abavus white paper

The ultimate guide to channel shift

An overview of different approaches to channel shift and practical suggestions for how best to manage the channel shift process

Introduction to channel shift

A channel strategy explains how an organisation will meet the demands of its customers/ citizens using the resources it has available and bearing in mind the needs of the customer/ citizen.

In this section we will discuss how an organisation should plan and design a strategy for the contact channels it will use to deliver services.

What is a channel strategy?

An organisation's channel strategy is a plan for the contact channels it will use to deliver services to and interact with its customers or citizens. A channel strategy explains how an organisation will meet the demands of its citizens using the resources it has available, and bearing in mind the citizens' needs.

A channel strategy's worth will not just be an organisation's ability to set out on paper a strategic approach to customer contact management. Real success will mean improved experiences for customers or citizens as they use services, greatly increased value for money in service delivery in times of growing economic constraint, and a clear demonstration that the public sector is a confident operator in the new digital age.

How does this affect you?

Whilst local authorities are not compelled to produce a channel strategy document or even operate with any forethought as to the contact channels made available to their customers, it is clearly in the interest of all stakeholders that a deliberate strategy is in place.

We are aware that many businesses, local and national government authorities have prepared channel strategy documents or are considering preparing such papers. We are keen to avoid unnecessary work and duplication and to this end we are producing this paper to allow you to easily produce a strategy by either adopting this paper in its entirety or to add your own strategic direction.

Each government authority has a responsibility to provide excellent services to their customers and the public, as well as value for money to the taxpayer or client base. The channels through which services are delivered and by which the customers have contact with the authority (be that via telephone, online, in person or by other means) are a critical part of the service provision, and they need to be managed effectively and efficiently for everyone.

Why is a channel strategy important now?

Customers are used to receiving high standards of service from many public and private sector organisations. However, they sometimes have low expectations of services provided by local government. It will be necessary to exceed rather than meet these expectations to achieve channel shift to cheaper and more effective channels. To achieve this, the public sector must continue to raise its own standards of service across all the channels it offers.

In order to meet the needs of customers, local authorities must provide services that are:

- Easily accessible
- Simple to use
- Streamlined
- Convenient
- Cost-effective
- Robust

It is also important to bear in mind the target audience's access to technology, the type and complexity of the contact, their personal preferences as well their skill sets when selecting channels.

Rising internet use and customer expectations of accessing public services online present an ongoing opportunity for public service providers. Effective online services are easy and quick to use, available whenever customers need them and have a relatively low administrative burden. Managed well, online access to services can offer considerable benefits to both customers and taxpayers.

However the public sector must also meet the needs of people who do not have access to the internet. Therefore digital inclusion is a core element of any government or public sector channel strategy.

Key considerations

The process of developing and implementing a channel strategy needs to be guided by insight, and insight specifically relating to:

- The citizen or customer.
- The services an organisation is providing and each service area in question.
- The current delivery channels at the council's disposal as well as those that may be available to be used in the future.
- Other council-specific micro/macro factors that may have an impact on service provision and delivery.

It is also important to understand the wider online services market, as expectations of online services are driven by customer experiences of using similar services of other organisations.

What are the organisational challenges?

In considering a channel strategy, there is often a considerable challenge and change to existing organisational structures. A channel strategy needs to become an integral part of the structure of the organisation and the way the objectives of the organisation are realised. It cannot be super-imposed or retrofitted onto existing practices and as such is likely to require considerable organisational change.

We also need to recognise that people will use different channels not just for different types of interactions, but also to suit their own convenience. Particularly at local level, an integrated channel strategy is required that takes into account the varied ways in which local people may want to interact with the council.

Let citizens use their channel of choice

We live in a multi-channel world, with customers using email, the web, social media, drop-in centres, phone and mobile during different phases of the process. Reducing choice, for example by cutting out the ability to email, will frustrate and annoy your customers or citizens – as does making them change channels midway through a process or not offering their preferred channel at all.

Respond to customers via their channel of choice rather than what is convenient for the organisation. As a general rule it is a good idea to respond to a citizen through the same channel that they originally used to make contact, unless they specify otherwise.

