

Online forms and automation in council tax

Torbay's ongoing journey to both release internal capacity and improve citizen self-service by enhancing online council tax forms and automating processes has delivered impressive results to date, including £138,105 in additional council tax revenue and £24,489 annual efficiency savings.

The issue and context

Torbay is a coastal unitary authority situated in South Devon, incorporating the towns of Torquay, Paignton and Brixham, and serving a population of approximately 133,000.

It has a higher than average older population, with one in four residents aged over 65, and represents the most deprived area in the South West. Its main industry is tourism and therefore many jobs within the bay are seasonal.

In August 2016 the council's face-to-face services for customers in Torquay and Brixham were closed with the service centralised in Paignton. There is an ongoing project to install self-service kiosks within Torquay and Brixham libraries and at the central office in Paignton to enable customers to self-serve using the Torbay council website.

Like all councils Torbay is keen to deliver efficiency savings by enabling those customers who can to self-serve. A new website was launched in August 2016 with a complete re-structure and review of content to allow customers to locate and complete transactions more quickly and more easily.

Torbay has made good progress in recent years on digitalisation, developing a customer portal and a suite of online applications forms. The next phase is to complete the implementation of the end-to-end automation between these forms and the various back-office systems.

Torbay therefore applied to the LGA Channel Shift Programme for funding to integrate online forms for single person discount applications and for notifying the council of change of

“We had solved some of the problems in terms of our front-to-back digitisation and online transactions. However we needed to improve the front-to-back integration. We have in the region of 160 forms on the website – some of these don't directly update the back-office applications so we needed to buy APIs from software providers to provide that proper front-to-back integration.”

Bob Clark, Executive Head of Customer Services & IT

“The problem we were trying to solve was to increase capacity in our back-office council tax team – it's a small team and we don't have the capacity to undertake a series of reviews that should have been taken. Integrating the forms into the back office and automating workflow was an opportunity to do this.”

Alison Whittaker, Project Manager – Head of Customer Services

address details with its back-office council tax system. It also planned to automate the processing of these requests.

The funding from the LGA would enable Torbay to purchase APIs from the back-office system supplier to enable this integration and automation.

Having proved the concept of automation with this project, Torbay planned to integrate additional online forms into the back-office council tax system in order to automate exemption and disregard applications, refunds and requests to change payment method.

Digital Channel Shift Programme

The work at Torbay Council to support its innovative use of digital technology has been funded through the Digital Channel Shift Programme, which is managed and overseen by the Local Government Association (LGA).

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.

The project objectives and targets

There are approximately 60,000 residential properties in Torbay. Analysis of the data at the time of applying to the LGA programme identified an average 12,000 changes of address within the area each year.

These moves comprise a mixture of existing households leaving Torbay, households moving into Torbay from another area and households moving within the area.

There was a 50/50 split of customers reporting these changes of address by phone and online via the existing user-friendly forms. All of this data was at that time manually keyed into the back-office system, with each update taking an officer ten minutes to complete.

Using an in-house model of productive capacity of six hours a day, 36 updates per day can be completed by an officer. A working year was calculated at 211 days (30 days annual leave, eight days of public holidays and 12 days for other absences such as training and sickness).

The savings therefore from integrating the change of address forms into back-office systems and automating the workflow, for a targeted 80 per cent use by citizens and call centre staff of the online form, could potentially save 1.25 FTE, or £25,276, a year.

Automating the single person discount forms was expected to bring further savings – although these were not calculated at the outset.

Automation would also provide significant benefits to the customer, in terms of easier access to services available 24/7, reduction in call waiting times, reduced processing times providing an opportunity to split payments via an additional monthly payment over the year, alongside an improved customer experience.

Officer time freed up in the back office – from the removal of manual data input and processing, quality control checking and training on a simplified process – would then be used to complete other work, such as council tax exemption/disregard reviews to improve accuracy and widen the tax base.

