



Digital Experts Programme

Improving the Wirral Website case study

The issue and context

In common with many local authorities, Wirral Council faces a challenging financial position. The council has had to make cuts of £151 million between 2010 and 2015. By 2020 the council will have to reduce its spending by a further £132 million to deliver a balanced budget.

In an attempt to address the issues it is facing, Wirral has undergone a massive transformation and in 2015 launched an ambitious Wirral Plan with 20 pledges to be delivered by 2020. Online services will play a key role in the provision of an effective service to residents and businesses, and in supporting the Wirral Plan's pledges.

The Wirral Plan includes a commitment to modernise its public services and states:

'We must be – and will be – a council which is fit for the digital world. Our services must be accessible, delivered sometimes entirely online, to reduce costs, and to improve speed and efficiency'.

The council has made huge progress with online services since 2010:

- Traffic on the council website has more than doubled
- The council has introduced over 100 services online
- The council has a resident email database of over 90,000
- The council's social media following has grown from zero to over 30,000.

The council believes there is a major opportunity to use online services to make life easier for Wirral residents and businesses whilst also controlling costs.

The existing version of the website was built in 2010 and was not designed for use with smartphones and tablets. However, by September 2015 over half of all visits to the site came from these devices. These customers were finding it difficult to use the website and many quickly discontinued trying to carry out their business online and went on to contact the council via other, more expensive, channels.

Statistics showed an 18 per cent higher 'bounce' rate for mobile users than PC users. A 'bounce' is when a user comes straight in and straight out of a site, and is a clear indicator that users are not finding what they want or cannot carry out their business. Industry statistics suggest that the bounce rate for mobile users is on average 7 per cent higher than for desktop users.

Google analytics for wirral.gov.uk between December 2014 and August 2015 (before the Digital Experts work was completed) highlighted that 58 per cent of mobile visitors bounced straight in and out of the site, i.e. around 520,000 visitors over the review period. With an increasing use of mobile technology this figure would be likely to grow significantly year-on-year unless some action was taken.

Joe Blott, Managing Director for Delivery, states:

'We must address customer expectations and keep up with developments in the outside world.'

The project objectives and targets

A key objective of the Digital Experts project was to enable the council to maximise the potential savings available through the efficient delivery of online services.

A major part of this work was to update the Wirral website:

- To make the site easier for customers to use
- To build a website which works well on any kind of device
- To support increased levels of online self-service
- To reduce costs associated with demand on traditional channels such as telephone and face-to-face
- To update the content management system from Drupal 6.0 to Drupal 7.0 as support for Drupal 6.0 was due to be withdrawn in 2016.

In particular, the council wished to reduce the level of mobile visitors 'bouncing' out of the site. Based on the assumption that half of these unsuccessful visitors would have gone on to contact Wirral Council via telephone, and applying standard SOCITM channel costs, the cost avoided by each percentage point reduction in the bounce rate was estimated to be around £13,000. This figure would increase as mobile traffic grew.

The Digital Experts funding would allow the council to:

- Subscribe to usability testing software to ensure that information on the website is easy to find
- Undertake accessibility testing to ensure that the website can be used by all individuals regardless of the challenges they face
- Review the operational performance of the website and fix broken links, correct spelling errors, rectify coding problems and ensure that the site complies with the house style
- Subscribe to Google internal site search for one year to enable faster and more accurate access to the content of the website.

The approach and progress to date

Simplifying the navigation

The first step was to simplify the navigation of the site, which was previously based on the complex Local Government Navigation List system.

Using the council's resident database, a 'top tasks' survey was undertaken to establish which tasks on the website were considered by residents to be the most important. The council also looked at traffic figures from Google Analytics along with transaction figures from their call centres and one-stop shops. This gave a good understanding of the relative popularity of tasks on the website.

Based on this knowledge and research of other local authority sites, the council put together a draft information architecture for the site.

This was tested with customers and staff using Optimal Workshop's Treejack software. This allows you to track how people navigate through the site in order to complete certain tasks. The council e-mailed the test to their resident database and 316 residents participated in a number of tests.

The feedback highlighted certain sections of the website where people were confused by the way information was structured and consequently changes were made and retested resulting in immediate improvements in the results.

