



Digital Experts Programme

Solihull online self-service project report

The project objectives and targets

Solihull Council recognises that in the current climate of decreasing funding and increasing customer demand, new and innovative ways of working will be needed to improve services, increase efficiency and reduce costs.

While Solihull has had an effective customer contact service in place for many years, underpinned by a customer relationship management system (CRM), the council had identified that a number of front-line service areas would benefit from the introduction of next-generation, integrated online self-service e-payments, e-forms and digital booking systems. In particular, there was a demand for local residents, customers, businesses and community groups to be able to book and pay online for:

1. Cycle training courses for children
2. Pest control visits and treatments
3. Licences to hand out free printed matter
4. Food hygiene training courses
5. Meeting rooms in community centres
6. Park events
7. Library meeting rooms
8. Library training courses
9. Football pitches
10. Cycle track usage
11. High street access, community events and markets
12. Cesspool and septic tank emptying
13. Appointments with the licencing team e.g. to renew taxi licences.

Although several elements of a technical solution were already in place within the council, competing priorities such as Care Act implementation had hampered the pace of change and it had proved difficult to gain access to appropriate ICT resource as a result of insufficient in-house capacity.

The council therefore bid for Digital Experts support to help fund a contractor to drive forward the implementation of online self-service e-bookings and e-payment in the 13 service areas above.

Solihull anticipated that a range of outcomes would be delivered through the project, including:

- Easier access to services and time savings for customers, as well as faster resolution of their enquiries
- Reduced demand on other council contact channels as a result of increased online self-service
- Efficiency savings estimated at around £50,000 per annum through reductions in officer time spent manually processing transactions
- Increased income through opening up council services to a wider audience and simplifying the booking and payment process
- Closer relationships with partners and community groups through their being able to make easier use of council facilities
- Reputational enhancement, as residents perceive that the council is keeping pace with the digital age.

The project was expected to be completed within six months of the successful bid and the resultant hire of a suitable contractor – that is, by late 2015.

The progress to date

A project manager was appointed in July 2015 and work on the project progressed over the summer and autumn. In the meantime, the council had committed to a wider Digital Connect programme, within which the Digital Experts work would sit.

Using a mix of internal and external resources, by late 2015 the main activity was focused on preparing the forms requirements¹ for different services and constructing the technical platform.

Although some delays were encountered as a result of resourcing constraints, by January 2016 and with support from an external contractor, a range of technical project elements had either been completed or were underway:

- Links had been established between online maps and the local land and property gazetteer

¹ These were completed by early November

- The capability to accept payments via the council's cash management system had been set up and was ready for use
- Test workspaces, testing and training for nine of the 13 Digital Experts services were being targeted for completion by the end of February 2016.²

The February meeting of the Solihull Digital Connect project board was therefore expected to take a business decision on which services might be ready for partial go-live in March (taking into account the pressures generated by end-of-year council tax billing) and those that would be implemented in April or later.

However, in May 2016 the project team reported that although all the technical work for the Digital Experts project had been completed and was 'ready for live', the decision to proceed was linked to progress on Solihull's wider Digital Connect project. This wider project included work on further services to the public, front-and-back office staff training and the phasing out of one CRM system and switch to another.

Although originally targeted for completion by the end of July 2016, the implementation of the Digital Connect project was subsequently postponed until November 2016 as a result of a council decision to undertake a more complete move of services from its old CRM to the new one. At this point in November, the council's current 200 or so service requests (including the nine outstanding areas covered by the Digital Experts project) would be replaced by a consolidated group of around 40.

Following intervention from the LGA to request an update on Solihull's plans for the funded Digital Experts project, at its September 2016 meeting the council's Digital Connect project board reviewed its position in relation to its Digital Experts commitments. The board's preferred option was to make the Digital Experts services live at the end of September in advance of the planned date for the other service requests. However, resource constraints in the business functions responsible for these services meant this could not be achieved.

