Shaping government for a digital future

Case Study

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council is the local authority of Southend-on-Sea in Essex, England. It is a unitary authority, having the powers of a non-metropolitan county and district council combined. It is a member of the East of England Local Government Association. The Council is responsible for a population of around 180,000 people.

"There's definitely demand from customers to be able to interact with us online. We're up to about 40,000 registrations on our digital platform which, when you consider we have a population of about 170,000, is a high proportion of all the adults in our area. We're seeing calls into the contact centre drop by on average 2% per month. The trend is that online activity is going up and calls are going down, and we want to facilitate even more of that wherever we can."

Imran Kazalbash, Senior Project Manager, Southend Borough Council

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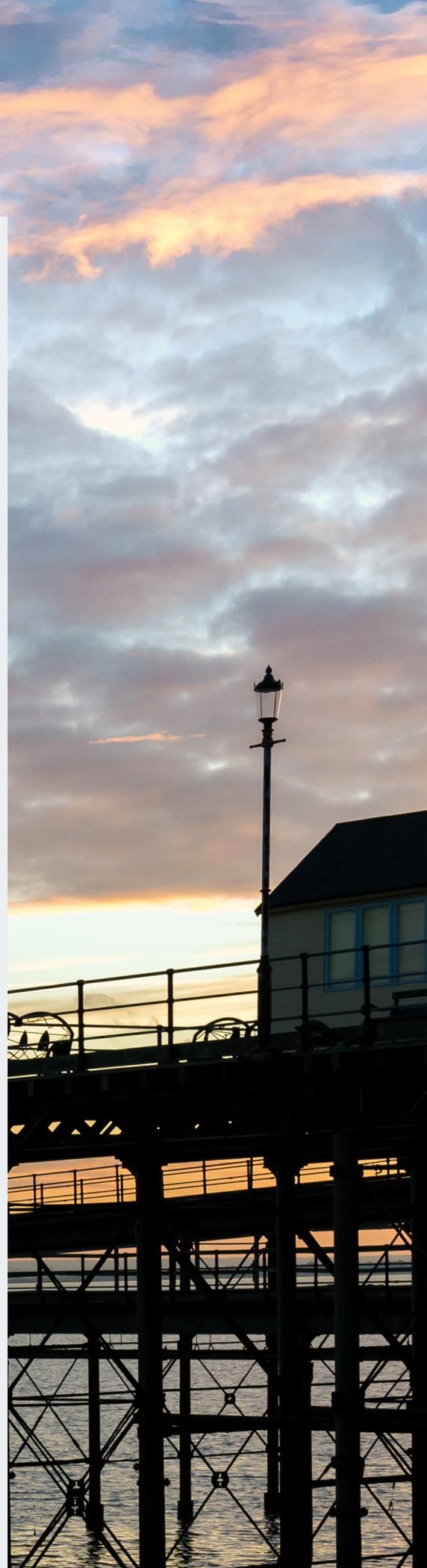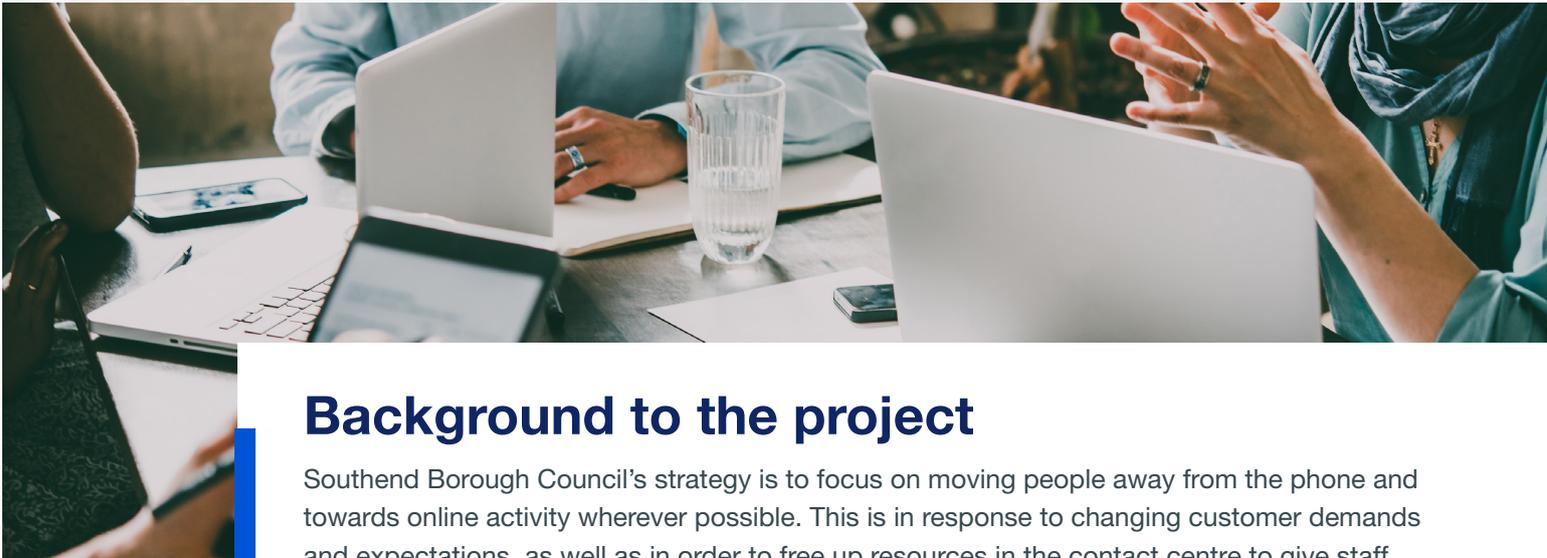
Background to the project