“The LGA involvement helped me to secure the funds to deliver innovation in the organisation. Funds are scarce. The total software and systems support we needed was in the region of £60,000. We needed to try and get some additional external funding to support that so the £15,000 helped to deliver the project and helped the local authority in terms of releasing £45,000 which was the maximum they could release.”

Bob Clark, Executive Head of Customer Services & IT

To monitor progress and performance the project team would baseline the average processing time pre-automation and compare it with the processing time post-automation, tracking both the percentage of automated transactions and customer feedback on those transactions.

The LGA channel shift programme funding would contribute to the overall £60,000 cost of the software and APIs required to deliver this project.

Feeding into Torbay’s overall transformation programme this digitalisation project would be managed by the Transformation Board – chaired by the chief executive, who attends monthly update meetings.

Targets

- implementation to commence July 2017
- go-live for all forms February 2018
- 80 per cent of customers using the online channel
- all back-office input automated, including customer contact via the telephone as the call centre staff will use the same technology as customers
- £25,000 upward annual savings from automation
- additional savings of around £14,000 from reduced training, quality checking, customer contact and recovery action.

The approach and progress to date

Due to Torbay's high levels of deprivation and ageing population the approach to all customer services is to make things as easy for people as possible – using plain English, simplifying online customer journeys and providing telephone or face-to-face support as appropriate.

However, the overall goal is to help as many people to self-serve online as possible.

To this end the council's in-house IT team had previously developed its own web form tool based on the Microsoft .NET framework (a free, cross-platform, open-source developer platform) and used it to build a full suite of online forms to help customers self-serve and reduce avoidable contact. These forms were 'first generation' forms in that they were not all integrated into back-office systems, so some rekeying was still required in the back office.

Over the past few years Torbay has been tackling integration into back-office systems, and this project aimed to improve a number of online council tax forms, integrate them into the revenue and benefits system and automate workflow wherever possible.

The initial route to delivering this objective was to use the APIs available from the council's back-office revenues and benefits software supplier, Civica. However, as the APIs for Civica's Open Channel came as a package complete with ready-made forms, a decision was subsequently taken to implement the supplier's forms rather than upgrade Torbay's existing forms.

"We had their standard forms, we had a look through them – the questions, the format and structure... We were concerned about the responsiveness and flexibility, and we actually found, which was probably unique to us as we have our own bespoke form package, that theirs didn't fit our needs as well as our own solution. So, we decided to use the APIs, use their forms as a basis, and build the form in our own software package."

Alison Whittaker, Project Manager – Head of Customer Services

"We were concerned about the responsiveness of the Civica forms and did not feel that their layout met our customers' needs. Making our own forms instead [and] using the APIs would give us a better result for our customers. So, we mapped out their form, added in content appropriate for the residents of Torbay and tweaked that during feedback to make sure that they worked for everyone."

Ali Tocknell, Engagement Lead

From its Google Analytics results, the council knew that many of its customers use phones, tablets and other mobile devices to complete forms and access services, therefore responsive design is a key tenet of its website.

As implementation started – and with the benefit of its own experience in designing responsive, customer-friendly and usable forms – the team quickly became concerned about the responsiveness of their supplier's forms and the council's ability to tweak them or add additional fields in order to meet Torbay residents' needs and prevent the service from having to contact customers for additional information.

In addition, issues were encountered with posting completed applications to Civica's Workflow 360 document management system for processing.

A subsequent decision was therefore taken to switch back to the original plan: to use the supplier's APIs to integrate Torbay's own forms

"From an IT point of view the more we can automate things and make things more efficient in the back office the better. The aim of this project was to free up resource for people to do more actual processing of accounts and claims in the back office. Automation can enable that and sometimes it is a bit of a struggle getting there but once you achieve it then people can really see the benefits of it."

Nick Jones, Project Leader IT

into the back-office system and automate processes where possible.

At the same time the opportunity would be taken to enhance the existing forms and include additional fields to enable better automation. A mapping exercise in the back office to explore processes and the opportunities for automation was undertaken to inform this approach.

