

Digital Experts Programme

Providing access to e-forms via smartphones at Cannock Chase and Stafford Borough Councils

The issue and context

Stafford Borough Council (SBC) and Cannock Chase Council (CCC) are two councils in the county of Staffordshire in the West Midlands. Stafford Borough has a population of 132,241, and Cannock Chase Council 98,549. The two councils have shared service arrangements in place for many of their corporate functions, including IT, HR, Revenues and Finance.

Both SBC and CCC are seeking to provide their customers with more cost-efficient means of carrying out their business with them by providing residents with the ability to make service requests via online forms and smartphone apps, rather than having to phone or visit the council.

Building on their shared services work, the two councils put in a joint bid for funding from the Digital Experts programme to replicate in Cannock Chase Council the e-forms software Stafford Borough Council were already using. The new software would also enable the CCC's e-forms to be offered via a smartphone app.

This followed Cannock Chase's discovery in 2015 that 56 per cent of people accessing the council's website did so via tablet devices and smartphones – a rapid rise in recent years and an indication that their local population seems more than ready to carry out its business with the council over apps. As with most councils, CCC is facing a funding gap, with a potential deficit of £700,000 in 2016/17 and over £1 million from 2017/18 and is seeking to make savings via channel shift.

SBC have an existing e-forms system for their waste management and streetscene services. This is based on a product called MyCouncilServices (MCS) offered by software provider Abavus. It is a hosted solution which SBC have implemented to offer the waste management and streetscene operatives across the borough access to e-forms via smartphone apps. Additionally, SBC have also integrated the e-forms via their CRM system with their back office streetScene application – so that information reported via the app is sent straight through to the service provider without any manual re-work or delay.

Built into their software arrangement is the option to offer these e-forms in the shape of a smartphone app available on Android, Apple and Blackberry platforms. During 2015, SBC began providing this reporting functionality to members of the public via apps. The ambition of the project was to leverage the shared services partnership and the knowledge developed by SBC to implement the same e-forms system at CCC – principally to enable Cannock to offer residents access to the functionality via apps on their smartphone and/or tablet device. The partners plan to integrate this into their back office systems for waste and streetscene later in 2016.

The project funding purchased the software for CCC and also paid for the conversion of their existing online forms into the new hosted solution that offers the ability to offer the forms as an app for smartphones and tablets. A final tranche of the funding is to pay for the integration of e-payments functionality into the forms at both Stafford Borough and Cannock Chase Councils. This is expected to be implemented in spring 2016.

The project objectives and targets

The ultimate objective of offering services via e-forms and consequently smartphone and tablet apps – coupled with e-payments functionality when ready – is to drive interaction via the app and thereby lower the number of service-related calls being made to Cannock Chase Council. The effect, from the residents' point of view, would be to increase the access to digital services by extending the 'opening hours' (digitally) of the two councils.

In practical terms the project sought to replicate the e-functionality of Stafford's *MyCouncilServices* in Cannock, and to add e-payments functionality into both. The original proposal forecast expected savings of £6,400 at both councils once the apps and e-payment functionality was in place.

The approach and progress to date

The purchase and implementation of the new e-forms in CCC was greatly expedited by the shared IT services knowledge of the system and existing relationship with the software supplier. The project commenced in April 2015 by establishing a project board comprising representatives from the customer services and IT functions at the two councils.

Purchase of the software followed swiftly in May 2015. By July 2015, the list of e-forms that would be converted had been agreed and prioritized. The conversion process comprised populating the new forms with content such as prices or addresses and took two weeks.