Basic principles & scope

This section outlines the broad principles for the ways in which your organisation should deliver its services through a range of contact channels that provide better value for money, are more accessible and are designed with the customer or citizen in mind.

What is the purpose of a strategy?

A channel shift strategy outlines the broad principles governing the ways in which your organisation will deliver its services through a range of contact channels that provide better value for money, are more accessible and are designed with the customer or citizen in mind.

Contact channels you may need to consider include:

- Face-to-face
- Email
- Kiosks
- Websites
- Telephone
- Mobile apps and mobile web
- SMS text messaging
- Automated telephone technology
- Web chat
- Post

This document focuses on three key types of contacts between the organisation and the citizen.

- **Transactions** e.g. registering a birth, reporting a problem or paying a bill.
- **Interactions** e.g. obtaining advice, public consultations, petitioning.
- **Information** e.g. requesting cycle maps, finding out about library opening hours.

The channels on offer should be relevant to the nature of the services provided as well as appropriate to the customers' individual needs and preferences in a non-discriminatory way.

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Channel hierarchy & design principles

The choice of contact channels available to the public is growing all of the time as new technologies are developed and released. In the last 5 years there has been a significant growth in the use of digital channels such as social media, mobile internet access and mobile phone apps.

Without a channel strategy many organisations typically adopt one of two approaches to using these channels. Either they launch all of their products and services on all new channels without much thought to the relevance and cost of doing so, or they focus on switching their customer contact to the cheapest channel (often assumed to be the internet) without much thought as to the relevance of this channel to their entire customer base.

How do we position each channel?

There is a generally accepted model for the effectiveness of the major channels of contact, shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: effectiveness of major contact channels.

What this model shows is that as we move up the triangle the cost of delivery typically gets cheaper for the organisation. However for some types of contact a greater level of human contact is required, particularly for contacts that require some level of reassurance.

Imagine you've received a letter asking you to pay a bill or the bailiffs will turn up at your house. You've just paid the bill and now want reassurance that your personal belongings are safe. You are unlikely to log on and have a look at the organisation's website FAQ page for reassurance (even though this might be the most cost-effective solution for the organisation) but you may be more inclined to ring up the contact centre to request a letter confirming that matters are in hand. In this example there may be a case for having online FAQs relating to debt recovery in terms of best practice,

but there is probably little chance of shifting this individual contact online.

It is therefore vital to fully understand each type of contact and the level of reassurance that the customer is likely to require before focusing the organisation's efforts on the design of any contact channel for that service.

But of course the conundrum doesn't end there. There may be little hope of shifting the channels that a certain group uses if that group simply doesn't access that channel. For example, internet penetration is low amongst the jobless, the financially excluded, older people and people who do not read or speak English – all traditionally high users of council services. It may not be a good use of authority time or taxpayer's money to try and shift these contacts online.

Conversely, mobile phone penetration is very high amongst teenagers, so SMS messaging might be a good channel to use for advising of last-minute secondary school closures in bad weather. Customer insight goes a long way in the design of any channel strategy.

There are unfortunately even more factors to consider including channel-hopping (an individual's propensity to use different channels for the same transaction depending on what is convenient to them at the time) and the public's increasing confidence in new channels that develops over time.

The key aspects to an effective channel strategy therefore are:

Detail

The deliberate design of the channel strategy for each type of service, bearing in mind the level of human interaction required and the needs of the targeted customer base.

Fluidity

The constant reviewing of the effectiveness of the channel strategy for each type of contact bearing in mind changing technologies, channel-hopping and changing customer habits.

Simplicity

The best channels for the organisation should be the easiest to use for the customer, otherwise it will be extremely difficult to drive a meaningful shift in customer behaviour.

Inclusion

No group should be denied access to a service because of disability, language or cost of the access channel (e.g. mobile phone costs, broadband access). Options should be made available other than the organisation's preferred method of contact to ensure that no group is excluded from access to any services.