With the switch to in-house form technology, additional resource would be required from Torbay's IT teams. This resource was approved and the work started towards the end of 2017.

User research and testing

In the past the council has struggled to engage end users in user research or testing – members of the public in Torbay appear to be more keen on calling, visiting or transacting online with the council and then moving on. When provided with the opportunity to give feedback – at the end of a call, visit or online transaction – there has been little negative feedback about the customer experience.

Consequently, one of the main sources of user feedback comes from the call centre staff. They are trained to ask people if they have tried the online services and use the same forms themselves when helping a customer.

All new forms were therefore tested with internal staff, and then by internal staff with users. This gave a clear picture of common problems people were encountering, where the forms were perhaps not clear or could be simplified. It also provided a robust test bed for the automation and enabled the team to make rapid changes as required.

After iterations and improvements at this stage, a range of new forms were released online (see table at end of this section). With the web team tracking customer journeys and drop-out points,

“We asked the team for their feedback, how they found the experience and when they are speaking to customers we have asked them to note down how the customers have experienced the journey as well. We use that intelligence to try and make it better and shape the product for the future.”

Jon Bell, Operations Manager (Council Tax Benefits & Customer Services)

and gathering feedback from users, any further issues identified were quickly fixed, although there has not been feedback that customers were struggling to understand or answer the questions contained in the forms developed for this project.

A number of key improvements came out of this process. For example, an automated direct debit form was produced in addition to the original plan. This proved very successful and feedback suggested embedding it within the change of address. Now, when someone submits a change of address not only are they changing their council tax address they are also being prompted to update the direct debit information. This helps both the customer and the council by turning two transactions into one.

Stakeholder engagement

The project ‘threw together’ lots of departments at Torbay – council tax, customer services, the web and developer teams.

Regular meetings, communication and user research sessions were held with all parties from the outset.

This has continued throughout the project with regular training and open discussion sessions to highlight any issues, and continuous feedback sought from customer touchpoints.

The team also invited Citizens Advice to participate in team meetings and feed back on their experience of the new forms.

Integration and automation

The .NET forms are built using drag-and-drop components to add content and to link required information to the relevant back-office data fields. When the form is submitted the back-office system is therefore automatically updated.

“It would be beneficial to have more documentation along with the API. A lot of the documentation was built around Civica's own forms – so they sell the package as a forms package with APIs behind it. To have full documentation would have been a great help to know what the API did, compared to what the Civica forms did.”

Nick Jones, Project Leader IT

The in-house developers encountered problems with the APIs used for this integration as they did not always behave as expected. They felt that there was a lack of documentation accompanying the APIs, and consequently investigation and rectification of these issues took longer than expected, which led to delays in launching some of the forms.

As forms went live each application was monitored to ensure that the correct action was being automated and that the automation was working – where it failed the team investigated whether this was for an expected reason, ie invalid information submitted, or whether there was a wider fault.

Shortly after go-live, the team gained confidence in the system and scaled back monitoring. Once the customer submits one of the new forms, it is posted directly into the Civica Workflow 360 system and automatically indexed against the relevant account with back-office data fields updated as required.

Continuous improvement

Torbay uses Google Analytics to track and improve the customer journey through its website. This tool has been particularly helpful in informing the team where people are dropping off from the website or an application process and has been key to enabling iterative change.

The web team believes that a website 'is never finished' and continuous efforts are made to view the site from the customers' perspective in order to simplify things and make the customer journey as easy as possible.

In effect the forms never truly stand still and customer messages can be added as needed in order to manage expectations – for example, at peak times they may be advised that the process will take longer than usual.

Promotion

As online forms already existed, Torbay did not plan an official launch – a launch may have confused people who did not need to know whether forms were integrated into back-office systems or not.

At the point where each of the new forms was launched to external users (after first being tested by internal customer services staff) external partners, such as Citizens Advice, were also advised of their availability.

A major promotional push across internal and external channels – reminders on bills and in the call centre's recorded messages, plus social media channels – is planned to coincide with the council tax billing cycle in 2019.

