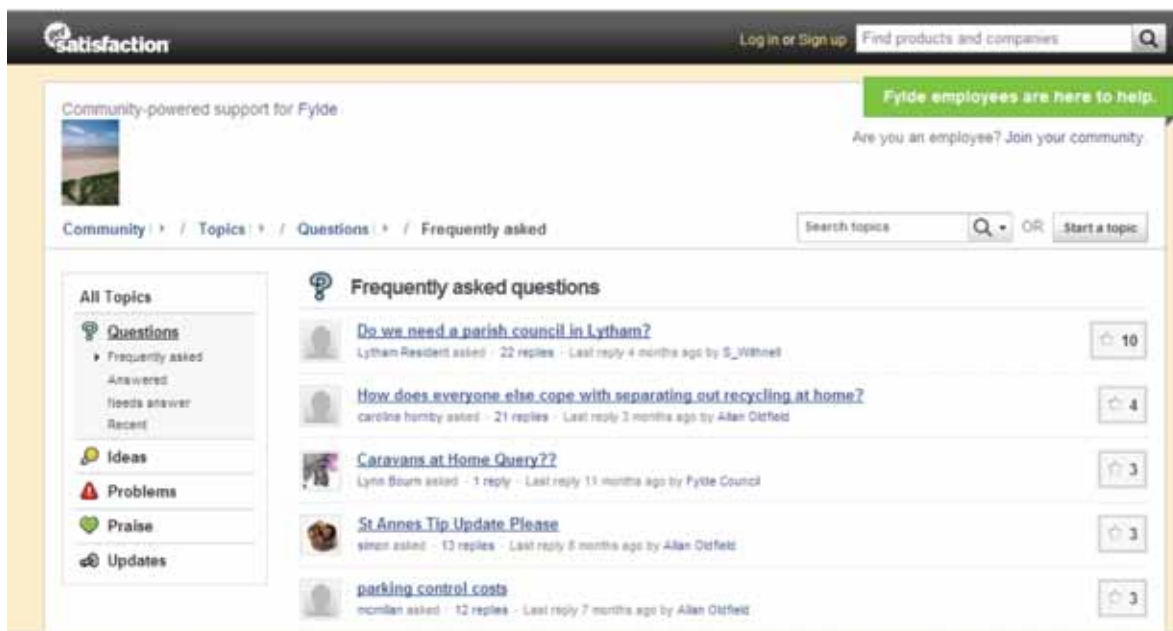
The project integrated the free, open source product Janrain Engage which allows users to sign in to the forum using their existing accounts with the above platforms. This has helped to maximise online registration, while association with these strong brands has also promoted greater user confidence in the system.

As well as making the service easy to access and easy-to-use, using this login data also enables the platform to record the history of the customer’s online engagement and use this as one of the references for generating future recommendations for the customer.

### The FAQ database

To facilitate self-service on the website, the project team developed a data base of FAQs. The project used the workshops with the Total Place partners to create the initial list of frequently asked questions used to populate