Southend Borough Council's strategy is to focus on moving people away from the phone and towards online activity wherever possible. This is in response to changing customer demands and expectations, as well as in order to free up resources in the contact centre to give staff more time to deal with more complex enquiries.

The Council had already worked with Abavus creating MySouthend, a customer portal for the digitisation of its waste management function, and was looking for other areas to target for channel shift. It was decided to focus on revenues and benefits as this area accounts for a large proportion of the calls into the Council's contact centre.

At the same time, the Council's existing supplier was moving out of the market, so this provided an additional impetus for the move to a new system as well as adding an element of time pressure to the implementation. It also meant that existing users needed to be moved from the previous system to the new system, requiring a substantial migration of data from one to the other.

Following a successful delivery of an integrated waste solution and a new procurement process, Abavus was selected to deliver a consolidated customer portal that would include a deep integration with Northgate, Southend's revenue and benefits system, as well as with Civica W2, the revenues and benefits document workflow system.

The aims of the project

Integration with the Council's existing systems

"We already had something like 30,000 people signed up to our previous revenues and benefi ts online system but that supplier was moving out of the market so we urgently needed a new system."

Move towards a single portal for customers to interact with the Council

"We have a back office system in the Council that holds all the data and we need to make that available to customers so they can log on, see their account and transact with us: apply for things, pay for things, any kind of online transaction. We want them to be able to see all the details of their account in one place and do everything they need to do in that same place. The revenues and benefits project was a building block moving towards giving customers a single view of the council."

Benefits of the project

The integration between MySouthend and Southend's existing systems delivered the ability for registered customers to securely authenticate themselves and, once authenticated, look up and interrogate a range of financial information relating to their interactions with the Council (e.g. council tax, business rates, benefits payments and entitlements etc).

More broadly, Southend now has a customer portal that is wide-ranging in function. A registered customer can access 40 different payment-based processes, from purchasing a commemorative bench to remember a loved one through to purchasing a copy of a birth certificate. As part of the wider project Southend has also deployed over 200 forms, via the MySouthend platform, for customers to access.

Greater efficiency

"The key benefits of a system like this are firstly that once people are signed up they're not calling us so much, and secondly that they can print their documents off online rather than us having to post them out, which obviously saves us a considerable amount of time and money."

"One of the main benefits of this platform is that it is very customer friendly in the way it looks and feels. We've had a lot of feedback from customers saying that they like the interface, it's nice and clean-looking. It's very simple, easy to navigate. That's worked really well."

Working with a single supplier to develop one gateway for all Council interactions

"Our aim was to create a single platform that customers can use to interact with the Council, so it was beneficial that we ended up with one supplier to manage all of that. It's obviously a plus."

A single platform for customers

"Now customers can go online and carry out a wide range of interactions including; paying for, applying for and reporting services. It's a really diverse platform."

Automatic updates for customers

"It's really good for customers because now we can give them automatic status updates. They no longer have to call in to ask us when something is going to happen. We send them an email automatically and say 'You've been awarded a new benefit, go and look at your account.'"

