Using digital methods to improve citizen engagement in local government

Roundtable discussion at Future Cities Catapult, London

June 1, 2017

Sponsored by novoville

With a very broad group experience, covering public and private sectors, UK and Europe, technology and other professional disciplines, we tackled a range of topics relating to the approach the councils need to take for digital customer service design:

- The role of digital in customer services in a modern council, and its risks
- Information management implications of citizen data analytics tools
- Shared services, partnership working and the impact of outsourcing on integrated citizen services
- Empowering frontline staff by using data and social media tools
- Secure and reliable integration of smart apps with back office infrastructure
- Citizen expectations from local government, in using digital means for service delivery
- Issues of depersonalization and disenfranchisement
- Security, privacy, GDPR, cloud and more, taking account of digital opportunity.

To start, there was discussion about what is meant by 'digital customer services' and how we might design these for the future, rather than simply adapting how we have always worked the past with better IT. This included understanding the differences in council interactions for voters, residents, customers, citizens, and service users.

Sometimes there is no choice about using a public service – hardly a 'customer'. At other times, we may pay for a service. Some services are 'free', funded by taxes, and at other times we may be paying a fine – such as for a parking offence. We may simply want to influence something that is happening in our community – such as a school closure or planning application.

Some services are increasingly commercial, and these can lift experience from the private sector more readily. The relationship will be different in each of these examples, and this

CCL

Creating digital impact

impacts on the design of customer services. But we all agreed that the user/citizen/customer need must be at the heart of design.

There was general agreement on the importance of designing for smart phone access, for both public and staff – the phrase "council in my pocket" was used, with the idea that not only could you access the services that you want in the way you want, but you could select the range of interests, transactions, and information relevant to your needs and preferences.

It was also agreed that transparency is key. This includes using data to open up information about the inner workings of councils and their performance, as well as having access to data, information and transactional services.

Part of the challenge for digital leaders in councils when designing customer access is the balance necessary between risk and empowerment. We want citizens to have more control, but that needs the appropriate 'checks and balances', to protect people, data and resources.

To do this well requires every service to be redefined for digital access, and that implies changing how councils operate from top to bottom. Leadership, governance and political oversight are all impacted.

The roundtable also felt the councils need to move closer to citizens – finding out what they really want, not what councils staff think that citizens want. This involves getting citizens more involved and responding to their needs and preferences in co-design and delivery of services.

This may also require incentives to encourage citizens to change their habits and to use (and to trust) digital services from councils. Simply moving to 'digital by default' to become more efficient, and so keeping down council tax, is not a strong enough argument in itself for citizens to want to interact that way. The question to answer is: "how will the citizen actually benefit"?

Within this we discussed what digital means in terms of cultural change for councils seeking to adopt digital means for citizen interaction. For example, truly listening and responding to changing expectations and demands, and adopting new technology models for delivery. How comfortable are we with new technologies from cloud to block chain, and in particular using social media and artificial intelligence? How can technologies be used to improve services and yet avoid digital exclusion?

Looking at the customer service experience, whilst there are ideas to draw from the private sector, the roundtable group also felt that there are some very different aspects to running public services. Part of this is to do with the fact that there is sometimes no choice about

needing or using those services, but it is also because of the sheer complexity and range of services that a typical council is providing.

This scale of service, so very different from central government, can make a simple and single approach to customer service design for councils particularly difficult. We all agreed that trying to transform 600 to 700 services that a councils may operate all at once was risky at best, and not sensible, yet, from the point of view of the citizen, there needs to be 'whole system thinking' in the way services are designed for digital delivery in the future.

There was much discussion around the need for councils to be more innovative – a traditional approach with marginal improvements and 'safe' adoption of some new digital means is unlikely to be enough to meet growing demands and falling budgets. Sometimes councils find it tempting to design digital customer service experience based on the way services have operated in the past (perhaps with some self-service and automation). This is partly because of legacy systems but also because of legacy thinking and habits. A more radical approach requires designing around the service user, so that they feel understood, valued and involved.

At the same time, one of the weaknesses in digital transformation programmes, especially where it impacts on customer service, is poor marketing, selling and communications. Simple and understandable language about what changes are happening, why and how they will impact on people, is sometimes compromised by jargon or an assumption that people will 'just get it'.

This can be a particular issue for local politicians who see face-to-face interaction as essential in certain circumstances for a personalised public service, especially for vulnerable people, and they want to understand the community impact, risks and costs of digital. IT does not always have a great track record, and digital leaders in councils need to take members with them on the journey of digital change, explaining the risks, benefits, costs and implications.

There was an interesting presentation by Novoville to attendees on their recent UK survey of councils. This can be found online and contains new findings as well as confirmation of things we probably knew already. For examples, people do want to know in simple terms how their taxes are spent. They want to know about local issues in their area (more than national impacts). And they want to be able to access services designed around needs and interests.