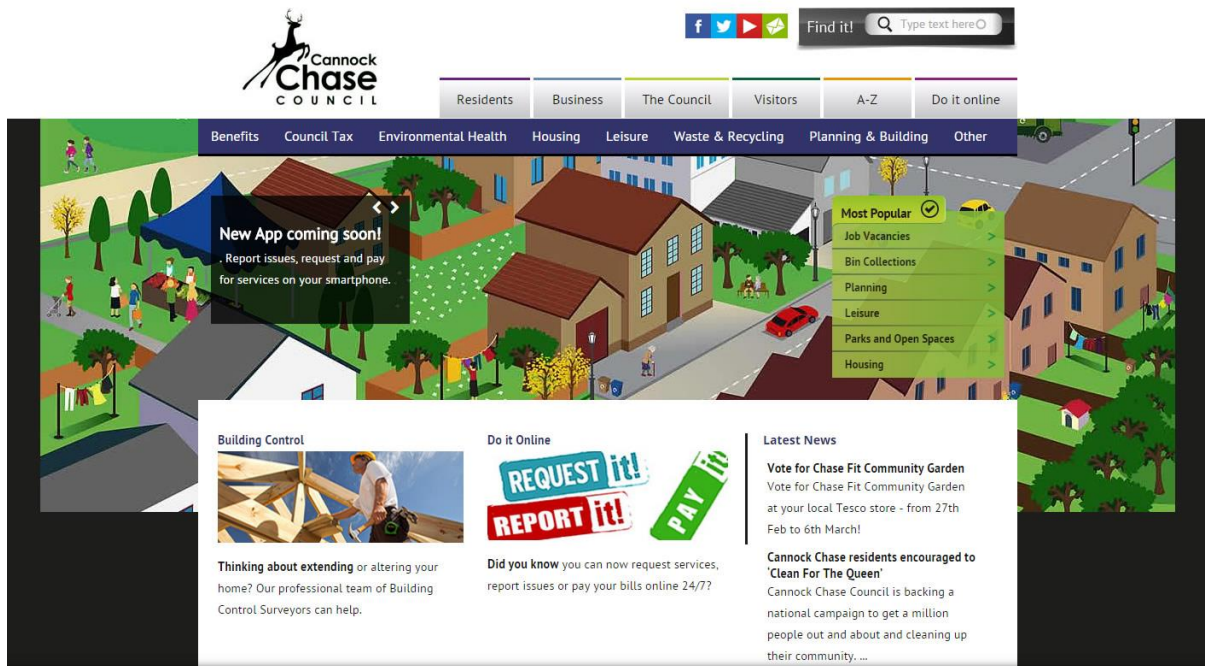
Training in the use of the forms with the software supplier was carried out during the summer and, by September 2015, 32 forms covering 65 different service requests had been completed and tested on Cannock's website.

Although the forms were ready to go live by the first week of September, Cannock Chase Council's communications team chose to schedule the go-live to coincide with the re-launch of their website on 28 September 2015.

It became apparent to the project team during autumn 2015 that progress on the e-payments part of the project would have to await the outcome of talks at a county-wide level with their current service provider, Capita. Negotiations are ongoing and this work is expected to start after the completion of the end-of-year council tax billing cycle.

Following the launch of the e-forms on CCC's new website, the next step was to leverage the functionality built into the hosted solution *MyCouncilServices* – to make the forms available in the form of an app for smartphones and tablets.

In parallel with the development and testing of the apps, CCC promoted the forthcoming availability of the e-forms via the council newsletters in June and December 2015 and via a banner advert on the front page of the council's website. The advertising messages stressed that the app would make CCC services available 24-7.



Market testing of the apps took place in December 2015 by which time 134 residents had registered interest in downloading the app. The app became available on Android in February 2016. Release on the Apple platform was delayed by the Apple registration process, but went live in March 2016. Hence, the online forms and the app are available to any appropriate smart device using the Android or Apple operating system. The councils chose not to release the app on Blackberry devices as the stats gathered by MCS (the hosted solution) show that there has been very little use by Blackberry owners over the last few years. The availability of the e-forms via the app will be fully launched and promoted in spring 2016.

The councils now plan to replicate in Cannock the back-office integration with their waste management and streetscene systems currently operation within Stafford. This enables information sent via the app to be processed via the CRM system and to be directly imported into the back-office system and passed to the waste management service delivery teams. However, at the time of writing, Cannock is currently negotiating their new outsourced service provider in waste management, and since the system includes service delivery operatives in the process progress in this area awaits commencement of the new service delivery relationship in spring 2016.

The outcome - successes and challenges

As result of this project, 32 forms covering 65 different service requests are now currently available on the Cannock Chase Council website.

The screenshot shows the Cannock Chase Council website's 'Report It' page. The page has a purple header with the council logo and navigation tabs for 'Residents', 'Business', 'The Council', 'Visitors', 'A-Z', and 'Do it online'. Below the header is a sub-menu with 'Report It', 'Request It', and 'Pay It'. The main content area is titled 'Report It' and features a 'Click to Report:' section with a list of 16 categories: Abandoned Vehicle, Air Pollution, Anti Social Behaviour, Benefit Landlord Consultation, Compliments, Complaints, Complaint about a Councillor, Bin - Missed / not collected, Bin - Damaged, Bin - Lost, Fly Tipping, Housing Options Feedback, Housing Repairs, Parks and Open Spaces issue, Planning applications portal, and Other / General Enquiry. A large red 'REPORT It!' stamp is overlaid on the right side of the page. At the bottom, a note states: 'The following should be reported to Staffordshire County Council online here or by calling 0300 111 800'.