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Enables the Council to respond to customers more quickly

"It's much quicker now that customers can interact with us online. Previously you'd have to fill out paper forms or spend time making sure that enquiries were directed to the right person. Now it's much quicker because you're not filling out a bit of paper or sending an email to someone that potentially sits in their inbox for a few days. It's all done in real time."

Reduces the number of different systems that need to be maintained

"Building a single portal means that we've been able to decommission legacy systems along the way as we don't need to use them anymore. Obviously that means we've saved money as well as saving maintenance costs because we're not running multiple different systems now that everything is in one place."

Channel shift

"We're very committed to our channel shift strategy. One of the things we're really pleased about is that we've got a really good platform now where people can go on and pretty much do anything they like online. That's really good."

Working with Abavus

"This project has been challenging in terms of the time pressure we were under and the volume of data we were dealing with. We weren't looking for an off the shelf solution but needed something brand new, tailored to our requirements. Working with the team at Abavus, including getting to know the developers, has been really helpful. They came over to meet with us and we really appreciate how hard they work and the skills and expertise they have."

Customers and staff share the same view

"The CRM capability means that when customers phone up the contact centre the agents there are using a version of the same platform to record their activity and record things for the customer if they can't self-serve. Customers and staff are seeing the same thing, using the same interface."

Next steps

Encourage more customers to use the online system

"The challenge now is for us to encourage customers to move towards completely self-service for standard transactions. Not to phone us and ask us to do something for them but just to go online and do it themselves. To that end we have a communications programme using social media and other channels to let customers know what's possible now. When customers phone up we're letting them know that they could do the same transaction online."

Development of a Highways system

"We've started work on a highways integration which will work along similar lines. Rather than phoning up to report a pothole or a missing sign, customers will be able to report that via the platform. That functionality already exists but we're in the process of integrating it with the highway inspectors' back office system. From there, inspectors can be out in the field looking at their phones knowing which locations they need to look at and creating the appropriate work orders, all in real time. The customer will then get automated feedback to let them know that we've received their report and that we're dealing with it."

Further integrations

"We're working on further integrations in environmental health, building control and planning control enabling customers to fill out forms and make applications. They might want to raise a noise complaint or apply for a building control inspection or something like that, and that whole process can be digitised. There's also a project looking at assets and bookings, so for example enabling people to add themselves to the waiting list for allotments and then letting them know when they reach the top of the list."

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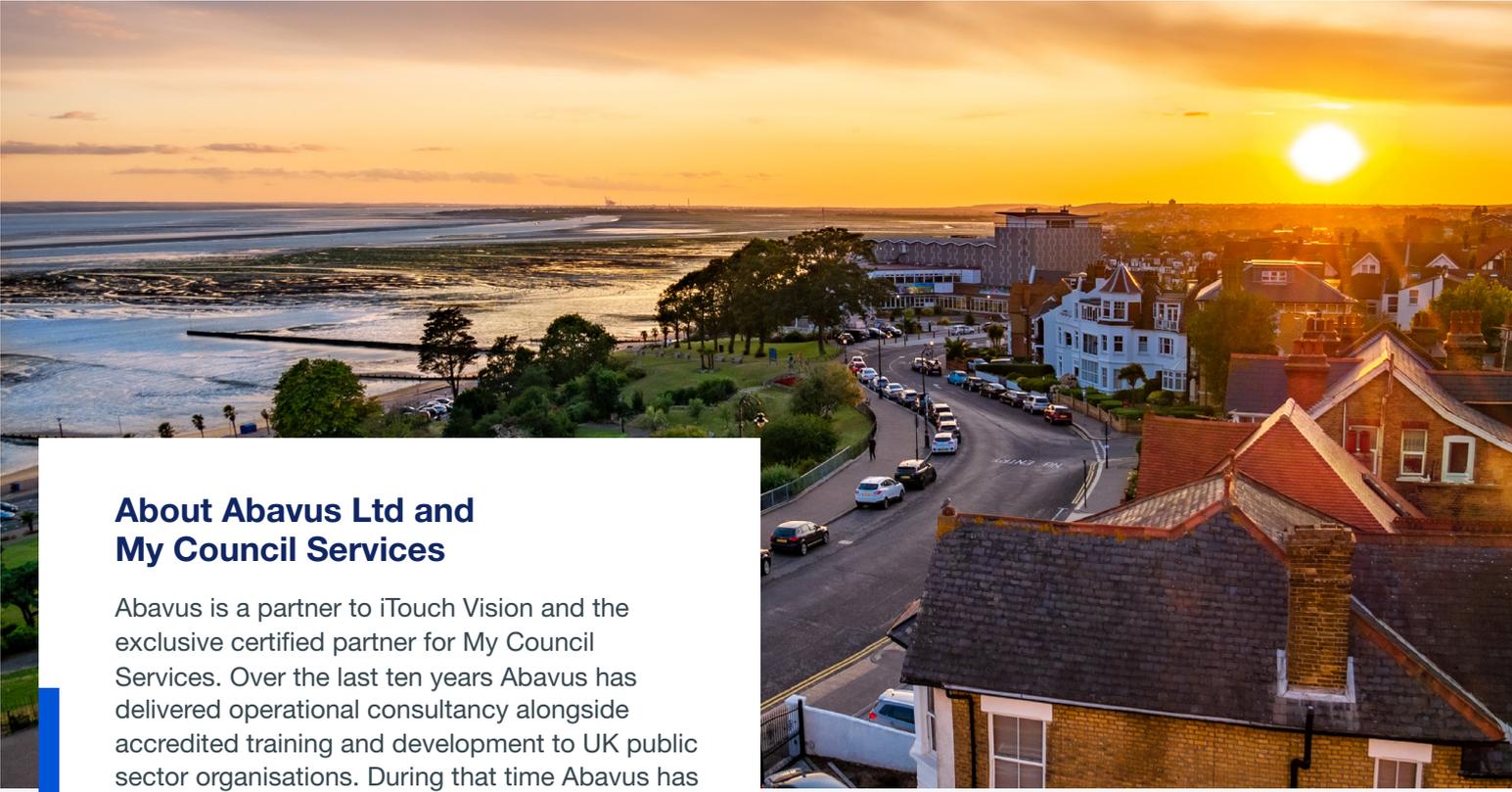
About Abavus Ltd and My Council Services