**Figure 6. Fyldeforum & FAQs**



**Figure 7. Users Login using existing social media platforms**



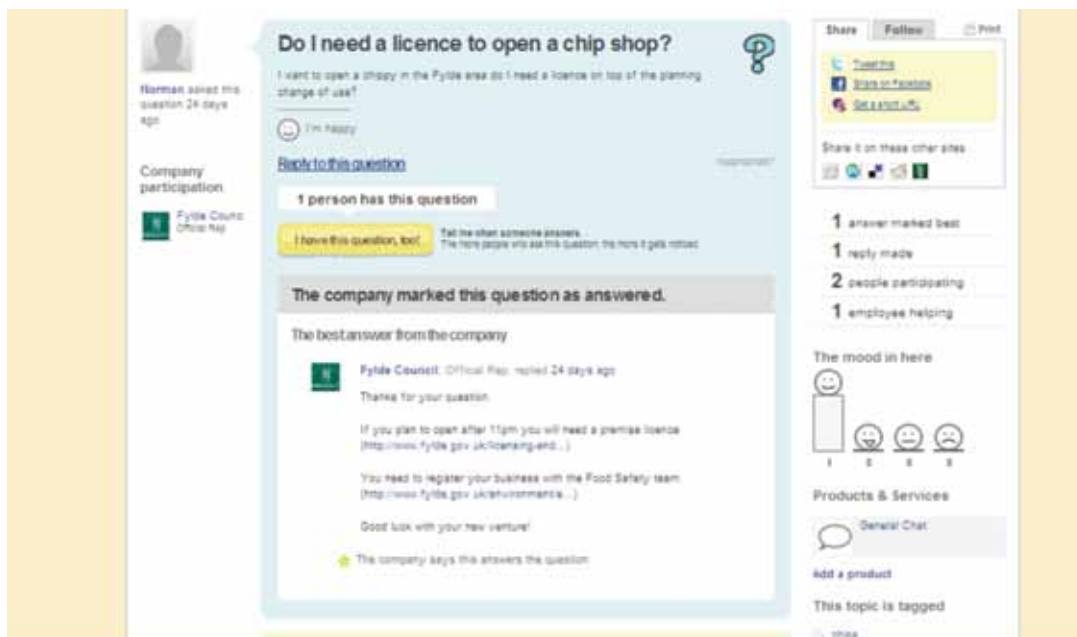
the knowledge data base. Following this initial data set, the FAQs grow in response to questions posted by users – with the answers posted by the partner network or other users (see ‘Resourcing’ below).

To enable customers to access FAQs from the full range of public service providers that comprise the Total Place offering from a single

point of access, the project team developed a sophisticated interface that can search and import FAQs from partner websites and databases. The facility currently searches for responses from Fylde Council, Lancashire County Council, the Forum and the national Police FAQ database, and the ambition is to integrate with other public sector FAQ databases. The facility is available on every page of the Fylde website.

The tool searches all postings on the forum to present responses to an enquiry and clearly labelling the source of the response for the user. In addition to the response to their specific question, customers are also presented with the views, opinions and responses that other users have already provided relating to the issue. The effect is to reduce avoidable contact, namely the number of calls, online ‘chat’ and e-mails that require a customer service assistant to support.

**Figure 8. Example of a question answered. This then becomes part of the FAQ database**



Customers can also access these responses 24/7 in an effort to migrate users from more expensive methods of communication and service delivery that require human involvement and cost.

The longer term objective is to encourage all partners to use a standard XML schema for their FAQs so that it is possible to search each others data without duplicating content on a number of sites. For example, a customer could search from the Fylde website about noise nuisance and they will be presented with what the council can do alongside what help the police can offer without the need to jump from one website to another.

### Recommending content

The site also borrows the idea of personalised recommendations from the Amazon online store. Customers are asked

for their postcode when they first login which is then used to recommend content that is relevant to the customer based on their geographical location and socio-demographic profile ie events, councillor contacts etc. Customers also have the option to sign up to a range of pre-selected topics by category – for example ‘sport and leisure’ – and subsequently receive relevant content.

The long term objective is to pull content from the full range of local public service providers based on the users’ interests and preferences, reinforcing the concept of the single point of access for all services. The project also hopes to be able to develop the ability to make recommendations based on users past web navigation history and previously used online services.

### Other outputs

As well as producing the forum and FAQ database for the residents of Fylde, the project has also produced a number of outputs that other local authorities and partnerships can benefit from:

- working implementation of open source logins – free for other councils to deploy
- working implementation of an un-moderated open forum – free for other councils to use
- source code for implementing ‘Ask the Police’ application programming interface – available for others to use
- framework for delivering customer focused web projects – available from the LG Improvement and Development Customer Insight Community of Practice
- need and services outputs for MOSAIC Group L – available from the community of practice.



