Channel Shift Strategy 2011-2015

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MAIDSTONE
Borough Council

Our Vision

Maidstone Borough Council wants residents to be able to access services they need, when they need, in ways that suit them and that provide the best value for money.

This means understanding our customers, continuing to provide good telephone and face to face services, but also making better use of our website so more residents use it for information and to access as many services as possible 24 hours a day.

Introduction

Maidstone Borough Council is committed to providing value for money services that residents can access and are satisfied with. This is set out under the priority of 'Corporate and Customer Excellence' in the Council's Strategic Plan 2011-15. The Council has also adopted service design principles to ensure that the wants and needs of those who use the service must be central to the way the service is designed and delivered: it is important to ensure that the right services are delivered in the right ways.

The Council provides many different services which are used by different types of people. We recognise that the internet provides the only way people can access our services and get information at any time of day and on any day of the year. Therefore, we must ensure our website is fit for purpose, information is clear and as many services as possible are online.

Using the Council website also provides good value for money: it costs least for people to get information, apply for things and make payments online (about £0.32 per visit to the website), a little more if people telephone the Council to do these things (about £1.86 per phone call) and it costs most for people to visit the Gateway (about £9.66 per visit). We know that not everyone can or wants to get information or services online and will continue to provide high quality telephone and face to face services.

Using customer insight tools like Mosaic Public Sector we have identified the types of people who are more likely to want to access services online and the services they use. We will look to provide services in ways that meet the needs of the people who use them, preferably through the least expensive option where this is possible. This will help us cut the cost of delivering services to the public.

Central government are increasingly designing services that are 'digital by default' and have a policy to increase the numbers of people who have access to and use the internet. Nationally over the last 5 years broadband access has more than doubled and currently 83% of people in the south east have access to a broadband internet connection, which compares to 71% nationally.

This does vary across age groups: recent figures show 80%+ of 15-55 year olds have broadband access, compared to just over 50% of 65-74 year olds. Of those who do go online, 90% describe themselves as confident in using the internet, although again this varies from 95% of 16-24 year old to 75% of over 65s. People's behaviour has also changed. Online shopping sites like Amazon have been very successful and other private sector organisations like banks and credit card companies also encourage their customers to manage their money online.

People expect to be able to do things online and it is important that local government recognises this and responds, whilst ensuring those who prefer more traditional methods of telephone and face to face can still access services through these routes.

Improvements are also possible by reducing the amount of contacts to the Council that could have been avoided. This can be as simple as making sure that letters are accurate and clear, or dealing with more customer contacts at the first point of contact.

What is Channel Shift?

Channel Shift is the process by which we seek to encourage customers to access, or interact with, services via channels other than those they normally choose. This includes offering new ways of accessing services, particularly through the Council's website.

Deliberate channel shift is the design and marketing of effective and efficient channels because they are the most appropriate for the type of contact, customer and organisation in question. If implemented well it can lower costs, build reputation, empower the citizen and improve the overall service proposition.

Shifting customers to particular channels involves behaviour change on the citizen's part, but once they are aware of the channels available, they will use the one that works best for them. Channel shift is not just about online services, it is about customer choice, and it is also about better service design.

Our objectives

In order to achieve the vision we have set the following objectives:

- To increase the proportion of online transactions by 20% by 2015.
- To reduce unnecessary face to face and telephone contacts, shifting around 40,000 contacts to the web by 2015.
- Increase the use of online forms by 200%.
- To monitor and increase customer satisfaction with all contact channels, and in particular the website.
- To help ensure that savings targets can be delivered by 2015 whilst ensuring key services are still delivered to our residents' satisfaction.
- To improve efficiency by increasing the number of fully automated services available to our residents.

Where are we now?

Total traffic on the Council's website has increased by 23% in the last year and the number of online forms completed by customers has doubled. Unique visits to the website now make up nearly 62% of total contacts to the Council. Customers can currently request any Environmental Service on line and most Waste Services. These Environmental Service requests such as fly tipping reports are completely automated, with the report going straight to our service teams.

Despite our successes there are significant gaps in our on line form provision. Council Tax for example is our largest service area in the Contact Centre when measured by call volume, yet there are currently no on line forms for this service. Customers are not able to upload documents and this will restrict the depth of automation that is possible. We also know from our customer insight work that some Council services like Planning and Parking Services have customers that are more likely to want to transact online, but that they have to contact us in other ways because of our processes.

There are legislative issues with regards to uploading documents via our website, but for services such as Parking there could be an opportunity to fully automate the application for parking permits if proofs were uploaded by a customer. The uploading of documents means a customer can transfer scanned copies of proofs, such as those proving residency for a parking permit application, from their computer to the Council via our website.