Cost-effectiveness

Particularly in the current economic climate, finding ways in which to deliver services effectively but at lower cost will be increasingly important. A study has put the average cost of face-to-face transactions at £8.62 each, those via telephone at £2.83 whilst those via a website or mobile app cost as little as 5p per transaction - a huge cost saving.
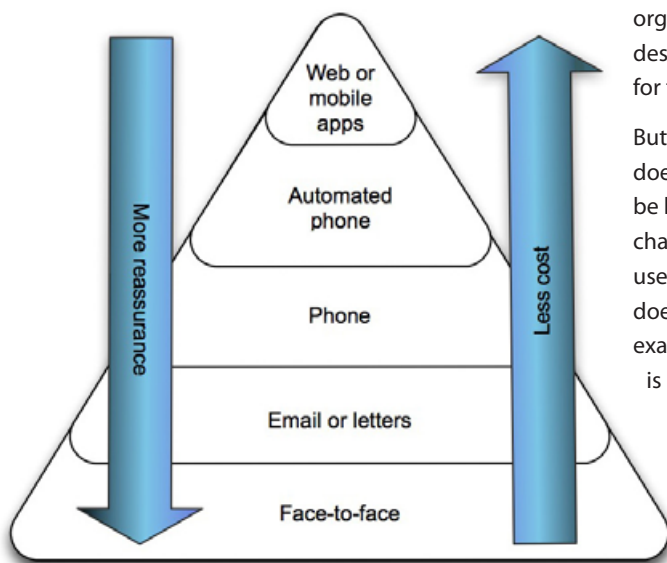
Principles

Responding to your customers

Customers want to know that you've received their query and when to expect a response. While just under half (49%) of companies acknowledged inbound emails, just 39% gave a timescale for replying and only 69% of these actually kept their promises and responded within their timescale, meaning nearly a third failed to meet their own deadlines. This basic inability shows a lack of resources – companies simply can't deal with emails as quickly as they want to.

Don't force people to use a channel

The NAO looked at 20 public services and found the main reasons for lower take-up to cheaper channels were: a preference for face-to-face dealings; an unwillingness to provide information online; and low awareness of some online services.

Provide all channels and ensure that consumers are offered the option of using the next cheapest channel without having it forced upon them. Gradual uptake of the channels is a better approach than forcing people who will then either phone the council or voice their issues on social media.

Email is still important

Despite the rise of social media, email is still a vital channel for citizens. It provides a written record of correspondence, particularly when asking more complex queries, giving an audit trail of activity.

Email use is growing with devices such as smartphones and tablets providing new opportunities to quickly communicate with the council.

But research shows that email customer service is in crisis. Faced by a deluge of emails, many councils are simply shutting the channel, forcing them to call contact centres with their queries.

There was a 10% drop in councils providing email between 2011 and 2012, meaning that 23% of councils are essentially slamming the door in the face of citizens by removing their channel of choice.

For those that do allow people to email them, performance was worse across the board, with fewer accurate responses provided and a longer average time to reply. This points to a fundamental mismatch between the resources that companies are dedicating to email and the demand for answers.

Rather than force customers onto other channels, councils need to adopt a smarter approach to email. Technology that can help agents by analysing incoming emails and suggesting responses from a knowledge base increases accuracy and speeds up replies. Workflow that automatically delivers queries to a free agent balances the load across the contact centre.

Speed counts

Citizens today want things done yesterday. When they communicate via a channel they should be given a reference number, and response how long their query or request will take. It is important to set the expectation as soon as possible. For example a freedom of information request (FOI) can take up to 30 days. If the citizen is not aware of this they will become disgruntled after a few days, as they will be expecting a response. Try to automate responses based on the request type.

Social media - don't ignore it

Social media use has firmly reached the mass market. Over 63% of the UK population is on Facebook, with the amount of time they spend on the social network increasing. Some councils are now receiving ten times as many hits on their Facebook and Twitter pages as on their website. Twitter usage has rocketed, with over 340 million tweets sent every day and new blogs are being published every minute.

Social media gives everyone a voice. While originally they may have used social networks to talk to friends or family, they are now sharing their views on councils and the service they receive from them – in real time, all around the world.