## Benefits

Benefits to the customer include:

- reduced time and effort required to find the answer they are seeking by accessing a comprehensive range of services from a single point of access and single sign-on
- increased relevance and specificity of information, due to access to the perspective and experience of other local people and the provisions of recommended content
- increased availability of information and services through 24/7 access
- increased confidence and trust in local online services due to association with existing social media platforms, and the joining-up of information from a range of service providers.

“Arguably, every visit to the forum could otherwise have become an avoidable contact – the customer would otherwise have contacted one of the partners. Moreover, once we post an answer that information is reusable. Over time the same information about the same question can be accessed by hundreds of users.”

**Andrew Cain, Transformational Services Manager, Fylde Borough Council**

Additional benefits realised from the project include:

- Using the forum and police feed to populate the FAQ has contributed to an increase in unique hits (on FAQs) by over 300 per cent. In March last year (2010), 320 pages were visited a total of 529 times. During March this year (2011), 1,080 pages were visited a total of 1,679 times. Arguably, these visits would otherwise
- result in a customer contacting the council or the police to get a response.
- The FAQ bank has received over 900 unique visitors since launch. Arguably, these visits would otherwise result in a customer contacting the council or the police to get a response.
- In addition to FAQs, 267 customers registered on the Forum and 207 topics have been posted – and well over 500 replies made.
- The new functionality has also helped to increase use of the website by the pilot’s target group by 500 unique hits per month (Source: Hitwise analytics). This represents a 25 per cent increase in online service delivery by mosaic group ‘J’.
- Using existing social media platforms for the log in process has helped to increased return visits. Logins increased from 1.6 logins per user to 3.3. Signups for email newsletters and alerts have increased substantially, helping Fylde keep users informed of local news and more effectively solicit feedback on council policies.
- Previously, only 24 per cent of users chose to sign up for email alerts, but that percentage has increased to 87 percent after implementation of single sign-on.
- Giving users personalised content based on customer insight increases the time customers spend on the site and decreases exit rate (source: Google analytics):
  - time on standard homepage 00:00:46
  - time on personalised homepage 00.1:49
  - exit rate on standard homepage: 21.70 per cent
  - exit rate on personalised page: 6.33 per cent.

## Benefits to the partners

The E-Service Solution is also producing benefits for all partners. The platform is serving to:

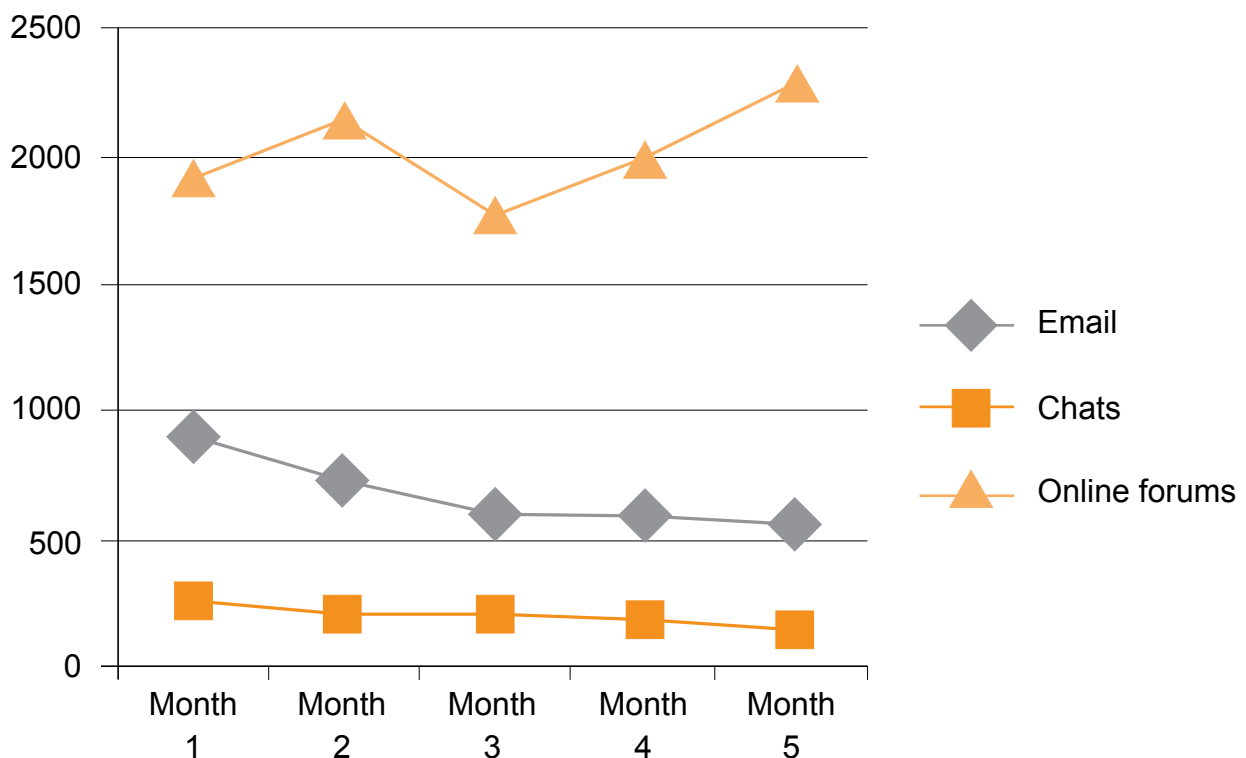
- Increased channel migration to online services, thereby reducing the demand on email, phone and face-to-face contact all of which require more expensive human engagement. The graph (figure 9) below indicates a decline in the number of e-mails and online chats as the number of people using online self-service forms and FAQs increase.
- Fylde Borough Council has calculated that this migration to online channels from other communication methods has reduced avoidable contact to these other channels from 39 per cent to 29 per cent.
- Provided an additional and cost-effective method of creating engagement, for example the local fire service has noted an increase

in the take-up of fire safety checks partly due to increase in the numbers being registered online. Since the launch of the service, there has been a 30 per cent increase in smoke alarms installed in homes.

- Enhanced the reputation of public sector online service with the positive shift in customers perception highlighted by recent customer feedback and the post project focus groups. Furthermore, a recent local survey monitoring NI5 'Overall satisfaction with the local area' indicates a 3 per cent increase to 89 per cent.

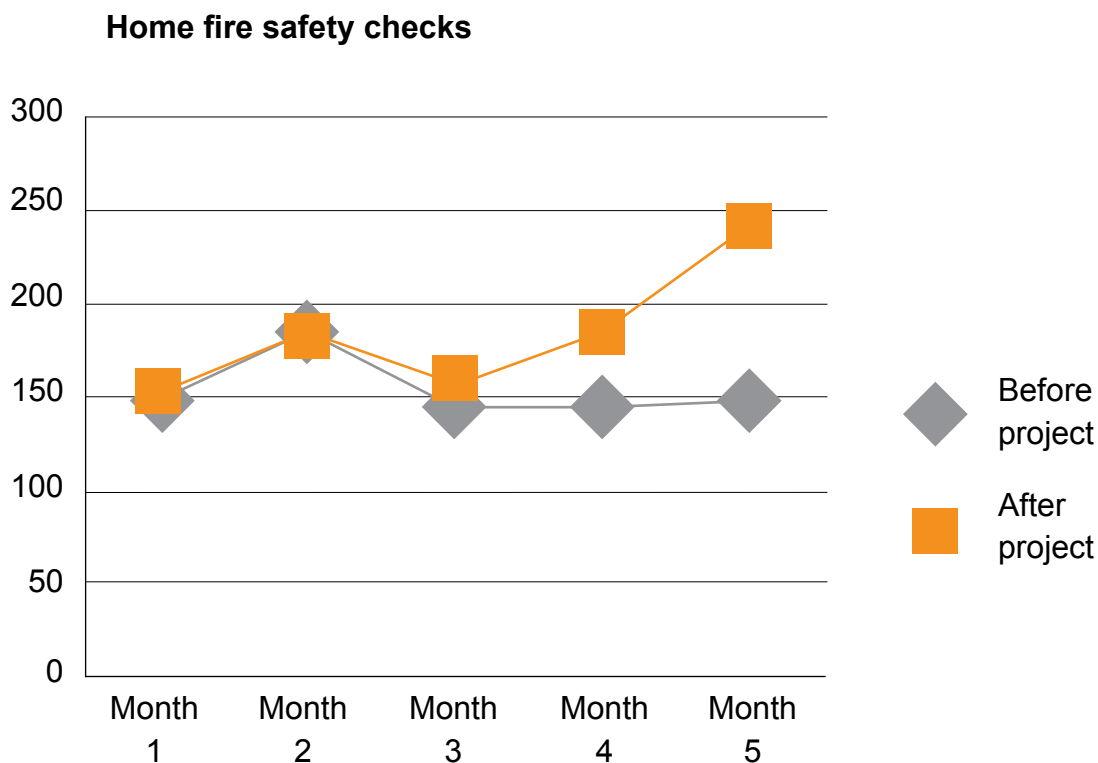
The project has also helped to improve the working relationship with public and third sector partners identifying cultural and behavioural differences that when addressed will facilitate joined up service delivery.

