

Digital Experts Programme

Gloucester Digital App – Case Study

The project objectives and targets

Gloucester City Council and Gloucestershire County Council have well established joint working arrangements which allowed the councils to explore a joint approach to the digital opportunities available to them. Consequently, they submitted a joint bid to the Digital Experts programme for funding to join up and expand their digital offering to their respective customers (many of whom may be shared), and make best use of internal staff on their shared working agenda.

This bid initially consisted of two strands. The first of these areas was the development and implementation of a 'My Council / Report it' App for anyone who wanted to notify either the city or the county council about a range of issues. The second strand of the bid involved the possible development of a shared intranet service to support the shared working arrangements between the county council and the district council.

However, after discussions with the LGA, it was agreed that the funding from the Digital Experts programme would be used to focus specifically on the development of the App as one element of a wider, more ambitious agenda. This App would cover a range of areas where the public might wish to report issues relating to:

- Flytipping
- Dog fouling
- Graffiti
- Fallen trees
- Pot holes
- Flooded drains
- Broken play equipment
- Missed bins etc.

This would provide customers with the opportunity to inform the relevant council of an issue and enable them to send real-time information, identifying the nature of the issue, its location and status.

The App development would aim to:

- Provide ease of access for customers
- Promote channel shift and offer the means to access services from different devices e.g. for customers wishing to use a smart phone or tablet device, etc.
- Reduce the number of contacts to the councils' respective contact centres, freeing up these resources for customers who most need the direct contact with an individual
- Reduce transaction costs for the councils.

The proposal identified the potential for financial benefits across both councils, including the reduction in costs associated with servicing customer requests.

- The city council recorded 135,000 telephone calls per year and similar number for email enquiries.
- The county council recorded 221,136 telephone calls per year and 32,685 email enquiries (plus 60,134 other contacts including face-to-face).
- Total calls received by the city and the county were approximately 356,136 i.e. a cost of £1,018,549 based on the £2.86 industry standard cost reported by SOCITM.

Both councils provided access to information and services for their customers across a range of channels, and recognised the associated costs for face-to-face, telephony and email contacts. Their understanding of the costs of these more traditional channels and the potential savings to be gained by promoting greater online self-service was one of the key drivers toward the development of the App to support the expansion of their online offer.

The Digital Experts proposal planned to reduce the number of telephone contacts by at least 10 per cent, potentially saving £101,854 per annum. The same approach would also be applied to other channels such as face-to-face and email, which would provide similar savings.

Additional savings were also likely to be generated from officers needing to spend less time attending or locating incidents (such as fly tipping, pot holes etc.) due to poor or duplicate information.

The progress to date

Once the project got underway, it was recognised that the level of transactional 'report it' type functionality would lend itself more naturally to district council services. However, the councils agreed to continue with a joint approach on the understanding that in many instances residents do not recognise the difference between the organisations and their respective responsibilities

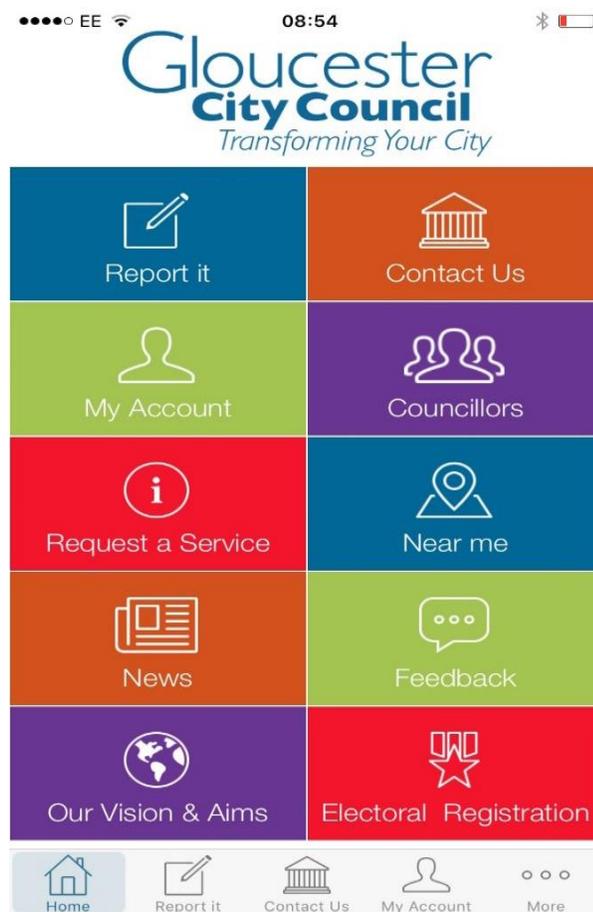
and if the councils worked together in a seamless way then there would be no need for the customers to even be aware of these distinctions.

Hence, it was agreed that the city council would initiate the project. The county council would monitor the project and possibly join in at a later date, enabling them to explore the application of this technology to their own services – from reporting highways-related issues, to topics such as school closures.

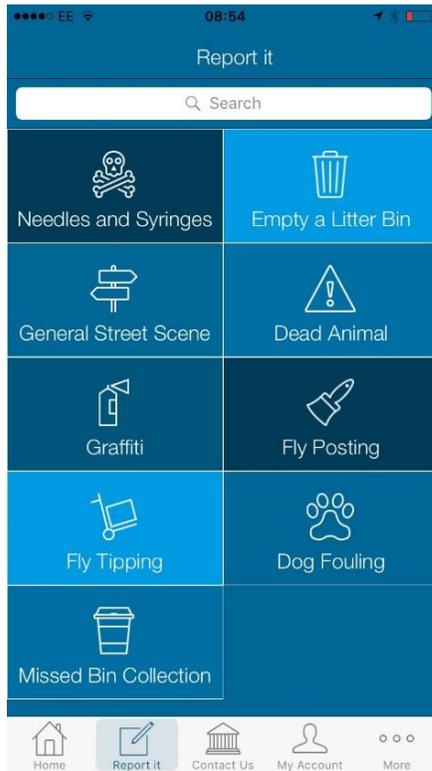
In the following months the city council procured an external development for the required App and by March 2016, the chosen developer (Yourselves) had delivered it and the council began to test it.

