Digital uptake during COVID-19

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Looking at how digital platforms will be the 'new normal' moving forward ■

At the time of writing it is a period that I never want to experience again but by the time this article is printed, hopefully we will all be experiencing the post pandemic **'new normal'**, whatever that may be.

As Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying *"Out of adversity comes opportunity"*. One of these areas of opportunity will no doubt be the rise of digital take up in public services to include Revenues and Benefits.

The need to social distance highlighted the strengths and shortcomings of authorities as they rushed to put in place digital alternatives for face-to-face customer service. Cost and complexity barriers often put customers off from using digital access channels, but when they became possibly the only option by which to interact with authorities, these obstacles were soon overcome and new digital ways of working were introduced. We must ensure that these gains in lessening the digital divide are not lost and are used to plan and build a digital future. We need to see a long-term change in service delivery and not let it just be a quick fix for the pandemic.

An example of good work in building for a digital future was seen in Scotland. The **Connecting Scotland** programme was created during the pandemic and sought to connect 9000 people considered to be clinically high risk so they could access services and support and connect with friends and family during the pandemic. The Scottish government identified that being connected was essential to beat the coronavirus and that local government was ideally placed to assist in delivering the programme.

In the Connecting Scotland programme, eligible digitally excluded people were identified by local authorities. Then third sector organisations offered individuals a device with a mobile internet data package which was delivered to their homes. A **'digital champion'** provided phone and online support for an initial period of six months.

Also, during the pandemic, we have seen an uptake in the use of remote meetings via applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. We have seen people use this technology including councillors for the very first time. More importantly we have also seen segments of the population that would never have touched Zoom with a barge pole accept it as a satisfactory way to communicate. Here again we must not lose the impetus that the pandemic has provided and these remote meeting access channels should be developed for the future.

The lockdown has also seen an unprecedented surge in remote or home working. Whist Revenues and Benefits services have not been strangers to remote working, the government's instruction for people to work at home wherever possible has galvanised IT services to provide equipment and software to enable even more remote working. Processes that historically demanded face-to-face interaction were reimagined in a short period of time. Let us hope that the move to more home working is not lost and that the commute to the office every day is a thing of the past.

I have written many times about the use of bots in delivering customer services especially in Revenues and Benefits. Some authorities looked to use bots to deliver information to residents during the pandemic. It was reported that Cheshire West and Chester Council saw a 500% increase in queries from the public about a range of topics such as COVID-19 symptoms through to Council Tax changes. Bots can field a significant number of such queries which then allows staff to support those residents with more complex enquiries. Bots are the future in customer services and the virus has shown how they could be deployed quickly when there is a significant increase in customer interaction.

Websites were crucial during the lockdown period. Many authorities publish their website around services such as Revenues and Benefits, Planning, Housing etc. This works well when citizens have specific requests or a need for a piece of information regarding these individual services. However, the pandemic crossed many boundaries of local authority services so numerous authorities redesigned their web sites to provide a one stop shop for all the pandemic support being provided by them. They created a central webpage with information such as help for businesses in claiming grants and reliefs, support for communities such as foodbanks, where to get financial help, schools and childcare information and support for employment. It may be that the pandemic has at last broken-down digital information silos that were in existence prior to March 2020.

Whilst it was great to put in place shiny new digital applications to help solve short term problems, the real measure was whether residents were satisfied with their local authority during the lockdown. A report published by the Local Government Association in May 2020 found that 70% of people polled were **'very satisfied'** or **'fairly satisfied'** with the way their local council was supporting them and their household during the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, only 49% thought their local council kept them **'very well informed'** or **'fairly well informed'** about the coronavirus pandemic. Maybe there is a lesson to be learnt for websites and the use of digital newsletters etc. for the future.

Soon we will see authorities look to fund the hole in finances resulting from the cost of the coronavirus pandemic. Numerous authorities are, as I write, looking to serve a Section 114 notice halting any new expenditure until a balanced budget can be achieved. Authorities will have seen increased costs together with lost income and if they are to pay for this then cost cutting may be, quite rightly, the first port of call. However, now is the time to build upon the digital take up and reap the rewards from efficiencies that digital services can bring. The pandemic is a wake-up call for authorities to refocus their attention on the day-to-day methods of operation and invest in clever digital solutions that will be fit for the future but hopefully not another pandemic.

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