**Figure 9. Online channel migration data April to August 2010**





**Figure 10. Fire safety check uptake in Fylde April to August 2010**



## Governance

The project team used the existing governance structures of Fylde's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in order to encompass as broad a range of services in a single point of contact as possible. The LSP currently includes the following organisations:

- Fylde Borough Council
- Lancashire County Council
- Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre Council for Voluntary Service
- North Lancashire Teaching Primary Care Trust (PCT)
- Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service
- Lancashire Constabulary
- Local Community Groups, Town and Parish Councils and others.

"I think it's fabulous that you canvas ideas in this way." – **Caz**

"It's nice to see interaction like this from a council – a refreshing change." – **Connor**

**Customer feedback in response to a post requesting ideas to the topic 'Help Fylde balance its books'.**

The E-Services Solutions project reported to the LSP Executive. A series of workshops and network meetings were held with senior representatives from the partner organisations during the scoping stages of the project. The objective was to gather further insight into the target group and assess the current level of service provision, take up and expectations across all partner organisations.

The workshops were also helpful in ensuring that the partners were fully engaged in the project and supported the project objectives as well as having the opportunity to shape the outcomes. The partner workshops and network provided an ideal platform for creating the initial list of frequently asked questions used to populate the knowledge data base.

The lead officers at Fylde Borough Council were given the remit by the partners to manage the project with clear requirements to provide progress reports and ensure appropriate ongoing engagement with the partner organisations throughout the project.



## Resourcing

The project was co-ordinated and led by Fylde Borough Council, with insight and ideas input by the police, PCT, county council and other partners. The core project team comprised Fylde Borough Council's director of customer operational services, the transformational services manager and the customer services manager. Partner organisations now have in excess of 18 employees supporting the forum – including two community safety officers to answer policing issues and the chief executive of the council.

Other people who respond to questions from residents include:

- county council staff
- town council members
- council leader
- cabinet members
- ward councillors
- YMCA charity.

“We have content managers in each service area that have been trained and are trusted and responsible for making sure that their service is up-to-date, accurate and available online. They have a great deal of autonomy and freedom to post what they see fit – without needing prior approval. Our online customer's would not tolerate the associated delays. Other councils may be reluctant to trust their staff with such flexibility, but we undertook a risk assessment and decided the benefits were worth it.”