Digital inclusion

Torbay has a mixed demographic and a seasonal population. There is a large elderly population and some digital literacy issues across generations.

Because of this the team felt that it was important to help 'those that could' to self-serve and thereby free up resource so that staff could help vulnerable people and those that cannot, or prefer not to, use online services.

Customer service representatives will fill in forms for people over the telephone or face-to-face at the Paignton Library customer centre.

LGA support

Being part of the LGA channel shift programme was beneficial to Torbay in many ways. Apart from its support with funding and project review, the LGA was able to put the team in touch with a peer council tackling a similar project in the Civica environment. The team was able to exchange ideas, discuss issues and gain support on back-office and API configuration to improve functionality.

In addition, the LGA also supported the team when a technical issue was encountered between the IT team and supplier that was delaying progress.

"The website for us is vitally important and we are obviously trying to get as many transactions online as possible so that people can self-serve at any time convenient to them. Obviously it allows us then with shrinking resources and budget to use people in the back office as efficiently as possible."

Nikki Massie, Web & Systems Manager

Project milestones	Planned	Actual
External supplier Civica commences work	Aug 17	Aug 17
User research and testing	Jul 17	Jul 17
Technical testing	Oct 17	Oct 17
Pre-launch communication and staff training	Nov 17	Nov 17
Single person discount form launched for internal customer services and external use	Nov 17	Nov 17
Development for change of address form configuration	Dec 17	Dec 17
'Moving out' form launched for internal and external users	Jan 18	Jan 18
'Moving in' form launched for internal and external users	Jan 18	Jan 18
Direct debit creation form launched	Additional	Sep 18
'Moving within the borough' form launched for internal and external users	Mar 18	Jan 19

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Moving house



The current processing time for new applications and changes to council tax is an average of **6 weeks**. If you contact us with a general enquiry online we will reply to you within two working days.

Unless you're telling us that you're moving into Torbay you'll need to know your council tax account reference number.

Moving into Torbay

You should use this form if you are moving into Torbay, or you are moving out of a property in Torbay and you're not currently responsible to pay the council tax, for example you are living with a parent or friend.

 [Moving in to the area](#)

Moving out of Torbay

You should use this form if you are moving out of Torbay, or you are moving within Torbay but you will not be the person responsible to pay the council tax at your new address. For example you are moving in with a parent or friend.

 [Moving out of the area](#)

Moving within Torbay

You should use this form if you are living in Torbay and responsible to pay the council tax and you are moving to a new address in Torbay where you will also be responsible to pay the council tax.

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Council Tax - Apply for or Cancel single persons discount



Your Details

Title:*

Please select ▾

Forename:*

Surname:*

Council Tax Account Ref:*

Is this a new claim for a Single Person Discount or a cancellation to an existing entitlement?*

Please select ▾

Telephone Number:

Email address:

The outcome – successes and challenges

Despite delays to go-live for some of the forms – caused by the switch back from use of the supplier’s forms to use of APIs and in-house forms – the project has delivered impressive results to the end of March 2019:

- 44 per cent of forms developed in this project are now processed automatically
- £24,489 in annual efficiency savings ongoing
- £138,105 to date in additional council tax revenue.

In light of the successful use of released capacity to generate income and the customer satisfaction with the forms themselves, the team is confident that its approach of ‘taking the time to get it right’ has been justified.

For those customers that choose to channel shift for the first time, it is important to the project team that the customer experience is positive, so that customers look to use other online forms in the future as opposed to becoming frustrated and reverting to traditional methods of communication.

Council tax customers are now able to self-serve from any mobile device or PC at any time they choose, night or day. Applications for single person discounts, notifications of changes of address or requests to set up a direct debit are processed automatically directly into the back-office system.

Feedback from customers via the customer service team meanwhile has been positive. The

“It took us longer than we had anticipated to get the forms live. However that was partly because we decided to build forms ourselves and partly because of the approach we decided to take. Because of the financial challenges on the organisation and customer services we wanted to ensure that we did it right, and we took the decision to implement it more slowly than perhaps we could have done.”