Simplifying the design

The second step was to simplify the design of the website. The site was previously built in 2010 and was designed to work on desktops, not phones and tablets. The front page of the original site looked like:

The screenshot shows the original Wirral Council website layout. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Wirral logo, a search bar, and links for 'A-Z of Services', 'Contact us', 'Accessibility', and 'Site Map'. Below this is a large banner for 'FLOOD ADVICE' featuring a car driving through water. To the right of the banner is a sidebar with links for 'Bins/Streets', 'Council Tax', 'Libraries', 'Leisure Centres', and 'Benefits'. Below the banner are sections for 'Latest News' and 'What's On', each with a small image and text. The main content area is divided into several columns with various service categories like 'ADVICE AND BENEFITS', 'HOUSING', 'JOBS AND CAREERS', 'LEISURE AND CULTURE', 'SOCIAL CARE AND HEALTH', 'TRANSPORT AND STREETS', 'BUSINESS', 'CHILDREN'S SERVICES', 'COMMUNITY AND LIVING', 'COUNCIL AND DEMOCRACY', and 'ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING'. At the bottom, there is a 'Leader's Blog' section with a photo of a man and a 'Council Jobs' section listing various roles and salaries. The footer contains multilingual links, the Wirral Council logo, and social media icons.

Looking at best practice from other sites and guidance from the Government Digital Service the council created a clean design which was partly based on GOV.UK. The GOV.UK team were very helpful and were happy to let the council follow the styling of their site. This saved a lot of time and effort with the site design.

The council created the following, much clearer, designs:

Desktop home page

WIRRAL

Search

Leisure, parks and events

Libraries and archives

Bins and recycling

Council Tax

Benefits and money

Make a payment

Schools and learning

Planning and building

Parking, roads and travel

More Services

WIRRAL BOOKFEST

10-17 OCTOBER 2015

News

Bookfest 2015 full line-up released
17 September 2015

Wirral launches £2bn joint-delivery plan
17 September 2015

Residents to help shape the future of public services
14 September 2015

More News

What's on

Mayor's Diary
Mon 21 Sep 1:30am to Sun 27 Sep 11:30pm

Vince Hunt – Scorched Earth – Bookfest 2015
Sat 10 Oct 2:30pm to 4:30pm
Location: Moreton Library

Hilary Green – Keep Smiling Through – Bookfest 2015
Mon 12 Oct 2:30pm to 4:30pm
Location: West Kirby Library

More events

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Mobile home page

 **WIRRAL**

[Search](#)

- [Leisure, parks and events](#) >
- [Libraries and archives](#) >
- [Bins and recycling](#) >
- [Council Tax](#) >
- [Benefits and money](#) >
- [Make a payment](#) >
- [Report a child at risk](#) >
- [Planning and building](#) >
- [Parking, roads and travel](#) >

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Improving the e-forms

Many of the services that customers access rely on the completion of a form containing relevant information. When this is done online it is known as an e-form. Research showed that many of Wirral's existing online forms were long and complex and difficult to use. In addition, many were in a pdf formats that still had to be printed off and completed by hand. Work had already begun to simplify these existing forms and with the introduction of the Digital Experts Project this work was focused on improving accessibility via mobile technology.

Each of the existing forms was reviewed with the aim of producing a 'minimum viable product' – i.e. making the form as short and simple as possible so it was appropriate for the service– with just enough information to initiate an action. When designing each form the council ensured all internal stakeholders were involved. Workshops were held to map the entire "as is" and "to be" processes, applying both BPR and Lean techniques, to ensure each stakeholder had the necessary information to do their job. The council also applies continuous improvement based on customer feedback and customer insight.

For example, a form to request the temporary closure of a road (e.g. for an event) which included extensive technical jargon has been redesigned to significantly reduce the number of steps and so is now a simple and user friendly interactive form.

Improving the search facility

Experience suggests that many users find content through the use of a search facility. However, the Drupal search engine utilised by the council did not perform particularly well.

Hence, a decision was taken to trial a more modern search facility (Google search) that utilised 'fuzzy' logic. A fuzzy search is a process that locates web pages that are likely to be relevant to a search argument even when the argument does not exactly correspond to the desired information (e.g. because of spelling mistakes or the use of synonyms).

For example customers reported that the following search items failed when the old search engine was used but succeeded when Google search was used:

- Current planning applications
- Childminders
- Challenge a parking fine
- Dawlish Road brown bin collection
- Trees
- Renewal parking card for disabled person
- Blue badge parking for disabled
- Telephone number of Wirral council
- Non permit holders parking times.

Plain English

During the modernisation process it was recognised that some customers were failing to find what they wanted on the website as a result of the use of technical language. Although the fuzzy search helps with this, customers may still not recognise the terminology used, so the opportunity was also taken to move towards the use of plain English on the website.

For example, the 'household waste and recycling centre' became the 'rubbish tip' and 'road defects' became 'potholes' etc.

Testing the site design

Once this work had been undertaken, the council held two testing sessions with staff (who are also Wirral residents) and one session with residents who were carers or work with people with disabilities.

These people were given a series of tasks to do and asked to carry them out on different devices.

The feedback on the design and navigation was very positive, particularly from mobile users. People found information quickly and said that the clean minimal design helped them to carry out the task they were asked to do.

Any issues identified during these tests were rectified and the site was launched in October 2015.

