

Digital Experts Programme

MyStaffsApp case study



The issue and context

Staffordshire is a large county located in the north West Midlands, covering an area of 2,713 km² and with a population of 850,000. The county is divided into eight district councils, including Tamworth BC, Lichfield DC, Cannock Chase, South Staffordshire DC, Stafford BC, Newcastle-under-Lyme BC, Staffordshire Moorlands BC and East Staffordshire DC.

Residents and businesses need to interact with both county and district councils to carry out their business – but customers often neither care nor need to know what organisation provides what service. The partners involved in the project also recognise that consumer behaviour is changing – with residents of Staffordshire transitioning rapidly to using tablets and smartphones rather than desktop computers.

“Customers’ preferred touch-point has rapidly become their smartphone. The MyStaffsApp seeks to respond to this change, and to begin to engage customers by ‘being in their pocket’”. Dionne Lowndes, Head of Customer Service and Digital Leader at Staffordshire County Council

Hence, to make it easier for residents to access services and more cost effective for the councils to serve them, Staffordshire County Council have worked in partnership with the district councils across the county to develop a ‘MyStaffsApp’, a smartphone App, offering access to a range of services provided by both county and district councils. There is a long history of partnership working across the county, with the Staffordshire Connects e-Government Partnership being formed in 2001 – leading to a shared customer relationship management (CRM) system being jointly procured and adopted by the county and the majority of district councils in Staffordshire.

The principal partners responsible for driving progress on MyStaffsApp are Staffordshire County Council, Tamworth Borough Council, South Staffordshire District Council and Lichfield District Council. The partners recognise that residents already self-serve online when shopping or banking, and expect their local authority to be more like Amazon. Furthermore, encouraging greater self-service allows the council to manage demand and free up resources to support those in greater need of support.

The partners also recognise that residents do not know or care which organisation – county or district – provides which service. Hence, they sought to design the experience accordingly – offering services from both tiers in the same App. The App offers a solution that enables residents to interact with their district or county council without the need to know which council delivers which services.

The funding from the LGA has enabled the partners to project manage the development of the App. Work is ongoing to expand the range of services available on the App into higher volume transaction areas.

The project objectives and targets

The rationale for developing MyStaffsApp is to:

- Improve online access to services for customers, by offering a channel which residents are increasingly switching to
- Encourage channel shift and self-service to reduce the cost of contact for the council
- Leverage the existing CRM system to begin to integrate processes and achieve efficiencies.

The project funding from the LGA focused on supporting the collaborative development of the App functionality between the partners and suppliers – comprising design workshops, training and developing the 'profiles' for each council (a copy of the presentation introducing the design workshop is available on the case page). The district councils highlight that without this collaborative, shared approach the time and costs required to develop an App themselves would have been prohibitive.

The approach and progress to date

The identification and procurement of the Ombiel platform took place during 2014, with progress being reported quarterly to the Staffordshire Partnership Strategic Advisory Board comprising Staffordshire County Council, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, Stoke City Council, Stafford Borough Council, Tamworth District Council, Lichfield District Council, Cannock District Council and South Staffordshire District Council.

The LGA funding was invested in the project management resource to help drive the project forward, and the timing was fortuitous as it coincided with the kick-off of the design and development phase of work. A major part of the project management role was to:

- Act as principal point of contact with the software provider – Ombiel
- Convene and bring representatives from the councils together with the supplier in design and training workshops.

The process began in early 2015 with a design workshop convened between Ombiel, Staffordshire County, plus the heads of customer services at Tamworth BC, South Staffordshire BC and Lichfield BC. The purpose was to design a 'proof of concept' of how the App would look and feel – using a demand analysis to determine the position and scale of the tiles – i.e. the areas of the screen relating to a particular service or functionality that when touched reveal further options and buttons. For an example, see the screen shot below:

Figure 1. Staffordshire County Council's Version of MyStaffsApps

The next step was for Ombiel to build 'profiles' for the four participating councils – these comprise basic templates of the App landing and supporting screen with tiles for each service area that the councils could build on.

The intention from the start was for the participating organisations to become self-sufficient in designing and developing their own versions of the App. Hence, during May and June 2015 the project manager convened design and training days with the supplier and key people from the authorities' web design and customer service staff; this also would enable each team to further develop their App over time as they acquired the necessary skills. They worked with a live but basic version of the solution – building on the pre-existing profiles and templates which Ombiel had developed for each authority. These sessions were part training, and part design, as staff learnt how to work with the tiles to add functionality, text, links to the website and images into their Apps.