The revised 'go live' dates for the Digital Experts service areas, involving both a web form for use by citizens and an internal service request for use by Connect agents, were as follows therefore:

- 7 December 2016 – food hygiene training, high street access, cesspools and septic tanks (implemented)

² The remaining four services in the original bid (booking and paying for pest control, meeting rooms in libraries and community centres, and library training courses) had by now been excluded because the service areas were either undergoing review or had indicated that alternative provision would be made

- 11 January 2017 – cycle training courses, free printed matter, park events, football bookings, cycle track usage, licencing appointments (planned at the time this report was being prepared).

The remaining four areas continue to be excluded from the current plans, but could return to being supported by the Digital Experts technology during 2017.

The outcome – challenges and key learning points

The Digital Experts project in Solihull faced a number of challenges from which other councils can learn.

Specific project v wider transformation

The Digital Experts project focused on 13 specific service areas, whereas Solihull's Digital Connect programme had a much wider brief. It was important therefore to make links between the two initiatives, as the various project activities became interdependent.

However, explicit links between the funded Digital Experts project and the wider work do not appear to have been made sufficiently clear early on, nor does the project seem to have been given appropriate priority in the overall programme. It therefore did not benefit from the necessary visibility, senior-level attention and resources required to deliver it in the manner and timescales set out in the bid.

The result was that the council had to manage a difficult balancing act between delivering the Digital Experts project, funded by a specific grant with agreed timescales, and the wider and more comprehensive ambitions of Solihull's Digital Connect programme.

The result was a delay of around one year in the implementation of the Digital Experts work – a year in which residents could have been benefiting from better service and the council from efficiency savings.

The challenge of managing specific projects within a wider programme of work is not unique to Solihull. All councils need to consider carefully how they structure their transformation programmes to ensure that the benefits of specific initiatives are not diminished or delayed by being linked to longer-term goals, the interdependencies between different elements of work are recognised and managed, and appropriate resources are secured and deployed.

A further learning point is the need for constant and effective communication between project teams and their grant funders. The LGA is well aware that the environment in which councils work is more turbulent than ever and that priorities may need to change; at the same time, the LGA has its own priorities, targets and responsibilities as a project sponsor. Therefore, it is

important for the project leads to ensure good regular updates on progress and to communicate issues as soon as these arise.

Project resourcing

One of the original drivers for the Digital Experts project was a concern over the availability of technical resources within Solihull. The funding was meant to help address some of this shortfall.

In practice, however, the main constraint on finally implementing the project proved to be resource pressures in other parts of the council, including contact centre staff who had to test and be trained on a wide range of new processes and staff in the various service functions who are under tremendous pressure in the current financial climate. So although the technical elements of the project had been completed by the spring of 2016, the actual implementation date had to be rescheduled until December 2016/January 2017.

This underlines the need for all councils to consider at the outset the wide range of resources required to deliver a major transformation programme, and to plan carefully for their availability, while at the same time recognising that flexibility may be required to address changes in council responsibilities, funding and public expectations. It also reinforces the importance of establishing and maintaining very close links between the technical, contact centre and service staff involved, as well as to have continuing senior sponsorship and oversight to ensure digital transformation projects have the support they need to be brought successfully to completion.

Where next?

The project team went live with three of the nine identified Digital Experts services in December 2016 and were planning to implement the remaining six in early January 2017. If appropriate, during 2017 the technology developed during the Digital Experts projects will be used to support the remaining four areas of the 13 originally identified in Solihull's Digital Experts bid.

In the meantime, our recommendation has been that the council should put in place the baseline measurements of current performance and appropriate data collection methods to enable it to analyse take-up, improvements in customer service (both customer and internal measurements) and efficiency gains once the services go live.

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. To maximise the potential savings, processes should be integrated to link online forms with back-office systems and avoid manual intervention wherever possible (as Solihull's project aims to do)
- Administrative savings from staff no longer having to manually enter or re-key data
- Other process efficiencies e.g. the reductions in cost involved in cheque processing or in printing forms to send out to clients.

The LGA plans to keep in touch with Solihull as it continues its Digital Experts work.

Contact for further information

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