Open-sourcing might be the way to go

Simon Bailey

By pooling resources can LAs create a new non-commercial Revenues and Benefits system ■

Last year I wrote two articles about a bid to the Local Digital Fund made by a partnership of authorities to explore the feasibility of writing an open-source non-commercial Revenues and Benefits system.

The partnership comprised of Teignbridge, Exeter, East Devon, Basildon, Brentwood and Sedgemoor councils and together they explored the feasibility of creating what they described as a true customer focused, configurable, cost effective IT system for processing Revenue and Benefits. The authorities successfully bid for £71,000 of funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as part of the Local Digital Fund.

They reported back in the spring of 2020, around the same time as we were all going into the first pandemic lockdown, so there was a slight delay in publishing the findings on the Local Digital Fund website.

The presentation of their findings can now be found at:- *https://localdigital.gov.uk/funded-project/processing-revenues-and-benefits-data/*

The user research was undertaken by Snook who engaged with local authorities, within the partnership and beyond, to establish the desirability and feasibility of creating an open-source solution for a Revenues and Benefits computer system. The research reached out to 21 local authorities, held 30 interviews, had 15 workshop attendees, and received 61 survey responses. Participants were all using one or more of the three suppliers for Revenues and Benefits systems (Capita, Civica and Northgate).

The report highlighted that there is a growing discontent with the existing service providers as systems have not kept pace with users' current needs, expectations, and interfaces. It was noted that manual workarounds have become the norm. The cost of the systems was also mentioned with users feeling trapped with their current system provider as suppliers knew that the costs of migrating to a new system would be prohibitive and as such could take advantage of the situation. A Revenues and Benefits Manager was quoted as saying *"They have us over a barrel. It feels like it is all about them making money, not working towards maintaining and improving the service"*.

However, it was acknowledged by participants that suppliers' systems were robust and had never failed to process Council Tax. It was also accepted that the software met all statutory requirements and kept up to date with legislative changes.

The research observed that the authorities wanted systems and platforms to integrate with each other with a more modular and flexible approach. With shared services, authorities are looking to work closely with each other, and the current model of separate suppliers is hindering this sort of joint working. A Head of Revenues and Benefits was quoted as saying *"If the work can be more efficient, we are likely to be more up to date, so that it provides enhanced customer experience and ultimately improved collection"*.

Local authorities (LAs) understand that designing, developing, maintaining, converting to, and improving a system is a risky challenge and would be extraordinarily complex. Whilst the original concept was for a local authority led open-source system only, it transpired that closed source systems may be also be needed for example by using Microsoft products.

Authorities needed assurance that someone would be responsible and accountable for maintaining the system. They would also need to be convinced that any new system would work, and they would need to have clear view of the benefits. Experience has shown that converting to a new system can take a considerable period of time, cause backlogs, require integration and create significant training requirements.

Made Tech, a separate company, contributed to the research as to the feasibility of an open-source system. Made Tech believed that an open-source system was feasible and LAs would be able to modify and build a system to better meet their needs, rather than waiting for new features to be released by commercial vendors. By pooling resources, the cost of system development and updates could be shared.

I asked Made Tech for examples in the public sector where open-source software was being used. They highlighted that all new publicly funded code in the UK was open source by default, including GOV.UK Pay, Notify etc. Added to this, open source is used in other areas such as Linux, the open-source operating system, and WordPress which runs 37% of the world's websites and is the most popular Content Management System in the world.

Creating a system for Business Rates has been identified for the next stage of research and development of a viable product. A Business Rates system was regarded as more **'standalone'** than the other Revenues and Benefits functions. It is therefore likely to have less complexity and less volume. It was observed that areas such as Housing Benefits are still in a period of change and that it may be best to wait and develop a Council Tax reduction system at a more appropriate time.

What's next? Well, it was identified that the research undertaken was not a discovery phase but was in fact a pre-discovery project. The proposed plan will see more discovery planning, research on Business Rates and user needs and development of an alpha system.

Obviously, the pandemic has affected the work on this project so we will have to wait and see what transpires in the future for the systems that we use.

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