Another significant milestone was reached in June, when integration with the National Land & Property Gazetteer was achieved. This enables residents using the App to be presented with a mix of county and district services relevant to their location.

By summer 2015 the platform went, enabling the authorities to continue to their development work based on their individual priorities.

A second design workshop was convened in early summer 2015. This was to look at the data matching and sharing required to create an App that would go beyond simply offering information, advice and guidance to one which was interactive (i.e. enabled service requests with acknowledgements and updates) and ultimately supported transactions (i.e. services which could be requested and paid for all via the App). With a view to developing each council's own capacity to develop their App, the second design workshop focused on the data that needed to be exchanged between the smartphone and CRM systems.

For example, Tamworth BC and Lichfield DC have taken steps to integrate the App with their waste management systems via their CRM system. One of the legacies of the Staffordshire Connects partnerships is that most of the councils use a common CRM system – now provided by Kana. Integrating waste management services in Tamworth BC and Lichfield DC has partly involved integrating the MyStaffsApp with this CRM system. Other services go further and integrate with the back-office system. For example, Lichfield DC have done this for assisted bin collection – i.e. residents can put in a service request and receive notifications of its receipt and the request will be fulfilled by their service provider.

Likewise, Tamworth BC has chosen to develop their version of MyStaffsApp to offer council tax services; again this is integrated via the CRM system. Tamworth BC involved both the customer service staff responsible for the CRM system and the web design staff in the development. By using the same people who built the CRM to build the App, they developed their internal capacity to modify and extend the system to meet their council’s priorities while avoiding any external costs. South Staffordshire is seeking to learn from Tamworth BC’s experience later in 2016 when they seek to integrate council tax.

However, the project has also encountered challenges. This includes a delay in rolling out access to library services and e-payments via the App. These are both potentially high volume transactions which would attract users (see ‘Key Learning Points’ for further details). In both cases, the systems with which the MyStaffsApp would need to integrate were themselves undergoing changes – making it impossible to carry out the integration work. e-Payments are expected to be added in June 2016, once negotiations at a county-level are concluded. To offer access to libraries, the project team is looking to make the library site responsive (so it can be read via a smartphone browser) and once done a tile will be added to MyStaffsApp to link through to the responsive pages – this is expected to be done over summer 2016.

The availability of the MyStaffsApp was originally promoted to the public in May 2015, via bus advertising, posters and leaflets. The partners plan to re-launch the app following the addition of e-payments functionality in spring 2016. The relaunch will be done predominantly through social media (Facebook and Twitter) in conjunction with partners. An example of the artwork is presented in figure 3.

Figure 2. Lichfield DC Version of MyStaffsApp



The outcome - successes and challenges

Residents in Staffordshire County and the eight district councils can now access a range of services from both the county and district councils over the MyStaffsApp.

However, the number and nature of the services offered in each district are not uniform, as once the platform had been procured and the council staff trained in designing and developing the services, each district council took the initiative to focus on their local priorities. Integration between the App is being driven by the district councils, from their own internal systems up into MyStaffsApp. Tamworth Borough Council, Lichfield District Council and South Staffordshire District Council have taken steps to leverage the platform to integrate with back-office functions – outlined over the following pages.

In February and March 2016, the project also developed profile pages for the remaining district councils (Cannock Chase, Stafford BC, Newcastle-under-Lyme BC, Staffordshire Moorlands BC and East Staffordshire DC), and residents in these areas clicking on the App's tiles are re-directed to responsive web pages on each council's website to complete their transactions (as mentioned, the App integrates with the NLPG, and so presents the appropriate services according to postcode). Hence, residents anywhere in Staffordshire County can access (although they cannot complete) transactions relating to:

- Viewing school term times and closures
- Reporting highway faults i.e. potholes – this integrates through to the county's back office system
- Booking an appointment to register a birth.

Lichfield DC

- View information on leisure services, and local events
- Report a missed bin – integrates with Lichfield DC CRM system
- Apply for assisted bin collection – i.e. residents can put in a service request and receive notifications on receipt and fulfilment of request
- Apply for an additional or larger bin – i.e. residents can put in a service request and get an acknowledgement.