The rise of social media is both a challenge and an opportunity for councils. While in the past citizens communicated with council on private channels (such as email, phone or letter) they are now stating their views in public, in front of a potential worldwide audience of millions.

Essentially social media hands your customers a megaphone that lets them complain instantly to everyone they know – and even those they don't as they can reach people outside their immediate networks. And with the media increasingly monitoring Twitter and Facebook to spot breaking stories, what might have been a minor issue can suddenly explode into front-page news.
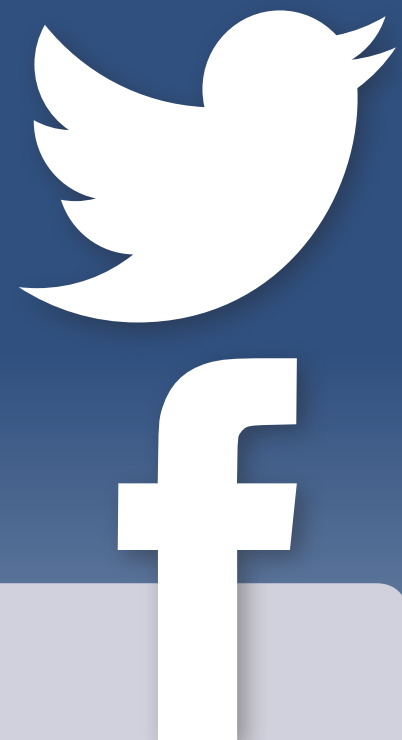
Things to remember

1. Make it simple

Citizens don't want to fight to get information and request services. You need to provide self-service ways to allow them to do things themselves; it should be straightforward and easy to use.

2. Make it mobile

Mobile internet use now accounts for more than half of all internet access and is only set to grow. Review your mobile strategy and ensure that citizens can access all your services via mobile.

3. Be social with customer service

Make sure you have a presence on the right social networks and are using them for service as well as informing citizens.

4. Let citizens share their experiences

Integrate your systems with social media to allow your citizens to share their experiences.

5. Be consistent across all your channels

Multiple channels shouldn't mean multiple sources of information. Invest in a multi-channel platform that underpins all channels to ensure consistent and efficient service.

6. We live in a multichannel world

Let customers choose the channel they want to use to contact You – don't force them off channels such as the web but give them options across all channels.

7. Be joined up

Nothing annoys citizens more than having to repeat themselves – ensure their service history spans all channels so they don't have to keep re-entering details of their query.

8. Capture information

Use forms to help turn basic questions into intelligent communications that can be quickly routed to the best person to solve their problem.

9. Learn from your customers

Look at your channels through your citizens' eyes. Monitor the questions they ask and use this information to improve content and services.

Channel shift strategies

In this section we will discuss how best to define an effective channel shift strategy and propose some options to consider for each of your channels.

How to define your strategy

To begin designing your strategy you must understand the demographics of your citizens. There are five areas you need to consider before you select what strategy to follow. These areas will not necessarily define your strategy but the will tell you what you need to do before you can fully implement it.

1. Finance

You will need to understand the financial situation of your citizens. Less well-off people may not have broadband access and a computer to connect to the internet so there may be a greater need for face-to-face contact. On the other hand citizens who are well-off may have broadband, laptops and smart phone, but they may prefer to use their PCs rather than a mobile device.

2. Location

If your council is mostly rural there may be a lack of broadband coverage or poor 3G coverage.

3. Age

If you have more citizens between 18-48 they will be more inclined and happy to use the internet. But the older generations may prefer telephone or face-to-face contact.

4. Education

This can be a difficult one to judge, but very generally speaking a higher educated population will try to research the issue first and will use the digital methods to contact a council.

5. Language

Language can be a huge barrier. If your information is only in English then you will be stopping a non-English speaker from accessing this information, and if your contact centre only operates in English then effectively you are offering no way for the citizen to communicate with you.

Overarching strategic vision

Before you start the strategy you need to define your organisation's overall channel strategic vision. This takes the form of high level statements which can then be underpinned by detailed actions.