Report it Online 24-7

- Abandoned vehicle
- Air pollution
- Anti-social behaviour
- Benefit landlord consultation
- Compliments
- Complaints
- Complaint about a councillor
- Bin - missed / not collected
- Bin - damaged
- Bin - lost
- Fly tipping
- Housing - private rented accommodation
- Housing options feedback
- Housing repairs
- Parks and open spaces issues
- View planning applications.

Request it Online 24-7

- Abandoned vehicle removal
- Benefits - appeal form - housing and council tax benefits
- Benefits - notification of change of circumstance - housing and council tax benefits
- Benefits - request home visit
- Bin - missed / not collected
- Bin - damaged
- Bin - lost
- Business rates - register for e-billing
- Chase Matters tenant magazine - request
- Council tax - left property
- Council tax single person discount application
- Council tax - register for e-bill
- Council tax - register your details
- Discretionary housing payment
- Hackney Carriage / private hire licence applications (pdf)
- Licence - scrap metal dealer
- Licence - temporary event notice
- Housing benefit and council tax benefit changes of circumstances
- Housing - discretionary housing payment
- Housing repairs.

Report It and *Request It* are simply groups that help guide the user to the correct list of forms and also provide a starting point for high level reports. Principally, *Request It* is aimed at providing forms that allow the customer to request a direct service.

Report It does the same for indirect services such as fly tipping. The councils will be adding *Pay It* as a group once online payments are live.

Promotion of the app began mid-April 2016. In advance of the availability and promotion of the app – which is expected to facilitate much wider access to the functionality – evidence of financial benefits is limited.

In the first five months since the release of the e-forms in Cannock Chase, there have been a total of 468 service reports/requests made via the e-forms system on the website.

Although these numbers are small it does represent a six-fold increase in the number of forms submitted via the CCC website. If we assume that each completed form replaces a call to the contact centre at a cost of £2.83, this represents a saving of £1,240 so far.

Figure 1. Transaction volumes (To be populated over time - transactions can be separated by submitting device i.e. actual service request numbers for each device)

		Sept- Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
e-Forms via PC / – web browser	Report It	345								
	Request It	123								
e-Forms via Apple OS App	Report It	5								
	Request It									
e-Forms via Android OS App	Report It									
	Request It									
e-Forms via Apple OS – web browser	Report It	5								
	Request It									
e-Forms via Android OS – web browser	Report It									
	Request It									

Note: access via Apple and Android OS includes access via smartphone and tablets.

The project has set itself targets of achieving 1,000 transactions over the course of 2016/17. The project expects the addition of e-payments integration and the additional integration with the back office to increase service volumes and so create further savings.

Staffordshire County Council has created a link on their MyStaffsApp to Cannock Chase and Stafford Borough Councils' webpages – from where they can access the forms via the responsive web pages (or download the Stafford / Cannock Chase app to access the forms directly).

Key learning points

In common with several of the other projects, the timing and progress of this work has been affected by factors outside of the project's influence – such as ongoing negotiations with e-payments providers at a county level.

Knowledge and experience of the Abavus MyCouncilServices software by their shared service partner Stafford expedited the process of implementation. The lesson for other authorities is to look for proven models and reference sites when choosing digital solutions where possible.

The financial benefit of channel shift is partly a function of volume, and councils need to have a clear view of the customer need and drivers – and be ready to heavily promote the new online service, potentially to specific customer groups.

Next steps

Promotion and marketing of the app is scheduled for mid-April 2016 and will comprise an online campaign via Facebook and Twitter as well online advertising through the Cannock website. This has been tied in with Staffordshire County Council's launch of their MyStaffsApp, on which both Stafford and Cannock Councils have a presence (MyStaffsApp was also partly funded by the Digital Experts programme, and a case study is available from the Digital Experts part of the LGA website).

Integration of e-payments is expected to be rolled out in June 2016, pending Staffordshire County Council's ongoing negotiations with Capita. This relates to an upgrade to the e-payments system that is managed at a county level. The integration of online forms with e-payments depends upon having a secure test environment, and it is not possible to progress this until that environment is in place.

Once Cannock's new waste management contract is operational, Cannock will proceed with integrating the e-forms with CCC's CRM and back office. This will replicate the back-office integration that Stafford currently enjoy and produce further efficiencies through avoiding manual intervention and data re-entry.

Cannock have already integrated the back-office functionality for their pest control service with their CRM and plan to add integration between *MyCouncilServices* and their CRM to join and automate these steps. Once complete, service requests submitted via the smartphone app will present directly in the back-office system of the service provider resulting in further efficiency savings for the council and an improved service for their customers.

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