Figure 3. Artwork to be used in re-launch campaign



Lichfield DC is currently working on integrating streetscene reporting, such as reporting fly tipping, directly into their CRM, and working collaboratively with Tamworth to map the processes involved. Lichfield DC is also looking at linking to council tax inquiries in the next six months, and learning from the work Tamworth have already done regards council tax. Lichfield DC is choosing develop the functionality of the App – the number of services available and integrated – before promoting the app to their residents. Hence, the volume of transactions flowing through the App to Lichfield DC’s systems is for the time being low.

Tamworth BC

- Request to make council tax payment
- Request for council tax balance
- Request for a single person discount
- Report that you are moving in, or moving out of the area
- Request new bins.

At the moment, these requests are integrated directly into Tamworth BC’s CRM system, and added to customer service staff work queues. Staff deal with the questions and work across systems to trigger the processes requested. However, Tamworth BC is now looking at procuring software to integrate directly with the back-office systems so that in most instances no intervention from customer service staff will be required.

Since November 2015, Tamworth BC has added push notifications indicating to residents when their bins will be emptied, and residents can now request reminders for when bins will be emptied.

South Staffordshire DC

To date, much of the functionality offered has focused on MyStaffApp’s reporting functionality. Residents can report:

- Fly tipping
- Dog fouling
- Assisted collection
- Additional bins
- Abandoned vehicles
- Alerts and notifications – residents can request reminders to put their bin out.

In addition to the efficiencies of working in partnership, collaboration has also enriched the process. Lichfield DC and Tamworth BC worked together on the design and development of their integration of waste management. Likewise, South Staffordshire DC is seeking to replicate Tamworth DC’s approach to integrating their council tax via the CRM system.

Most recently, during March 2016, the project team built a payments tile for all profiles, although integration of e-payments will need resolution of wider negotiations with their e-payments provider. Integration with e-payment is expected in June 2016. During the same period, the project teams also built an 'events' tile for all profiles.

The MyStaffsApp has been a partnership project, and the main source of financial benefits is in the efficiencies of developing the functionality in collaboration. The LGA funding was invested to support a dedicated project manager to support the design, training and launch phases. The partners highlighted that having a dedicated project management resource driving the work on behalf of all partners has been hugely beneficial.

The participating councils estimate that the workload required of them to achieve the same outcome would have been 50 per cent the equivalent of a project manager for the nine months from April to December 2015 – estimated to be approximately £18,750 for each of the District Councils involved – equivalent to over £55,000 in total. The partners stress that this cost would simply have been prohibitive in current circumstances, and the work would not have proceeded.

By the end of March 2016 the App has over 5,000 active users and has been downloaded onto over 9,000 devices. There have been over 39,891 user sessions (each session comprising multiple clicks) since the first launch, generating over 250,000 hits.

Staffordshire County Council estimate that even if only 20 per cent of these sessions helped to avoid a telephone call to the council (at a cost of £2.83), then the savings on avoidable already amount to just over £22,500 across the partnership – and this is in advance of the re-launch planned for spring 2016.

Key learning points

Digital projects have to work around organisational realities. The project originally had ambitions to include access to library services – a potentially high volume area. However, the project discovered that the libraries had a major transformation project underway, and therefore decided to wait until the new systems were in place and settled before trying to integrate with the App.

Likewise, one of the original ambitions of the project had been to offer Staffordshire County staff access to their payslips over MyStaffsApp. However, the project swiftly discovered that the HR function was in the process of replacing its payroll service and it was not possible to integrate until the new system was up and running.

Partnership working can accommodate very different types of approaches

Each of the district councils took a different approach as to the best way to apply to their council's services to the App, so these best met local needs, and then how to promote this to their local community to build the level of take-up. For example, South Staffordshire DC went about building up the number of users that had downloaded the app through advertising and promotion before investing in integrations. They now report 1,200 downloads – second only, very narrowly, to the county itself – and are monitoring usage to determine where to develop and extend functionality. In contrast Lichfield DC has not promoted the App at all, preferring to build up the functionality and integration before they launch it.

Next steps

The project is seeking to complete the following:

- A new 'My Wedding' feature is being tested and should go live around the end of April 2016
- E-payments is scheduled to be live in June 2016
- A tile will be added for libraries in the summer 2016
- The project team is planning to start a marketing campaign mid-May 2016 and has been working with a marketing company who will be assisting with this. This will be mainly focussed on social media.

Later in 2016, Tamworth BC is seeking to extend the integration regarding council tax services beyond their CRM system to encompass their back-office document management systems – reducing the need for staff intervention. Likewise Lichfield DC is seeking to extend integration into the back-end systems relating to streetscene.

Contact for further information

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