This strategic vision could include statements like the following:

1. We will make access to our services available through appropriate and cost-effective contact channels designed with the needs and preferences of our customers and taxpayers in mind.

2. We will seek to encourage greater usage of the most effective contact methods, by creating a series of deliberate and targeted channel shifts.

3. We will not discriminate against any individual by limiting the choice of contact methods available.

4. We will offer feedback to the customer to acknowledge we have received their service request.

5. We will ensure the first person who receives the request is the overall owner to ensure that the action is complete and the citizen is informed.

How to ensure the strategy is defined

Define an owner

It is important to define an owner for the strategy, someone who can manage the whole task of gathering inputs and compiling the document. Without an owner progress will stumble and you will not achieve the desired outcome.

Define a review period

The strategy is not a document you create then put in the cupboard, it is a living document that defines a road map, that needs updating as your thought process changes, or technologies evolve.

It is import to define a review period, where you will look at what you have achieved, and where it has not been so successful. The strategy should be constantly evolving and a formal review and re-publishing of this document should occur on a quarterly basis.

Define the governance of each channel

It is highly likely that you will need to make some structural changes within your organisation in order to optimize your various channels. For example we feel that a contact centre should include the management of all channels due to the high level of customer contact coming through these channels. Within the contact center we would advise an owner is assigned to each channel.

For each of the following areas you must define an owner.

- Telephone/contact centre
- Website
- Email
- Letters
- SMS
- Face-to-face
- Mobile apps

You must also define high-level owners that will manage overall delivery. Typically this will be people such the Head of Customer Services or Customer Service Improvement Manager, and their primary concern will be with issues such as:

- Accessibility
- Avoidable contact
- Channel shift
- Performance measures

What is channel shift?

Channel shift is the process by which organisations seek to encourage customers to access or interact with services via channels other than those to which they normally choose.

Deliberate channel shift is the design and marketing of effective and efficient channels because they are the most appropriate channels for the type of contact, customer and organisation in question. Channel shift forms one part of an overall channel strategy. 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.

To encourage residents to shift to new and more effective channels by a number of means, the following options should be considered.

1. On each contact the advisor will suggest other channels where the can receive the same service.

2. At key council locations advertisements should be placed to inform citizens about the other channels.

3. Whilst on hold when calling the contact center you can provide information about the other channels.

4. Wherever possible, staff should use the public website to transact in their day-to-day work, thus ensuring that the site is fit for purpose for residents too.

5. More engaging content should be placed on the website to increase public confidence, usage and interaction with the site. For example traffic reports, weather, events and electronic petitions.

What is a digital inclusion strategy?

Over 40% of the UK population does not use online channels. Exclusion from access to digital channels matters for these users, especially as the digitally excluded group includes socially excluded and hard to reach groups who are likely to have the greatest needs from public services.

It also matters for the delivery of efficient public services, because when people cannot access services online they invariably access them via alternative means which are generally more expensive. Again, the priorities set out in the Digital Britain report reinforce the importance of digital inclusion. The report sets out the government's plans to drive digital participation in the context of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan and the proposed Digital Switchover of Public Services Programme. The report also reiterates the government's commitment to ensuring that public services online are designed for ease of use by the widest range of citizens.

It is therefore important that any channel strategy includes plans for communicating these hard to reach groups.

Embrace digital

The future will be digital because your customers will demand it of you. The sooner you accept that and start making the moves towards becoming a digital organisation, the easier the process will be for you, your staff and your citizens.

Think digital – not just digital inclusion

If you start the process by thinking about how you are going to become a digital organisation, bringing citizens along with you will be a lot easier. Your digital strategy will have a positive impact across your council helping you work more efficiently and deliver a better service as well as helping your citizens to become more financially, socially and digitally included.

But remember – it's a change programme, not a technology one.

It's easy to get consumed with the tools and the technology you'll want to use to support your new digital council, but to be successful your digital strategy needs to be about winning the hearts and minds and staff and citizens.

Share your knowledge

Creating a digital strategy from scratch can be pretty daunting, but you're not the first council to go through it, and there are plenty of councils out there who are happy to share their expertise.