**Allan Oldfield, Customer and Operational Services Manager**

## Challenges and lessons learnt

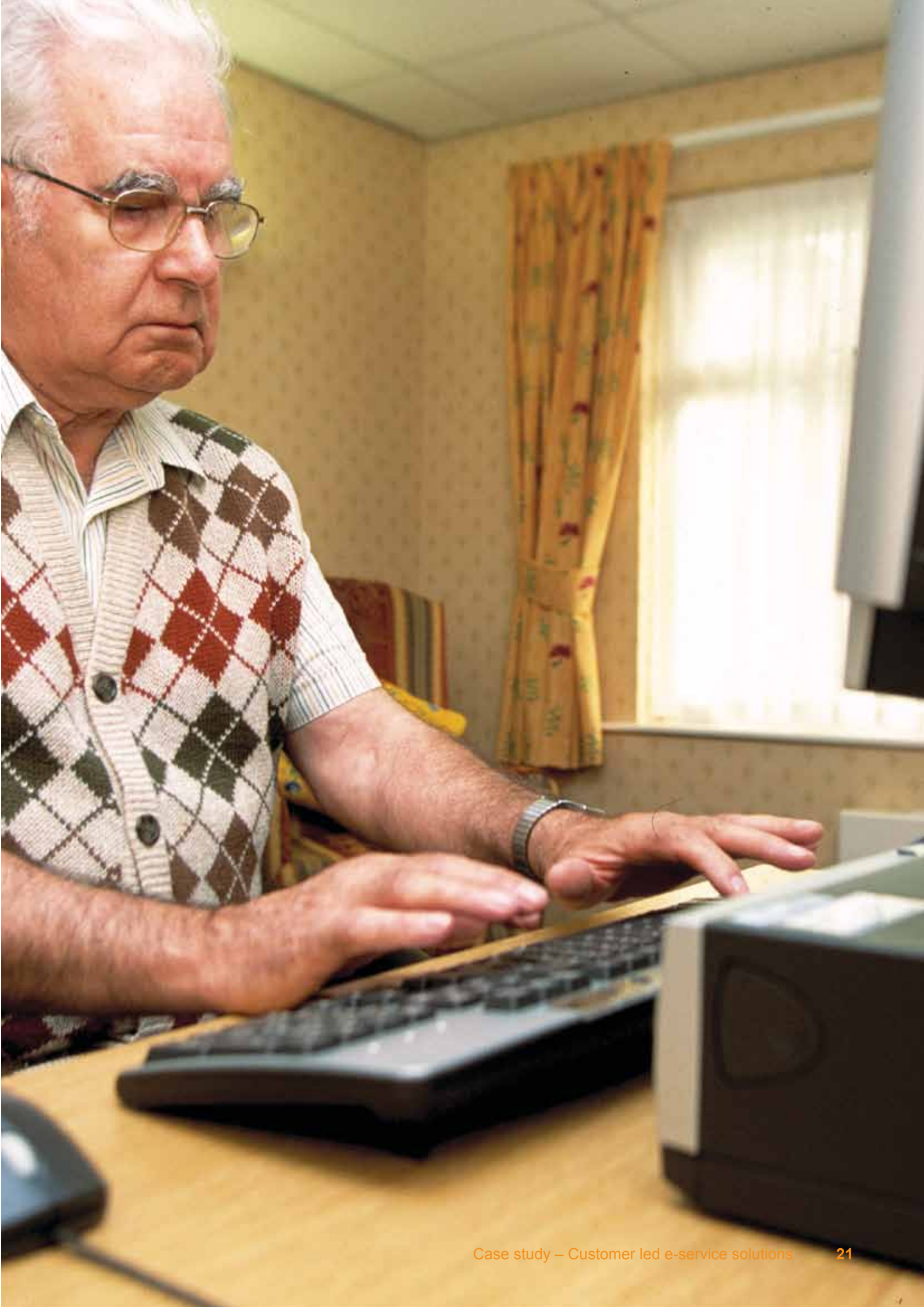
During the course of the project a number of valuable lessons were learnt about the logistics of implementing the project effectively, the target customer group and the development of online customer led solutions. These lessons learnt will support future work and are outlined below.

