



Digital Experts Programme

Wyre Council e-forms case study – update

Background to the project

To help meet the resourcing challenges presented by the reductions in council funding – and the consequent impact on staffing levels – Wyre Council sought through its Digital Experts project to increase the levels of customer self-service through the introduction of e-forms that were integrated both with the website and the back-office processing systems.

The project concentrated on the administration of council tax, where at the outset of the project all channels required council staff to be involved in the process – whether it was handling a phone or face-to-face inquiry, or manually re-keying the data supplied by an email or existing unintegrated e-form.

In 2014, Wyre had purchased benefits integration software that enabled customers to make applications via the internet, without the need to complete a paper application form. The software was fully integrated into the council benefits system, enabling information input into the electronic claim form to be uploaded without the need for re-keying and leading to a significant reduction in costs.

The intent of the Digital Experts project was to replicate this approach to reducing the council's costs in council tax administration by introducing integrated e-forms, reducing the need for manual intervention, data handling and re-entry. In addition, the e-forms would offer residents 24/7 access to council tax services and lessen the requirement for customers to call or travel to the council offices – saving both the resident and the council time and money.

The position in Spring 2016

Following a successful procurement, Wyre began implementing the new e-forms solution in May 2015. The direct debits module went live with customer service staff in October 2015.

During late 2015 and early 2016 the change in circumstances and single person discount elements of the software were tested in a live environment at the customer service desks and

in Wyre’s Benefits Mobile Advice Centre. However, the complexity of these processes, combined with the continuing changes resulting from Welfare Reform, meant that these service elements had not been fully implemented by the time of the initial case study.

E-forms offer two principal sources of benefit – integration into the website facilitates customer self-service and avoids the need for telephone contact, while integration into the back-office saves internal processing time by removing the need for staff to manually re-key the data or send information to colleagues to do so.

Wyre estimates that the time saved by avoiding the manual re-work required in a typical council tax transaction can range between two and 20 minutes (setting aside the potential need to re-contact the customer if errors in the information are found). Assuming an average of five to ten minutes of staff time, the costs of manual intervention equate to a minimum of £2 per transaction.

By mid-April 2016, the estimated savings from implementing the direct debit e-form were as follows:

| Type of e-form transaction | Volume of transactions to 12 April 2016 | Calls avoided = £2.83 | Staff processing time saved = £2.00 | Total |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Direct Debit | 413 | £1169 | £826 | £1995 |

The council anticipated that avoiding significant manual intervention in changes of circumstances and single person discounts would be likely save more than £2 in the long term, estimated to be up to £6 a case, due to the fact that these cases require more manual intervention than direct debit registrations and other simpler transactions.

Our original case study and vox pops can be found at http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/productivity/-/journal_content/56/10180/6357119/ARTICLE

The position in Autumn 2016

The change in circumstances module is now in full operation and activity around the e-forms has continued to increase, as the table below illustrates.

| Type of e-form transaction | Volume of transactions to 30 Nov 2016 | Calls avoided = £2.83 | Staff processing time saved | Total |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------|
| Direct Debit | 608 | £1,720 | X £2 = £1,216 | £2,936 |
| Change of circumstances | 912 | £2,580 | X £6 = £5,472 | £8,052 |

| | | | | |
|--------|-------|--------|--------|---------|
| Totals | 1,520 | £4,300 | £6,688 | £10,988 |
|--------|-------|--------|--------|---------|

As a result of continuing issues with the single person discount form, Wyre is currently using their change of circumstances form for single person discount applications. However, this does not make any difference to the public, who simply go online and report a change of circumstances or request a single person discount as normal. It is possible that Wyre will decide to continue using the change of circumstances form for single person discount requests in the longer term.

Experience to date suggests that the complexity involved in administering changes of circumstances and single person discounts means that these processes will never be fully automated and that some manual intervention or checking is likely to be required. The good news is that even a semi-automated process saves a great deal of time and resource.

Wyre envisages that the use of all revenues and benefits e-forms will increase substantially once the suite of e-forms for both revenues and benefits are promoted more vigorously. This in turn will assist both the customer in terms of access to the Revenues and Benefits service, but also the council in being able to reduce the operational costs associated with the administration of these functions.

Contact for further information

For further information on this project, please contact:

Peter Mason
 Head of Contact Centre
 Wyre Council
Peter.Mason@wyre.gov.uk
 01253 887530