Address the main barriers

We know the main barriers that prevent people from using the internet are motivation, skills and access, so to be successful in supporting your citizens you need to address all three, without overemphasising any of them. It's easy to see broadband for all as the golden ticket, but without the need to go online, or the skills to use the internet confidently, it's likely citizens will continue to feel excluded.

Know your citizens

It's really important to understand your excluded citizens, and target them carefully. If it's parents of school-age children, then supporting them to find school places online or to help their children with learning can be the carrot they need to improve their own skills. Universal credit will be a big stick to encourage tenants to improve their skills, but providing some carrots as well will help makes the journey easier for everyone.

Provide access a key locations

You can provide public internet access at key locations such as libraries, museums and council offices.

Accessibility of contact strategy

What is an accessibility of contact strategy?

Accessibility of contact refers to the ease or difficulty that a citizen experiences whilst using different electronic access channels to obtain services from the authority. For example, someone with hearing difficulties may find the telephone unusable and may prefer to communicate through email. Equally a customer who does not have English as their first language may not be able to access any contact channel without appropriate translation services.

The following list suggests a few ways you can achieve accessibility:

1. Provide a range of language and easy to read options where practical on your website and mobile apps. When it is not practical to do so to clearly indicate how a customer can obtain translation services or obtain information in a format suitable for them (e.g. large text, MP3 etc).

2. Use inbound text messaging to communicate with hearing impaired customers.

3. Provide full mediated access to your website via the council's contact centres and face-to-face centres.

4. Obtain and maintain the WCAG 2.0 level AA rating for accessibility by all to your website.

5. Carry out an equality impact assessment of the channel mix and regularly consult with disability advocacy groups and make reasonable adjustments to the channels as needed.

Strategies for specific channels

Coming up with different strategies can take time. The following sections list key strategic areas you should look to include when defining your strategy.

Telephone strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own telephone strategy.

1. Provide one main phone number for the organisation, which can be easily found in order to make contacting the council straightforward.

2. Make a limited number of specialist phone numbers available to your citizens to allow menu-less access to your contact centre.

3. Aim to answer the phone within 20 seconds.

4. Use telephone call data and customer feedback to identify areas of improvement within the council and work to eliminate red tape, process failure and unnecessary cost to the public.

5. Look for opportunities to work with other public sector contact centres to improve overall service, accessibility and improve value for money.

6. Use 0333/0300/0345/020 phone numbers wherever possible to make contacting the authority cheaper on "pay as you go" mobile phones.

7. Aim to constantly improve the number of customer queries that you are able to resolve first time on the telephone.

8. Provide automated phone services where appropriate.

9. Let the caller know how many minutes before you expect to answer the call.

10. Maintain industry accreditation of the council's contact centre.

11. Maintain overall service excellence as evidenced by customer feedback, industry awards and accreditations.

12. Provide a comprehensive translation service to allow easy access to the authority for all.

13. Wherever possible, use the public website to transact in your contact centre to ensure that the site is fit for purpose for your residents.

14. For each service you provide over the phone offer alternative channels to receive the same service.

Mobile app strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own mobile app strategy.

1. Provide the ability to report issues, apply for items, request services, and pay for services.

2. Provide news, events, jobs, council meetings and key events through the mobile app.

3. Offer the ability to search for nearby council facilities.

4. Offer the ability to search for local councillors.

5. Offer key seasonal items of information.

6. Offer opening times for leisure facilities and recycling centres.

7. Offer the ability to view on going roadworks near to the citizen.

8. Make use of existing content from your website and not double-key the information.

9. Supply key contact information so if the citizen is not happy using this channel they can use other alternatives.

10. Provide integration from your mobile app to your core CRM systems.

11. Provide the ability to use the app with social media.

12. Provide a login and register facility to enable the citizen to receive updates and track their historic transactions.

13. Allow the citizens to complete ePetitions.

14. Allow the citizens to complete eVoting.

15. Allow the citizens to complete eQuestionnaires.

16. Monitor the registration data, and analyse the demography of the apps user base.

17. Offer different apps for different for different purposes, e.g. youth apps, domestic abuse, crime.

18. Offer location-based notifications.

19. Action broadcast messages for email, SMS and push messages.

Mobile telephone strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own mobile strategy.