The Contact Centre handles the majority of customer calls to the Council and all customer calls for the larger service areas, such as Council tax and Waste Services. In 2010/11 the Council received over 680,000 contacts (see table below). Over 60% of these were via the website. However, it should be noted that switchboard calls, which account for about 60% of the calls into the Contact Centre, have been excluded so as to avoid double counting. This is because a high proportion, between 40% and 50%, of calls to switchboard are transferred within the Contact Centre to the appropriate departmental queue.

Channel	No. Contacts	% of Overall Contacts
Face-to-Face Services (Gateway)	69870	10.16%
Telephone (Contact Centre only)	193965	28.19%
Web *	424124	61.65%
Total	687959	

*Web contacts are calculated by deducting 1 page visits from the total number of unique visits. Unique visit are complete customer interactions or sessions on the website, it does not matter how many pages were visited or if the customer visited them more than once. One page visits are deducted because it is not possible to know whether the customer really wanted our site.

Avoidable contact is currently estimated at about 10% of our contacts to customer services. This figure would almost certainly be higher if all contacts to the Council were being measured. Therefore, more work is needed to measure and reduce avoidable contact across the Council.

How are we going to do it?

Understanding our customers

Mosaic customer profiling data has been combined with as much customer interaction data as possible to give an indication of what type of customers are using Council services. We will develop an on line customer survey and use customer journey mapping to better understand how customers feel about their interactions with the Council and to gather their views on how they could have been improved. All this will help us make sure we shift the right contacts to the right contact methods, so that we get maximum uptake of any new service channel that is developed.

We will look at ways to widen the use of our on line services so that no part of the community will be disadvantaged or left behind. This will involve understanding why some people currently do not access on line services and how they can be developed so they are used by the greatest number of people. It will also involve looking at accessibility, issues such as limited broad band access and computer availability for some residents.

Identifying key services and working to shift appropriate contacts

We will look at all customer transactions across all departments to make sure these transactions are using the most appropriate channel and as efficient as they could be. We will look at our processes and change them where we can to make them more efficient.

A priority list of departments that have a customer base most predisposed to transact on line has been established, these departments are:

- Parking
- Environmental Health/Enforcement
- Maidstone Borough Services
- Council Tax
- Planning
- Waste Management

The list above highlights the service areas where channel shift will have the largest impact in the shortest amount of time. We will also look at ways to move contacts from the other high volume service areas, such as Housing Benefits, as even a small amount of shift in these areas will equate to a significant number of contacts.

Making our website more customer friendly and transactional

We will design the website with serving the customer as the central theme. The most popular on line services will be highlighted and accessing them will be made easier. The site will also be made more interactive so that customers can get updates on their requests. More on line services will be introduced and will be designed to be as efficient as possible, so that customer requests are dealt with quickly and using the optimal amount of resource. We will also slim down the website so that the content is easier to manage and relevant to the customer.

Communicating and promoting the website and other contact channels to residents

We will try to ensure that when any publication is produced and it is appropriate, the website address will be more prominent than any other contact method.

We will support the widest possible collection of customer email addresses across the organisation and

customers should be asked if this is an acceptable method for future communications. A central database, currently our CRM system, will be maintained and accessed by all service areas.

The promotion of the website, in particular our online forms, should form part of any closing of a transaction be it face to face, telephone or email. Scripts will be developed for the Contact Centre and Gateway to keep advisors aware of the latest on line services. We will also use other methods to promote our on line services such as internal publications like Wakey Wakey. There is also the opportunity to use our database of email addresses to encourage customers to use alternative contact methods.

Enabling customers to do more
We will expand the number of payments that can be made by using the self service payment kiosks in the Gateway, starting with the introduction of payments that would normally have been taken at the Crematorium.

We will make sure that our website has more up to date and customer relevant information, in the hope that the website will become the first point of contact for any customer needing to find out about the Council and its services. The customer will be empowered to do as much of the data entry for themselves as they can. This will increase the accuracy of our records and ensure the customer reports exactly what they require from us.

Financial implications

The opportunity to save both resources and time for both the customer and Council are huge if contacts can be shifted to alternative channels. As well helping service areas meet their savings targets, there is also an opportunity to offer a better more convenient service to the customer. This allows services to be protected because they are being delivered in a more efficient and rationalised manner.

The cost of 'shifting' some customer interactions could be high. For example, investment in new auto-mated systems such as speech recognition call handlers would require a sizable up front investment. These investments should be able to show real revenue savings and would be considered as invest to save proposals.

The investment required for more on line form development tends to be more staff resource based as the systems required to develop these forms have already been purchased. The staff time required should not be under-estimated however. It can take several months to develop fully integrated on line forms that pass information directly to the service area and then return an update to the customer. It is hoped, through working in partnership with neighbouring boroughs, that some of the cost can be shared in the future.

Monitoring

The progress of this strategy will be measured quarterly by analysis of the contact figures for each contact channel as well as measuring the use of on line forms. We will also look at customer satisfaction with the different methods of contact. Progress and outcomes from the strategy will be reported as part of the quarterly monitoring reports, with a detailed annual review at the end of each year.