Alison Whittaker, Project Manager – Head of Customer Services

“Our target was 80 per cent take-up from our customer base and we’re not there yet. But what it has shown us is the ability to maximise our resources in the back office and use those resources to do other things.”

Bob Clark, Executive Head of Customer Services & IT

“The form with the highest volume was the ‘move within Torbay’ and that has only recently gone live. So as we move further through the project the uptake will increase. We’re hoping for potentially 60 to 70 per cent of customers to use the forms independently.”

Alison Whittaker, Project Manager – Head of Customer Services

forms are impressive, not for being groundbreaking as customers have been used to transacting via forms for some time, but in the improvements to the customer journey and the speed of processing thanks to the automation.

Following automation, processing times for customers have reduced by three weeks on average, to approximately five weeks.

Eighty-four per cent of direct debits are now processed automatically via the new direct debit form. However, this only represents 44 per cent overall take-up, the target of 80 per cent use by customers and call centre staff has yet to be met.

An increase in promotional activity coinciding with the March 2019 council tax billing run is expected to significantly increase take-up towards the 80 per cent target in 2019/20.

In addition, the team intends to increase the automation rate by reviewing the reasons for current failures. They are aware of date validation issues when people are asking for claims to be backdated. For example, the single person discount form currently only allows a 30-

day backdated application – whereas the applicant may wish to backdate a claim by six months. The review will risk assess the implications of accepting a longer date range to enable these current exceptions to be automated.

Meanwhile, automation has successfully released capacity in the back office, enabling officers to spend more time helping people and conducting the targeted reviews across the council tax base.

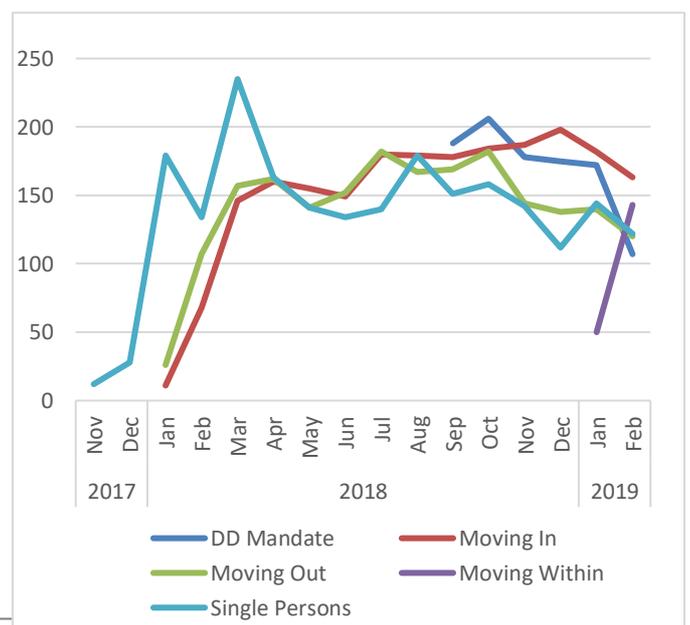
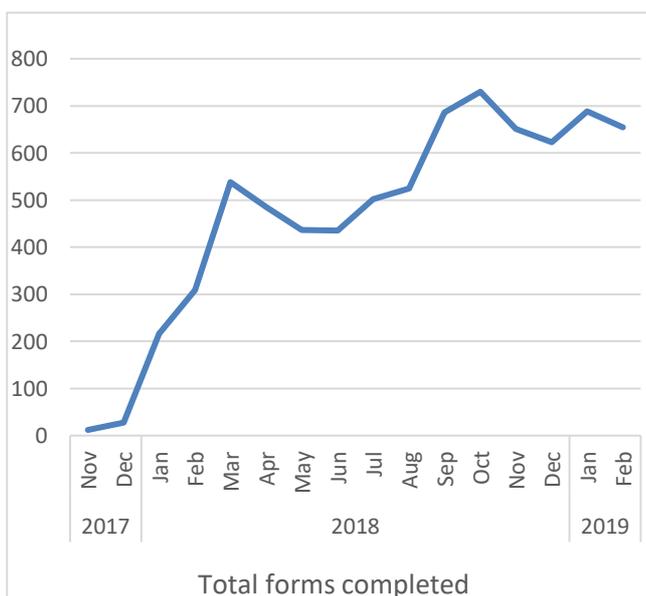
During the project, the team refined its savings model to incorporate additional information relating to officers’ average availability in the real world as opposed to a basic 35-hour week. For example, the model now accommodates breaks, lunches, holidays, team meetings and catching up with admin and emails. Hourly cost savings vary from department to department and the team believes that they have now been

