

Benefits of an agile approach

Agile working practices help build teams and relationships quickly, and deliver redesigned services and solutions that better meet user needs through engaging users, repeated testing and iteration from user feedback – and this means that the solution developed is more likely to work for the user.

Digital Channel Shift Programme

The Digital Channel Shift Programme was set up to help councils and their partners to promote greater use of online tools and technologies for the benefit of both their customers and staff.

The aim is for the digital tools and solutions created through the programme to be reused by other councils and contribute to the wider work to transform local public services.

Agile: fast and flexible

Using an agile working process, following a cycle of 'test, iterate and test again', means that we are far more likely to deliver a better end result for both the user and the council. This is because agile development includes iterations that spread the risk of project development more evenly over the lifecycle, ensuring that changing requirements can be included during development.

This underpinning agile principle of iteration and continuous improvement is essential in a world where technology continues to evolve at a rate of knots, policy can change and public expectations and demand are rising. As new capabilities become available the solution can be further enhanced to meet changing user need.

Under an agile approach, projects run a Discovery phase exploring the user need, leading to a focus on rapid prototyping and the development of a 'minimum viable product' in a subsequent Alpha phase. This prototype is tested with users and iterated into a Beta phase that continues with rounds of testing and iteration until the product is ready to go live.

Teams work in short sprints, or cycles of two-week work periods, focusing on immediate next steps. They meet daily with key people to talk through the project and agree what is going well, what is not, and what they are working on at that point in time.

This rapid and reactive development cycle helps to engage users with developments and changes – and gain feedback for further improvement at every stage. This helps to generate a sense of continual progress, and maintain momentum and morale.

Product development, therefore, is a continual and iterative process – reviewing and making sure developments work and, if they do not, agreeing how they can be revised. This constant dialogue can be helpful in driving projects forward, maintaining commitment to the project and in accommodating and reacting to unexpected issues.

The Local Government Association (LGA) encouraged projects participating in the Digital Channel Shift Programme to adopt agile methodologies. Those projects that did so saw the benefits through improved working relationships – and greater mutual understanding between specialist services, for example ICT and customer services staff – and through the ability to rapidly respond to changing requirements.

Agile vs waterfall

Traditionally, project management has taken a waterfall approach – following sequential project steps planned from the start based on a pre-set specification of what the product is to deliver.

This approach works well for projects where the requirements and user need are static – for example, building a bridge. However, in a world of rapid technology change it can lead to projects being delivered that no longer meet requirements – for example, the National Plan for IT took so long in delivery that some of the technology it was based on had become obsolete.

An agile approach enables a real-time response to advances in technology and changing policy or user requirements. It requires the project team to gather requirements, plan, design, build and test at the same time rather than in the waterfall sequential steps. It is particularly helpful for those IT projects that are discrete ie where a specific service is being redesigned or where a specific solution is being developed, as it allows the team to focus on the project, to test as they go and to respond quickly to feedback.

North Yorkshire uses a mix of both agile and waterfall methodologies, choosing an appropriate approach depending on the project. The agile approach encourages teams to build quickly, test what they have built and iterate their work based on regular feedback, while the sequential waterfall software development process enables them to keep on target with wider corporate goals.

Agile also gives more flexibility on when the product is ready to launch, or 'go-live' as the fortnightly sprint cycle gives the team the power to test when ready and revise schedules depending on the outcomes.

The Government Digital Service has published guidance and service manuals as well as a series of tools and techniques which are available at www.gov.uk/service-manual/agile-delivery

Training

Training everyone involved in design and delivery of a new digital service in agile working practices is an essential first step.

This process was deemed so important that the LGA organised places for participating councils on a GDS-delivered training course, 'Agile for Teams' – an opportunity that was taken up by a number of these projects as well as other councils. Indeed, all projects harnessed agile working methodologies to some extent, despite the cultural change that this often involved.

Inbuilt flexibility

A number of projects encountered changes and delays that were outside of their control, for example, changes in political leadership or corporate priorities, or changes in supplier products or user need.

Using an agile approach helped them to refocus their project to respond to the new circumstances and still deliver the desired outcomes.

Agile methodology and project management gave the team in Sunderland the skills and tools needed to rapidly deliver. They found that using techniques such as setting targets to create a minimum viable product was very useful and would recommend using agile – “it’s not technical, not complicated and helps you to deliver and it builds up trust with the stakeholders that you work with because you can deliver and share the success on a sprint cycle basis”. Helen Johnston, Customer Services Delivery Manager, Sunderland City Council.

Newcastle is an example of a project that changed tack in response to new products being available. During the Discovery phase it was ascertained that the council’s existing text marketing service provider was not available for use on the chosen Microsoft Bot Framework, leading to use of an alternative text provider at additional cost. However, the team is open to future iterative technology change to bring back the corporate provider when possible and reduce ongoing costs.

Elmbridge also changed SMS text provider after the start of its project, in response to the availability to local government of GOV.UK Notify.

Meanwhile, in its discovery phase West Sussex uncovered a previously unknown user need from parents and carers for a ‘checklist’, taking them through the requirements and expectations of special needs educational support for their children.

Sell the approach

If the team are going to succeed then the project managers and product owners must be sensitive to the wider stakeholder community’s familiarity with agile working practices. The propensity for changes in direction during an agile project can be particularly uncomfortable for many who are used to a waterfall project management approach. However, by highlighting that this will get a better outcome as it enables the project to respond better to user needs and feedback, the wider stakeholder community can be reassured.

In Newcastle, for example, whilst the core project team was comfortable with the agile working methodology and practice, the wider stakeholder community was not always confident with this way of working. The team therefore took great care to engage and educate their stakeholders at the outset about the benefits of an agile approach and how this would impact the way in which they worked together.

In North Yorkshire the software development teams were also already confident users of agile methodologies. However, this was the first time that an agile approach to project management had been taken across the highways service. Agile training for the project management and service teams was put in place and was very well received – such that the resulting enthusiasm meant that the agile working process “was an easy one to follow”.

Top tips

- Visit the Government Digital Service Academy for information on how to help people be part of an agile, multi-disciplinary team delivering digital services: <https://gdsacademy.campaign.gov.uk/>
- Make full use of the Government Digital Service guidance, service manuals, tools and techniques: www.gov.uk/service-manual/agile-delivery
- Take time to engage all stakeholders in the agile approach.
- Underpin all project phases with thorough user research and engagement.
- Don't be afraid to mix agile and waterfall elements if that is the best way to get product delivered in your organisation.
- Agile working is a mindset, not just a methodology.

Taking an agile approach and training gave Newcastle’s team the skills and tools needed to pick up pace. Using techniques such as setting targets to create a minimum viable product was very useful. “Develop it, test it, tweak it, develop it, test it tweak it was our approach. Releasing a little bit, getting feedback and then tweak – so we absolutely followed an agile approach.” Jenny Nelson, Digital Newcastle Programme Manager, Newcastle City Council.



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