The survey also found that more than two thirds of citizens had interacted with the local council more than three times in the last 18 months. Some of this may be about the failure of service (i.e. a need for a repeat visit), but 50% also reported that they were happy with the service that they had received.

CCL

Creating digital impact

So the public demand is clear, and in terms of data and digital services, over 85% were prepared to share their data if digital services are useful and if they understand why data is being collected and how they will benefit. Notably, 45% prefer social media to interact with the council, and over 80% will use their mobile phone to do so.

So, it seems clear that citizens want digital services to 'feel and look' like Facebook, with a single account and simple, single login. The Novoville approach of 'progressive authentication' which means that citizens are not asked for more data than they need at a point in time, is an example – citizens are only asked to add more personal data when required for more complex or sensitive transactions with the Novoville citizen smartphone app.

The roundtable agreed that a digital architecture needs to be flexible, simple and based on a standards-based approach. This helps to separate data and systems, to replace and remove apps, without proprietary lock-in.

It can also make it easier for councils to work with community services, other public services and social enterprises, sharing data and system functions when necessary – easily, safely and securely. Councils can no longer deliver everything themselves and are increasingly working collaboration partnerships with other public service organisations and community associations. In the future, councils that do not work together and are not easy to do business with, are likely to face severe problems in meeting both public expectations and to deliver quality services within resource constraints.

For this to work, there needs to be greater sharing of customer information and services, but with the agreement of citizens about how their data is used and shared. There is also a need to create a new generation of public sector key performance indicators that make sense to citizens and these new digital services. Gamification can assist with this, and it links back to citizen incentives for digital loyalty.

Data is therefore key. In the future, councils will need to use data differently, seeing data as 'the fuel for innovation', and there needs to be a structure to achieve this. That structure must include governance, decision-making, systems architecture, and data standards and cultural change. It was felt that cultural change included, for example, being prepared to try new things and occasionally to fail. It also requires councils to define and create flexible digital architectures

CCL

Creating digital impact
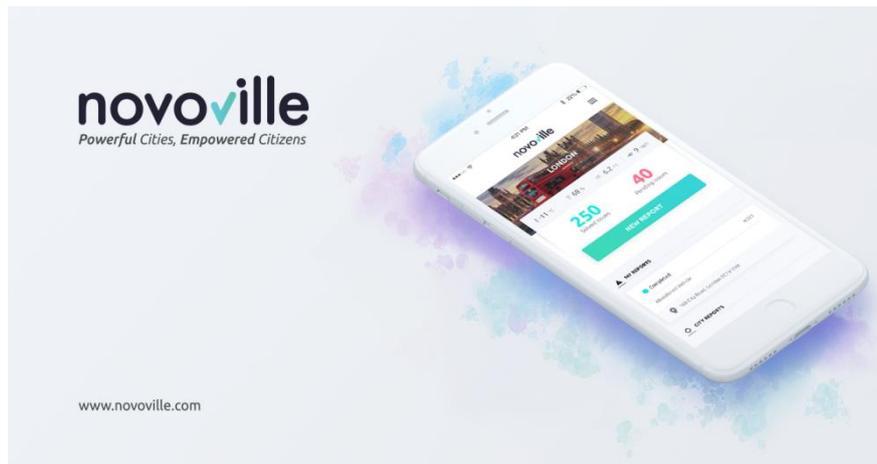
There was much discussion about the growing importance of data management in councils, as a somewhat neglected and fragmented area, and the roles required. This included management of issues such as GDPR, and defining data and information responsibilities in an increasingly data-driven business. The roundtable participants thought that without greater maturity in data and information management, councils risk drowning in a deluge of data.

Suppliers have a role in this too. New approaches to procurement, especially around joining up services and introducing greater invention, requires a true partnership with suppliers, large and small. Councils increasingly need to buy services, not products, but some suppliers simply want to sell and move on. Councils want suppliers to think about support, their role in innovation, finding best practice, managing change and joint troubleshooting when required.

The roundtable group considered the challenge around supplier rationalisation in delivering more integrated customer services. Whilst a patchwork of systems carries risks and challenges, so does a dependence on a few big suppliers. Currently many councils have duplicate systems for similar functions.

Some big suppliers argue that technology rationalisation is down to them. But for some councils the reliance on big suppliers alone does not always deliver the flexibility, speed of change, low-cost and innovation that councils now require. It was also agreed that big suppliers need to work with smaller start-up businesses, so as not to squeeze out smaller suppliers.

The roundtable group concluded that it is important for councils to have a comprehensive customer service and channel strategy, that ensures an understanding of core digital components and where there could be choice in digital functions. Given it is difficult to know what services or technology would look like in (say) five years' time, flexibility in

contracts and technology is needed, with the ability to adapt, replace and update digital components, when IT opportunity or business requirements make this necessary.

"Technology is absolutely intrinsic now to council services. The profile and importance of IT and technology investment must be raised, in the interests of efficiency, improved customer service and better customer insight".

C C L
Creating digital impact