“It was difficult to start off with. We used our own forms at the front end, it was a case of linking the APIs and that was tricky. So a lot of teething problems to start off with but it got easier as we went along and it was all about setting up the parameters and knowing where you’re coming from, knowing the position that you’re at in the beginning and then setting out a time frame and a list of achievements that are conceivably possible within that time frame and not kind-of running before you can walk. It’s got better, better and better as we’ve learned.”

Jon Bell, Operations Manager (Council Tax Benefits & Customer Services)

able to calculate more accurate savings based on the variables included in its model.

Form	Transactions	Automated	Percentage automated
Single person discount	2,205	917	42%
Move out	2,010	822	41%
Move in	2,168	736	34%
Move within	247	36	15%
Direct debit	1,051	882	84%
Total	7,681	3,393	44%



Financial benefits

Torbay has realised £24,488 in efficiency savings through the channel shift to its new integrated online forms.

However, the main financial benefit to the council has been the opportunity opened up by releasing capacity to undertake council tax reviews. Between March 2018 and February 2019 the team undertook a full student review and two probate reviews, raising **£138,105 in additional council tax revenue.**

“We’ve been able to maximise the resources that we’ve got and use those resources to do other things – so in terms of cashable benefits I would say the cashable benefits from online forms is quite low but the available resources that we’ve got and the ability of our staff to do other things has generated more income.”

Bob Clark, Executive Head of Customer Services & IT

“Statistics-wise we’ve achieved the actual savings we set out in the business plan, around £20,000, but the capacity we’ve saved through the automation we’ve put to really good use to review other processes. So far some of the reviews we have undertaken have increased the council tax base by in excess of £130,000. We’ve also got a full suite of additional reviews to do starting in the new financial year.”

Alison Whittaker, Project Manager – Head of Customer Services

“It’s not just the financial savings, it’s all the opportunity costs that we’ve gained through all the other income streams we’ve been able to maximise with the freed-up resource it’s created.”

Jon Bell, Operations Manager (Council Tax Benefits & Customer Services)

Where the efficiency savings came from			
Task	Volume	Calculation	Saving
Automated forms (back-office saving)	3,218	10 minutes each based on £20,000 staff cost	£ 8,473
Direct debits	793	Postage/print saving @ 75p/item	£ 594
Time taken to complete the forms	1,786	Call centre saving 1,786 forms at 90 seconds a form (approximate calculation as new forms are simpler than the scripts that were previously used)	£ 705
External forms completed	5,525	Assuming phone contact would have been used @ 10 minutes per transaction	£14,716

Reviews undertaken by released capacity		
Review type	Date of completion	Value of accounts raised
Probate	March 2018	£61,546.95
Probate	October 2018	£36,934.03
Full student review	February 2019	£39,623.56

Non-financial benefits

Working across departments: the increase in back-office capacity has enabled revenues team members to work with other departments to improve services and data. For example, a project with housing standards reviewed houses of multiple occupation and identified previously unlisted properties.

Enhanced customer support: released capacity has enabled staff to better help customers in complex cases.

Better customer service: available 24/7, the simplified online application forms provide a better customer experience and reduce the amount of required interactions. For example, customers in receipt of housing benefit and who change address within Torbay need only complete one form.