A number of the screens are shown below.

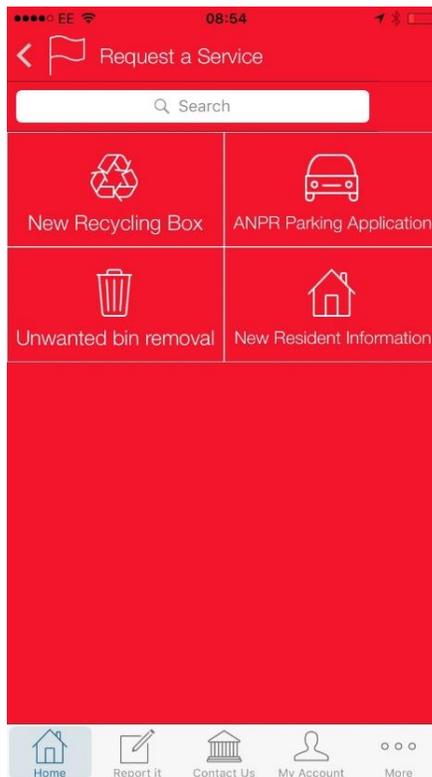
The opening page:



The 'Report it' screen:



The 'Request a Service' screen:



By April 2016 staff training had been completed and the solution was considered to be ready to go live. What is more, the procured solution went beyond a smartphone App: it provided web forms for both the normal and the mobile web site, had full analytics and included webchat.

The outcome – challenges and key learning points

Unfortunately, a number of issues and problems arose which impacted on the project.

Project management and resources:

After the initial change of focus, i.e. the funding was to be used specifically to develop the App, it was agreed that the city council would take the leading role with the county taking a watching brief. However, there was a reorganisation within the city council and the role of the project leader was changed and some other staff connected to the initiative left the council. In addition, there were a number of conflicting priorities calling on the time of the remaining staff. All of these factors severely limited the in-house resources available to take the project forward, which in turn had an impact on timetables.

Therefore, any other councils wishing to effectively develop and/or implement a similar App need to make sure they have sufficient resources in place to do so. They also need to make sure that appropriate governance arrangements are in place to monitor progress and report on this to a suitably senior officer who can help resolve problems as and when they arise.

Partner organisations and suppliers:

While the city's experience of working with the company behind the App has been very positive, an issue arose in the relationship between the council and its waste contractor.

One of the major ambitions for the App was to significantly improve the reporting of missed bins and related issues, in particular by allowing the contractor's crews to report bins they did not collect or other problems they saw while working around the city. Both parties recognised that to realise the greatest benefits from the App the waste contractor would need to take a technological leap forward, as its existing working practices were built on paperwork orders posted into pigeon holes.

The council received assurances from the contractor that its crews would begin to use the 'mobile worker' module on the App, and even provided tablet devices at its own cost for the contractor's crews to use while out on their collection routes.

However, despite raising this issue at weekly operational meetings with the contractor's management team, at the time of writing this report the council still had no firm commitment

or timeline for when the crews would begin using the new devices and the shift to digitising work processes had yet to be agreed.

Gloucester has therefore requested the return of the equipment, which it plans to redistribute to its neighbourhood managers, allowing them to document street care issues electronically via the mobile worker module.

The key lesson emerging from this part of the project is the need to work closely with your contractors and suppliers at a senior level to get their commitment from the outset to deliver any new, digitally-enabled approaches, particularly when these new approaches challenge existing working practices and cultures. The chances of success will be enhanced if there is already a solid working relationship and well-managed contract in place between the parties.

During the project, there needs to be:

- Robust project governance arrangements to monitor progress and enable the project to respond to changing circumstances, underpinned by the resources necessary to support good partnership working
- The active engagement of all partners (internal and external) required to make a success of the initiative
- A detailed plan setting out the key milestones and the resources each party is expected to commit to the project.

Wider ICT and integration:

In its current form, the App acts on a stand-alone basis – i.e. it is not linked to the council's CRM. Although this speeds up the reporting for the customer as the App is not linked into the 'back office' system, a member of staff is then required to re-key the information. Until this link can be developed so that information is automatically sent to the relevant system, the full potential savings will not be captured.

For the App to operate effectively it requires accurate data. In the case of bin collections, the database of 172,000 residents was found to contain a number of errors and inaccuracies that needed to be rectified. Therefore, to maximise the savings from this project, the data needs to be cleansed so the reported issues are associated with the correct address.

Where next?

The current situation is one where the council has a potentially effective solution, but has not had the resources or the support from key partners to fully launch and support it. As a result, the project has not yet been able to deliver the potential savings envisaged at the outset.

However, despite all these difficulties, the App is available and the council is now encouraging residents to register to use it. This is particularly important as Gloucester City Council has been tasked with finding £1 million savings in the next financial year. The council therefore will now have to explore all possible options to enable it to generate these savings, including working in different ways.

Consequently, there is a growing recognition at senior level of the benefits of enabling more residents and businesses to carry out their interaction with the council online and a growing interest in the outputs of this project. Hence, this project may have laid the groundwork for future developments and the delivery of significant reductions in costs.

Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

Richard Mobberley

Richard.Mobberley@gloucester.gov.uk