

Is local government keeping pace with its digitally-connected citizens?

The need for local government to keep pace with an increasingly digitally-connected public was one of the themes at a recent roundtable hosted by Enghouse Interactive and **Government Business magazine**, and chaired by Georgina Maratheftis, Programme Manager for Local Government at techUK

In delivering customer service, councils have to manage escalating demand and expectations from an ever-expanding user base. As digitalisation accelerates, they are having to deal with a more connected public who increasingly want to engage at any time, from anywhere, on any device. The event, 'Digitisation within Local Government and Winning Strategies for the Contact Centre', considered the challenges faced in meeting this demand and the potential opportunities if they get the approach right.

Gauging the challenge

To deal with public demand, councils are adding self-service offerings to their contact centre armoury and starting to bring in advanced automation, AI and robotics in order to drive efficiencies and increase customer choice. While the move to omnichannel is key to this, there will continue to be a need to provide voicebased interaction via a traditional fixed-line telephone call and even face-to-face. Not all citizens are digitally-savvy, after all. However, a growing number do want to engage through digital technologies like email, webchat and social media. Moreover, they increasingly want their problem resolved or query addressed instantly. As Richard Dooner, programme manager at the Welsh Local Government Association, puts it: "Customer behaviour is driven by lots of things and technology is just one part of it. Collectively, and individually, there are relationships that have to be worked with. The customer expectation is 'Want, Click, Get'. This is why Amazon has done so well. "When we are talking about local government services, we should be in that place, and we should be providing our leadership with the options to be there, efficiently.

Current technology, such as robotic process automation, is making that more achievable. It's certainly addressing some of the current issues with call centres." From the council perspective, delivering on this means implementing a range of communications channels so that residents can interact with them in way that suits them best. Doing this is in itself not always easy. As Sharon Passmore, customer service manager at Somerset County Council, said: "We haven't started with AI or robots yet. One of the challenges we have with transformation is that we have a lot of legacy systems. If you want to transform and have digital end-to-end, there's a lot of things that you need to change. It's like turning the oil tanker. "We are approaching the problem in a different way, getting the right foundation of infrastructure, the building blocks if you like, to enable us to move forward in the areas we can and to migrate from legacy systems when the contracts allow." Jenny Pan, ICT manager at Hambleton District Council, said: "The challenge for local councils often lies in systems integration in the back office. You can buy a highly-functional CRM system, for example, but to ensure that you get the benefits across the entire operation, you need to make certain it is integrated with every service area and that can be costly and time-consuming." So, integration is a clear challenge if councils are to successfully roll out new digital offerings to their residents. But even implementing new systems will not be sufficient in itself. Councils need to ensure that technology helps rather than hinders them. Too many channels can simply result in more confusion. Poorly thought through processes can exacerbate problems by causing mistakes that increase call volumes with more time and effort spent untangling issues and concerns.

Councils need to ensure they understand what customers want from any interaction and map the customer journey correctly up front



Focusing on the customer experience

A major part of the problem is a lack of understanding of the customer journey. Councils need to ensure they understand what customers want from any interaction and map the customer journey correctly up front, before layering in the additional channels they think are going to add value. Most customer journeys run horizontally across the organisation from start to finish. There's a natural friction as one department hands off to another. The customer, or in the case of local government, the citizen, doesn't see that. If your citizens have issues with their accommodation, they might call the council for advice. They may have issues with their rented accommodation, problems with council tax and housing benefit payments for example. To the resident, it's a single problem. To the council it goes across multiple departments. So, the citizen sees this seamless A to B journey, but inside the council it's a horrible hand off between every single department, and every time, there's a hand off, that falls into the gap.



It is vital that residents can get the answers they need quickly and efficiently and that they don't end up working their way through a complex process and finding that they have to abandon the interaction and start again

Understanding the customer journey

At Enghouse, when we sit down with people in the public sector, we always look at the top five citizen journeys: for example, revenue, payments, costs, lawsuits, regulation. We prioritise them and get those top five working brilliantly, then cut out the steps and smooth it out, using technology where appropriate. It sounds easy but the biggest problem with this is a cultural friction from department to department. Once you start layering in technology, people start to become defensive – i.e. what does this mean for my job? The people part, or the cultural part, is the fascinating piece of the puzzle. Often, the picture is complicated further by the need for central government agencies to play into it. As David Lewis, senior business transformation, and digital technology executive of the Government Digital Service, comments:

“These hand offs are bigger than local. You have the Central Government picture (DVLA, Home Office, HMRC) that has to play a role here too.” Of course, in any discussion of the customer journey, the real-world experience of those customers that engage with the process is absolutely key. Somerset County Council, for example, focuses on getting feedback from local residents and staff to ensure that they are closely involved in ‘testing’ the whole process. According to Jan Stafford, strategic manager for Customers & Communities at the council: “We asked for volunteers, and it has been quite overwhelming the amount of people who want to do this. We don't get them to do everything – we trial them and ask for their viewpoint. For instance, we might say: we are just about to launch our own website, can you have a go, tell us what it's like? Seeing the process through the customers eyes and trying to go through their journey was one of the most empowering exercises we've undertaken. For instance, when trying to apply for a concessionary bus pass we are not sure how many of our residents understand what the word ‘concessionary’ means, so we are looking to adjust some of the language we use to make it clearer as a result.”

Striking a balance – Is there an optimal use of bots in councils today?

Part of the issue councils face is relying too heavily on self-service. Ultimately, you can have a largely self-service model, but councils also need escalation paths. After all, they may have someone who can work their way through a self-service process no problem. But someone else might get halfway and then get stuck. Now what happens? It's at that point you need an escalation path to someone in the contact centre. Ideally, the context of what was done in the self-service channel is pulled over, so the customer isn't asked to repeat answers. It's a balance of how you shape the customer journey, and how you think about that in the design process. You have got to build the escape hatches back to the contact centre. Jo Holt, programme lead for Residents Access at Croydon Council, said: “The escape hatches, giving people options, letting the customer choose the best route for themselves, but making it as easy as possible, are all essential. It is vital that residents can get the answers they need quickly and efficiently and that they don't end up working their way through a complex process and finding that they have to abandon the interaction and start again.”



Building connections across the council

Delivering a fast, effective service to council residents also involves building a connected customer service operation that helps agents resolve queries more quickly. As Holt explained: "We are looking at our CRM to provide more information to staff. We don't want our staff using printed documents. We want them to look at a screen, type a word, and be presented with a pathway, which they follow through, enabling them to provide help, without having to train them in the way we currently do." There are other ways councils can build a more connected customer service approach such as using collaboration tools to triage calls out to domain experts in the middle and back office or out to the field. Also, bringing in new AI-driven technologies such as active listening applications, enables an automated bot to go off and pool information based on what it hears, effectively upscaling the agent in real time. According to Holt: "Local government service provision is hugely complex. At Croydon Council, we provide a wide range of services. It is all but impossible for a single agent to know and understand the intricacies of each and every one. As a result, any automated system that can learn and navigate all the complexity and help the agent find the key information the customer is looking for, will be indispensable." The connected enterprise approach is also about initiating an organisation-wide collaboration in order to provide a better service to the public. As the local authority starts to put more routine interactions through an automated or self-service mechanism, by definition what is left is awkward and ugly, as the customer will have tried to solve it themselves and couldn't.

Now they're calling the council, and often, the only way the council can fix the problem is to collaborate – either within their organisation, sometimes with third-party suppliers and obviously with the citizen themselves. How do you pull all those people together in a collective dialogue? Councils need to understand how they address that awkward problem when it arrives as it inevitably will. Is it just emailing people? Is it getting everyone together in a meeting room? Is it using a popular and fast-growing collaboration environment like Microsoft Teams? There are lots of potential benefits here. But the key element for councils is whatever the ultimate choice, what's the plan for today and tomorrow? Whatever the ultimate choice, the role of the frontline agent is likely to change.

There are other ways councils can build a more connected customer service approach such as using collaboration tools to triage calls out to domain experts in the middle and back office or out to the field

They will need new skills to handle different interactions and queries, to draw relevant information from the back office and from automated systems in order to provide a more informed service to the customer and answer queries more efficiently. As Hemali Cheema, customer contact centre manager at Croydon Council, says: "In our approach, we are looking at working with residents on early intervention and prevention, so how we deliver our frontline services will change considerably over time. Frontline staff will be more knowledgeable and better able to deal with different requests from residents. That will change the way which we design our technology too."

Looking ahead

Technology can bring far-reaching benefits across local government. But there is great pressure on councils to get it right. If something goes wrong in local government, it is inevitably very public and widely shared. As they implement new digital strategies, there will inevitably be challenges in the way of councils who often have to deal with tight budgets and navigate complex legacy infrastructures. But as they evolve their service provision, councils can plot a positive route forward by focusing on the experience residents have in engaging with them and ensuring the customer journey is front and centre of their whole approach. They need to prioritise those top citizen journeys and get them working efficiently across the whole operation, with technology playing an appropriate and targeted supporting role. If they get that right, they will be a long way down the road towards efficient and effective service provision that meets the needs of their stakeholders and of every resident in their specific local area today.