Accurate data: predefined fields in the forms enable accurate data capture, leading to bills being sent correctly to the customer and reducing rework and manual checking prior to recovery or additional contact from the customer. Prompt billing and flexible payment options also help customers to better manage their finances.

Simplification in the call centre: replacement of historic scripts used in the call centre by the new forms has simplified their workflow – the same self-explanatory forms are now used by both staff and customers.

New skills: personal skills development within the IT systems team from the project has created a valuable resource that can be applied to future automation and integration projects. Meanwhile, feedback and user research gained during the project has built a deeper understanding within the team of best practice

“It’s been a large learning curve for all of us because our project wasn’t just customer services, it was quite a wide-ranging project. We had people from council tax, customer services, the web systems team and IT – so we all had to come together and work together quite closely to deliver the product.”

**Alison Whittaker, Project Manager –
Head of Customer Services**

in project management, presenting simple customer information and creating transactional forms to better help customers to self-serve.

Automation: meanwhile the success in automating workflows has proved the concept of automation within the team and across the council, which is opening up opportunities to further automate transactions.

Values: overall, the project has highlighted the value to everyone of Torbay’s core corporate values:

- accept and work with change
- change how we deliver services to meet our customers' needs
- work together to resolve issues and to meet targets, deadlines and challenges
- strive to find innovative solutions to reduce costs, identify new ways of working and generate income
- use new technologies and working practices to make service improvements and reduce costs.

Challenges

Change in technology approach: the decision to change from using the Civica forms to using the APIs to integrate and automate Torbay’s own forms required a significant change in direction for the project team and led to delays in delivery. However the team is confident that a better customer offering has been delivered than would have been possible within the original plan.

Technology issues: during testing it became apparent that the APIs did not work as expected. Investigating the cause was complex due both to variables in the back office and a lack of documentation from the supplier. This highlighted a knowledge gap between the council IT teams and the supplier team and involved end-to-end investigation to identify the source of problems, causing significant delay to project delivery. In addition, on occasions, third-party software upgrades resulted in system bugs that required further investigation and fixes.

Stakeholder management: multiple departments had to come together to deliver this product. Due to the decision to use in-house rather than off-the-shelf forms, the IT team was faced with additional learning curves during the project.

Culture change: overcoming lack of confidence in an automated process within the council tax processing team required joint working. There was initial hesitation around the transition and confusion around how automation works. Automation is a logical process, and does not work in exactly the same way that a human would, ie it can only act on the information entered by the customer service advisor or customer. The project team worked with the back office to ensure they were confident with the software outputs.

Capacity: individual teams working on the project had different capacity issues. For example, the revenues team has annual peak workloads related to council tax billing, and the IT teams are running multiple projects in parallel alongside day-to-day support. Aligning capacity across all teams was difficult and impacted on timelines – the ‘move within’ form was particularly complex and implementation was delayed due to lack of capacity and conflicting priorities within the various teams.

User research: feedback from customers proved difficult. The team found that the public did not really want to become involved in helping to test the forms. To counter this, additional questions were added on to the end-of-call scripts to capture feedback at the time of a call.

“During testing when the APIs weren’t performing how we thought they should we had to go down an intensive investigation route. This affected the timescales as every time we found something or one of the APIs didn’t behave exactly as expected we had to go back through the chain to identify where the issue was and then fix it and then continue.”

**Alison Whittaker, Project Manager –
Head of Customer Services**

Key learning points

Timelines and contingency plans: the project team believes that it underestimated the amount of work involved with this project – particularly following the decision to use the council’s own in-house developed forms and the Civica APIs. This led to significant delay. However, the same decision would be made again since it ultimately delivered a high-quality product. Contingency time should be built into future projects to allow for the unexpected.

Capacity planning: staff illness, holidays, conflicting priorities and seasonal workloads can significantly impact capacity across project teams. Mapping requirements and priorities at the beginning of the project would help but it is also important to plan for inevitable unforeseen impacts.