1. Provide access to council telephone-based services using only 01,02 and 03 prefixes to ensure the minimum costs to mobile phone users, particularly those on "pay as you go" tariffs.

2. Use mobile phone technology in a tactical manner to provide better access to information for targeted user groups, to reduce costs, increase speed of communication or reduce direct contact.

3. Use outbound text messaging to confirm appointments, chase payments and advise of school closures.

4. Use inbound text messaging to communicate with hearing impaired customers.

5. Monitor opportunities and take up rates of mobile technologies.

6. Develop appropriate applications for mobile phones including fault reporting and simple information provision.

7. Use outbound text messages to chase outstanding payments.

Face to face strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own face-to-face strategy.

1. Undertake process reviews to identify potential channel shift and quality improvements to your face-to-face service.

2. Provide mediated access to the website through face-to-face staff.

3. Seek opportunities to share face to face provision with other organisations.

4. Aim to see citizens at the appointed time or, if there is a delay, ensure that they receive an explanation and are kept informed.

5. Aim to see citizens with no appointment within 15 minutes or offer them an alternative time.

6. Provide face-to-face staff with the same level and quality of information that the contact centre has access to, using mobile technology.

7. Provide a clean, tidy and comfortable waiting area and, wherever possible, a space to talk in private and facilities for young children.

Web strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own web strategy.

1. Promote the website as the main access point for the council's services for simple information and transactional services.

2. Provide a single website for the organisation to make contacting the council straightforward for everyone.

3. Ensure that business cases for improvements reflect both increased public satisfaction, but also reduced contact centre effort in providing mediated access.

4. Ensure that all web content is written in plain English and is easy to understand.

5. Ensure that the website is available and operational 24/7.

6. Aim to place 100% of your transactional services online and to encourage customer usage to reduce costs and provide 24/7 access to the authority's services.

7. Maintain overall service excellence as evidenced by customer feedback, industry awards and SOCITM usability ratings.

8. Obtain and maintain the WCAG 2.0 level AA rating for accessibility by all.

9. Provide appropriate intuitive map-based interfaces to both transactional and information systems.

10. Integrate all online transactions directly into back office systems to prevent double entering of information.

11. Provide status updates for any transactions that are started on the web but cannot be completed online – for example reporting a fault.

12. Ensure that all council leaflets and literature are made available via the website in order to reduce printing, cost and environmental impact.

13. Ensure that all communications activity is replicated on the council's website.

14. Promote the use of the council's website through "offline" marketing.

15. Use new technologies to increase democratic engagement, reach wider audiences and increase transparency.

16. Add engaging content on the website to increase public confidence, usage and interaction with the site. For example traffic reports, weather, events and ePetitions.

17. Invest in technology that allows publishing to and from multiple websites from a single point to ensure any shared data is always up to date.

18. Provide a range of language options where practical and when it is not practical to do so to clearly indicate how a customer can obtain translation services.

19. Provide live web chat facilities as an alternative to the telephone, post and email channels.

20. Establish a roadmap for a single account for residents across police, NHS, districts and county councils.

Post or paper communication strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own post strategy.

1. Provide a complete range of online forms to minimise the amount of post handled.

2. Place more of your leaflets and information online in order to minimise printing and reduce your environmental impact.

3. Reply to all letters within 5 working days.

4. Monitor demand across all channels for a representative sample of information.

5. Integrate email and postal distribution lists in order to give people the choice to opt for email only.

6. Reduce the amount of post and paper communication by better use of electronic channels.

7. Use second-class post as your main postal tariff to minimise cost.

Email strategy

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own email strategy.

1. Develop other channels in the ways detailed in this document to provide more attractive options to the email channel.

2. Provide a complete range of online forms to minimise the amount of emails handled.

3. Aim to place 100% of your transactional services online and to encourage customer usage to reduce costs and provide 24/7 access to the authority's services.

4. Aim to answer all emails within 24 hours.

5. Work with partners to ensure outbound emails contain all the information needed, ideally in a format that can be semi-automated.