Abavus is a partner to iTouch Vision and the exclusive certified partner for My Council Services. Over the last ten years Abavus has delivered operational consultancy alongside accredited training and development to UK public sector organisations. During that time Abavus has also been involved with the implementation and setup of IT platforms.

iTouch Vision is a leading innovator in the development of technology applications focused on increasing efficiency and improving the customer experience for both public sector and commercial organisations.

My Council Services is the flagship of its current development activity

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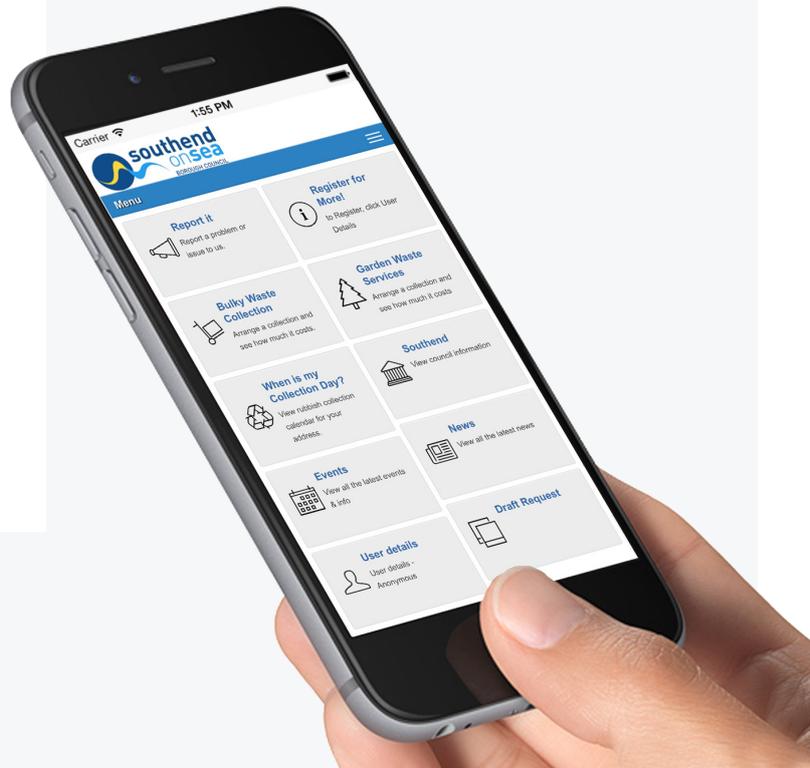
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