Focus on the baseline and end goal: baselining metrics at the start and focusing on the end goal, ie what the project aims to deliver, are both essential. And when the unexpected occurs, agility is needed to refocus and try different things to deliver the goal – for example, the switch to APIs for a better customer experience.

Stakeholder engagement and communication: take time at the beginning to ensure that all those involved in the project’s delivery, including third-party software vendors, are aware of what the delivery goal is and project expectations. Keep communications strong so that everyone knows where the project is at any point in time.

Flexibility: when things do not go to plan it is important to look around the problem for a way forward. Rethinking the way you are working is

“The off-the-shelf product didn’t really fit into how we wanted things to work so we took the decision to use our own forms in-house. This presents its own challenges because we then can’t go back to the supplier and say ‘why is it doing this or why is it doing that’ because there’s sometimes a gap between their knowledge of what we are trying to do and our knowledge of their products.”

Nikki Massie, Web & Systems Manager

“Through a lot of hard work and testing we got to a position we were confident we could go ‘right, that’s good’ and we can concentrate the human effort on other things that can bring us in other income streams.”

Jon Bell, Operations Manager (Council Tax Benefits & Customer Services)

key to getting the most from available information and systems.

Test, test and test again: whilst it added to timelines, putting effort into testing led to better outcomes.

Pre-investigate any APIs: do not take the supplier’s word for the capabilities of its APIs. The team encountered unexpected integration issues. Thanks to an experienced in-house development team these were resolvable, but this caused unexpected delay.

Use in-house skills: Torbay is fortunate to have in-house development skills that it can harness to deliver projects such as this, enabling it to avoid consultancy fees, for example, for integrations. In addition, internal skills have been strengthened and expanded during the project, which can be reused in future projects.

Performance monitoring: ensure that you have methods of monitoring performance from the outset as gaining metrics retrospectively is often difficult to do and can adversely impact the calculation of project benefits.

Manage expectations: ‘automation’ means different things to different people – the software does not replace human decision-making.

Take the opportunity to learn from other councils: contact with other councils working with the same software to deliver similar projects is hugely beneficial. Through the LGA programme, the team was able to discuss issues and exchange ideas with Harlow Council, also working to deliver online self-service for revenues and benefits.

Next steps

Now that the revenues forms are working according to expectations and the customer experience is proven, Torbay is planning a promotional campaign alongside the March 2019 billing run to drive further take-up of self-service.

Some 60,000 council tax bills and 5,000 business rates bills will include information about using self-service. Messages on call centre telephone lines will suggest self-service and a social media campaign across Twitter and Facebook will promote the new capabilities.

However, in line with the council's approach to constant improvement, the project team is planning a second round of development to explore changes to the parameters for the forms and back-office processing that could potentially widen the volume of forms and processes that can be automated.

In addition, because of the high cost of APIs, Torbay is keen to maximise its investment and learning. Some of the APIs purchased for this project are to be put to good use in other forms and services. For example, direct debit forms can be provided for other services, and change of address forms can be offered to landlords so that they can report changes of address for occupants.

The experience and skills gained during this project have given Torbay the confidence to look for further automation opportunities across all services – where speedier turnaround times can both improve customer satisfaction and release staff resource to bring added income into the council.

“LGA has been fundamental to this. Without the funding we wouldn't have had the money and maybe not the drive. The LGA's contribution, attention to what we're doing and the reporting has been good because it kept us on track.”

Jon Bell, Operations Manager (Council Tax Benefits & Customer Services)

“This is very much the start. We had been looking at going with APIs before and there are plenty of ideas of what we can do with them – it's just getting the time to develop those individual functions.”

Nick Jones, Project Leader IT

“It has given us an insight into what else we can do in other areas not just in council tax but across the website to try and optimise our online transactions and make them an end-to-end process.”

Nikki Massie, Web & Systems Manager

“APIs are very expensive – and that's the problem. So, it's a balancing act between how much cashable savings can you make on £60,000 to £100,000 expenditure. It's a difficult balancing act to always justify it.”

Bob Clark, Executive Head of Customer Services & IT

Contact for further information

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