1. The 'tea drinking bureaucrat' perception of Town Hall employees has filtered its way to online service delivery and manifested itself as distrust and a lack of confidence in online service delivery. Customers that will readily provide their credit card and other personal details over the internet and have a preference for online service delivery are reluctant to deal with the public sector online. This is an issue that needs to be tackled across the public sector and an area that warrants further research and understanding.
2. To establish an effective forum that can instil trust and confidence in the user it is essential to post responses quickly. Out of hours responses and updates are expected by the online generation which for some of the partners on the project required, and still does require, a change of culture and behaviour.
3. Forum responses must be posted in a 'relaxed' style that mirrors the customers. The typically long winded and very formal council response that has been cited from a script or standard operating procedure is inconsistent with the culture of an online forum. Partners must be prepared to take a risk with their online communication and be careful who they select to lead on any response. Employee roles, responsibilities and response time frames must be clearly articulated and agreed – if an employee knows it then they should be trusted to post it.
4. Feedback from customers suggests that the local government service list requirements and the integrated public sector vocabulary restricts the look, feel and navigation of local government sites which results in them not being as 'slick' or 'easy-to-use' as the market leaders in the private sector. Websites that are difficult to navigate can undermine customer confidence and ultimately trust.
5. The assumption was made that social media would involve Facebook and Twitter because they are the most dominant market leaders. However, the reality amongst the mosaic target group was different and these two market leaders featured low down on the agenda with a preference towards more local and community based social media and forums. A more in depth understanding of the online behaviours of the target group should be established.



6. A significant number of retired people do use computers and do prefer to deal with organisations online. The case for enhanced phone and face-to-face communication has been predicated on catering for the elderly and some of the most vulnerable in the community. However, the fact that services could not be accessed online was an issue for a significant number of the focus group participants. Customers were being 'forced' to use phone or email as a method of contact because they could not get the service online.
7. The focus groups expressed concern about the cost of the project to the local tax payer and that the project was a waste of tax payers money. It is important that this view is anticipated and it is stated clearly from the beginning how the project is being funded and the benefits it will realise.
8. Regular briefings and ongoing communication with partners is essential. These must include face-to-face sessions that provide the opportunity for instant feedback and further questioning by both parties. Some partners were unsure why the project was being carried out, the benefits that it offered and what responsibilities they had primarily because the majority of communication had been in the form of written updates as opposed to meeting and discussing the issues. Busy individuals can overlook written updates or miss the key messages.
9. Understanding the different cultures and behaviour in partner organisations will help to achieve more effective outcomes. Responding to out of hours forum postings and adopting a relaxed approach was a challenge for some partner organisations. Moving away from long established procedures and paper based approaches was a challenge for others.
10. The outcomes of the project also have an impact on existing policy and procedure. The target response time to customer contacts is five working days at Fylde Borough Council and up to 10 working days in some of the partner organisations. These response times are outside the expectations for online communities and new or separate standards need to be established for the project to succeed. There is a direct link to the culture of the organisation being ready for online service delivery and pre-empting existing policy and procedure being used as a means to delay or prevent any change. In light of these expectations, Fylde Borough Council is piloting a one working day response to emails.

The lessons learnt are an important element of the project outcomes and will be used to support the smooth implementation of additional work as well as similar projects in other organisations.



## Next steps

The project team are seeking to develop and enhance the E-Solutions in line with customer feedback and identified needs. The project has identified the following actions to achieve sustainability:

- use the platform with other socio-demographic groups in the local community
- develop a social media strategy to cater for the specific requirements of different market segments
- promote membership of the forum among residents, businesses, partners and elected members. The forums has been advertised in the local newspapers, and is now part of the induction process for new staff and elected members alike
- develop the online log-in account to include personal data from legacy systems such as revenues and benefits and electoral registration
- develop a sustainable mechanism to gather ongoing feedback from customers on their satisfaction levels and service requirements
- integrate the project outcomes into the partners' channel migration strategies
- work with more partners to integrate additional databases into the FAQ search engine functionality
- establish protocols for posting online responses including minimum response times and minimum standard content
- continually review and improve the online service provision to maintain pace with the increasing customer demand
- capitalise on and sustain the initial benefits for the long-term.





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