Online Electoral Registration through MyHarrow account

Summary

The London Borough of Harrow’s website offers residents the opportunity to carry out a significant range of online transactions as well as find out about local services and events. However, like many other council websites residents are required to complete a form for each individual services request which is time consuming for the citizen as they have to register for each service separately.

The electoral registration process was particularly time consuming for customers and inefficient for the council. For someone moving into the borough or registering for the first time, they are required to download or request a copy of the paper form, complete and then return it to the council for this to be checked and input onto the system.

Harrow decided to tackle this issue and that of similar online transactions by creating an online MyHarrow account that gave customers access to quick and convenient registration for a range of services, while reducing staff time spent processing paperwork.

The website has been redesigned to work across different platforms (smartphones, tablets etc.) ensuring an improved customer experience and as well as generating maximum efficiencies for the council. All the relevant forms are available in the appropriate format for the platform the customer is using, and integrated fully into the appropriate back office systems to remove the need for manual intervention by officers. The online service is also supported by a web chat facility to help those customers who are experiencing difficulties while completing the process online.

Objectives

The council wanted to reduce the resources currently being used on paper and the processing of electoral registrations, while providing customers with a convenient one-stop site to register for a number of services, thereby improving the customer’s experience and reducing costs.

Approach

The MyHarrow account distinguishes itself as a good example of effective use of technology in four ways:

- A scalable authentication layer that enables the council to use the same authentication product for accessing multiple services of differing sensitivity. For example, to link to your library account, the account number is sufficient whereas to access Housing Benefit data the customer needs to input the Claim reference and NI number before an unlock code is sent to the registered address. In order to access a personal budget for Adult Social Care, a face to face visit is required to link the relevant data. This is a major customer improvement – reducing unnecessary authentications and registrations – and contributes major savings.

- The council’s website and online forms are responsive to the device being used to access them. This is increasingly true of websites, but a more recent development for online forms. Harrow’s online forms have been designed in such a way that they work effectively across all devices. This is particularly important given that 30 per cent of interaction on Harrow’s website is via a mobile device (phone/tablet); they are seeing the same proportion of form completed through mobile devices, which was not the case previously.
The council’s CRM system and the associated back office systems are integrated. This ensures that when a customer uses a web form, a record is placed within the CRM, and the relevant back office processes are completed without the need for officers to get directly involved. Web chat has also been deployed to assist customers in completing more technical or lengthy forms such as those for housing benefits and concessionary travel.

Finally, web chat is used selectively to support completion of ‘hard to complete’ or complex forms, ‘popping up’ like the Microsoft Office safety pin to offer genuine assistance from a live person in a very cost-efficient way when the user may be stuck, with real impact on reducing failure, frustration, and additional phone calls.

Residents can now use their online account to register to vote, rather than as previously, where they could only request that a registration form was sent to them. They can also make changes to the annual canvas and rolling register via their online account.

Outcomes

Overall, the council has seen nearly 40 per cent take-up of the online account, with 63,352 registered users and 65 accounts being opened every day. Customers can access multiple services including viewing and paying Council Tax balances, checking details of their housing benefit, viewing planning applications, receiving alerts about a missed bin or an overdue library book.

Businesses can check their business rates statements, Landlords can see schedules, and even Neighbourhood Champions and Councillors are making the most of reporting and tracking issues online without having to contact someone at the council in person.

Electoral registration has increased by thousands, with 17,247 changes to the electoral register made online. Other success good examples of increasing levels of online usage:

- 21 per cent of all Council Tax queries are via the MyHarrow account
- 100 per cent of HB landlord enquiries are via the MyHarrow account
- 99 per cent of landlord enquiries are via the MyHarrow account
- 72 per cent of Housing Benefit payment queries are via the MyHarrow account
- 65 per cent drop in the average cost per enquiry
- 35 per cent decrease in ‘simple’ Council Tax queries

Benefits

Customer benefits

- Secure online access to personal council information
- Single sign-on to access all services
- 24/7 access to council services
- Pre-populated web forms when logged in
- Mediated access available
- Alerts functionality to notify customers of specific events, e.g. missed bins, parking permit renewal, council tax payment due
Council benefits

- The high number of customers creating MyHarrow accounts for electoral registration means these customers now have easy access to a range of other online registration services, thereby encouraging further online usage for council services by these customers.
- Advice agencies can review case history with residents through mediated access.
- Customer contact staff have access to more details of customer cases, so they are more often able to resolve issues without passing people on, and at peak times, other qualified staff can have the same access in order to be able to meet demand.
- 70 per cent of enquiries are via self-service.
- By moving electoral registration online, Harrow has saved £280k on printing, postage and staffing on inputting data and door knocking. In addition, the council has saved £1.55 million over four years across the website as a whole.

For further information, please contact jonathan.milbourn@harrow.gov.uk