6. Integrate email and postal distribution lists in order to give people the choice to opt for email only.

New media strategy

The past year has cemented the position of social media as the first channel that many consumers turn to when asking customer service questions or complaining. Councils have recognised this through an increase of Facebook pages, Twitter presence and hosting of their own online forums.

However there is still a long way to go, few councils have linked customer service pages to social media. This potentially leads to a silo-based approach that replicates effort and content between different channels, leading to an inconsistent, inefficient response. More integration is needed to avoid this.

The following lists key strategies you will need to include in your own new media strategy.

1. Launch electronic petitions.

2. Regularly review emerging and maturing new media channels.

3. Develop mobile phone provisions, particularly SMS messaging.

4. Broadcast council meetings on the web.

5. Launch live web chat sessions with councillors.

6. Review the use of online forums.

7. Review the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

8 Review the use of video sharing sites such as YouTube.

9. Launch online photo galleries.

10. Create more engaging content that can be placed on the website to increase public confidence, usage and interaction with the site. For example traffic reports, weather, events and ePetitions.

11. Use new technologies to increase democratic engagement, reach wider audiences and increase transparency.

12. Develop appropriate applications for mobile phones including fault reporting and simple information provision.

13. Use outbound text messages to advise of temporary school closures, chase outstanding payments, confirm appointments.

14. To use inbound text messaging to communicate with hearing impaired customers.

15. Develop new inbound and outbound text services to facilitate customer service improvements.

16. Provide live web chat facilities as an alternative to telephone, post and email channels.

17. Invest in technology that allows publishing to and from multiple websites and mobile devices from a single point to ensure any shared data is always up-to-date.
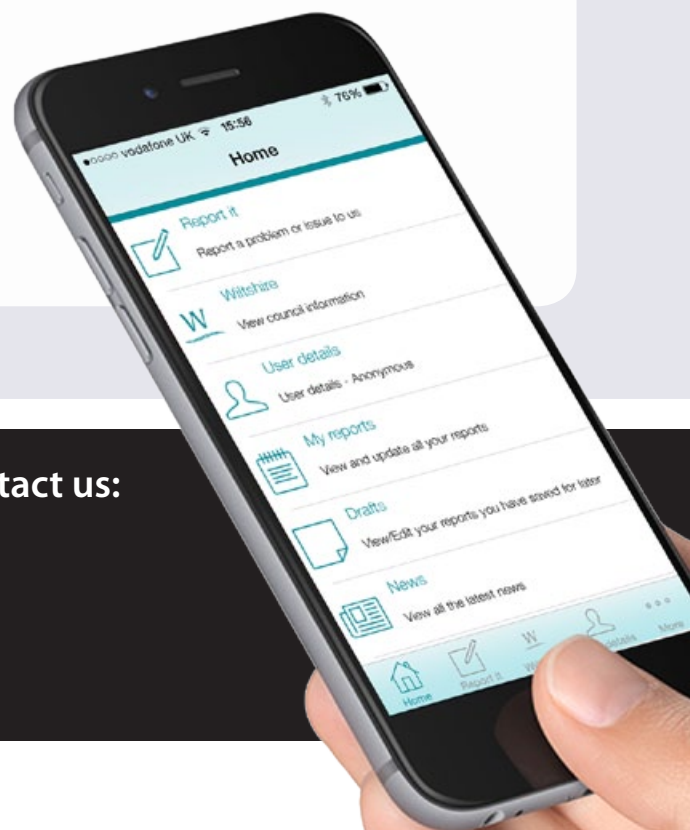
About Abavus

Abavus provides public sector organisations with innovative smartphone and web platforms that enable self-service customer access, mobile working, local authority-specific CRM and case management.

The My Council Services platform is unique. It is the only fully synchronised, dynamically configurable and integrated multi-channel, customer self-service and mobile working platform with full back-office capability and offering comprehensive data integration capability with third party systems. The combination of innovative, cost-effective technology and our made-to-measure professional services ensures our clients realise rapid returns on their investments.

my **Council** services