Following the site launch more issues were identified and fixed and, following the GOV.UK example, every page now has a link that says 'Is there anything wrong with this page'. The council now receives around 300 comments a month about a variety of subjects. Dealing with these is resource-intensive but is an invaluable way of finding out about problems that might otherwise be missed.

The outcome – successes and challenges

The project was launched on the premise that a significant proportion of individuals that failed to find what they wanted online and "bounced" out of the website would go on to contact the council via another, more expensive, channel. The potential saving that could be delivered by satisfying these customers, through the development of a more mobile friendly website, has been estimated to be in excess of £120,000.

In addition to the provision of a more responsive customer service, the proven savings to date, from a section of the council's transactions, are in excess of £65,000 per annum.

We give more detail on the impact below.

Creating a more responsive site

A first objective of the project was to make the Wirral Council website a responsive site which works effectively on any device. The results have been as follows:

- The site was relaunched in October 2015 with a new design that changes to the optimum size for the device being used.
- Since the launch there has been a significant fall in the bounce rate of mobile users, which is now 52 per cent. This equates to 86,675 fewer bounces per year on the current volumes of contact via mobiles.
- The SOCITM Better Connected 2015/16 survey on usability from a mobile device gave the site four out of four stars (the national average was 2.6).
- Survey feedback about this site has been very positive:

“Excellent overall experience. Very easy to navigate and read the pages. Good search facility.”

“Wow, this site has made some very bold design choices, clearly inspired by GOV.UK and stripping out all other noise.”

“Very bold and seemingly very usable.”

“A very impressive site - unafraid of being ‘boring’ and instead letting the user concentrate on getting stuff done.”

- Since the site relaunched mobile users are looking at 20 per cent more content in 2 per cent less time.
- The Site Morse Index ranks the quality of all 422 council websites according to a range of measures such as broken links, accessibility, availability, code quality and spelling errors. Wirral rose from 367th in Quarter 4 2015 to 5th in Quarter 2 2016. However, in Quarter 3 2016 Wirral has fallen to 37th due to the fact that the web team has lost a full-time editor.
- Call centre staff have said that the Google site search, introduced in June 2016, has made it much easier for them to find information for customers.

Reducing costs

A second objective was to reduce the costs associated with demand on traditional channels such as telephone and face-to-face. Based on our calculations, there are potential annual saving of £123,000 per annum. In practice a specific set of services have already delivered a saving of £65,000 per annum.

The detailed results are as follows:

- The improvement in the website has underpinned the decision to stop printing bin collection calendars and to provide this information online only. This has saved £45,000 per annum.
- The fall in the bounce rate from mobile users equates to 86,675 fewer bounces per year. If half of these people had gone on to contact the council by phone it would

cost the council around £123,000 per year, based on SOCITM average costs per transaction. This is a potential saving and actual savings have been recorded below.

- The council's CRM system records information for a specific set of services including Street Scene (e.g. street lights out of order, potholes, etc.) but excluding some significant services such as social services, planning, and leisure. A detailed analysis of the transactions recorded in the CRM shows a shift in channel usage since the implementation of the new e-forms. This has significantly reduced costs for the council.
- One element has been a £20,000 reduction in the cost to process email enquiries. In practice this saving is demonstrated by the fact that, prior to this project, the call centre had at least one and sometimes two full-time equivalents processing free format email enquiries. As a result of the increased use of web forms, this has been reduced to two hours per day, releasing these staff to deal with growing demand via other channels.

Lessons learnt

During this project a number of lessons were learnt:

- Don't be afraid to use other people's ideas. There are plenty of examples, experience and expertise in other councils and this should be utilised wherever possible – there is no need to re-invent everything locally.
- There may be problems getting timely buy-in from third-party suppliers when there is no financial benefit to them, so it is important that they are involved early in the process.
- Some services are more suited to mobile use (e.g. reporting dog fouling) whereas others are more likely to be reported from a desktop (e.g. where details of accounts or references etc. are needed). So it is advisable to identify these patterns and to concentrate efforts where they will deliver the greatest benefits.
- The use of Google search, with its fuzzy logic, had a significant impact and greatly reduced the number of failed searches that could result in more costly contact through other channels.
- The council should have done more benchmarking before the start of the project so that benefits could be measured and reported more easily.

Next steps

Wirral Council will start trialling webchat in the autumn/winter of 2016.

In addition there are a number of topics that will be considered over the coming months and may have a significant impact:

- The increasing use of social media for customer services needs to be evaluated and the council's response defined.

- The use of a single customer sign-in will be considered. This might be used, for example, to pre-populate e-forms.
- The Access Wirral Strategy outlines an aspiration to utilise the council’s web site as a front door to cross-agency services.
- The council will investigate the use of online maps – so customers can quickly and easily identify a location (e.g. to say ‘the fly tipping is here’)

Further information

For further information on this project please contact:

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