Giving the public what they want:

Embracing digital technology can not only reduce costs, but bolster community engagement

O2 Digital Communities Report 2013

O2

Foreword

The onset of the digital age has transformed the way we communicate. For local authorities, under pressure to reduce costs, it presents a huge opportunity – opening up a host of new ways to engage citizens and local communities more efficiently.

We commissioned the O2 Digital Communities Report with a view to exploring the experiences and views of the UK public when it comes to engaging with their council, sharing the insights with our local authority partners and working together to find solutions to some of the challenges.

While digital technology has changed the way we interact, it is by no means the answer to every problem. But applied in the right ways, it has the power to truly transform operations. We believe that the right investment in digital technology can have a real impact on social value; whether its policies and devices to empower staff to work more flexibly, or a mobile app that makes it easier for local authorities to engage with their communities.

We aim to work closely with councils to help them get closer to their customers through technology that supports better communications with citizens, and flexible working practices.

Our Local Government Digital Forum is exploring the role of digital technologies in modernising councils. We're working with senior officers and members from local authorities across the UK to gain a deeper insight into Local Government issues and opportunities. All local authorities will also have the opportunity to bid for up to £250,000 worth of Telefónica UK services and technology from our Local Government Digital Fund. The investment will help councils benefit from new digital expertise and unlock innovative ways to deliver effective services.

Together, we're proving that the public sector can take the lead in finding innovative approaches to long-term challenges. By working closely together, we can make sure that Britain's evolving public services are fit for the digital future.

Mark Adams-Wright
Managing Partner – Local Government
Telefónica O2

Giving the public what they want

The world around us is changing. Technology is transforming everything we do, and most of us are now accustomed to being connected, anytime, anywhere. With smartphone penetration set to reach 90% in the next three years and the advent of mainstream 4G services signalling a faster, more ubiquitous mobile experience, our digital demands and capabilities are only set to increase.

The age of connectivity has created a nation of digital citizens

Whether we're working, shopping, or socialising – with a host of handsets, tablets and laptops giving us instant access to the information we need, when we need it, our expectations are also evolving. The age of connectivity has created a nation of digital citizens – with a growing list of demands for quicker information and smarter, more sophisticated service.

For public sector departments, this digital revolution also represents a period of significant change. The UK Government is working towards its aspiration to become 'digital by default', calling on all departments to become digital in thinking in order to deliver services which are suitable for users.
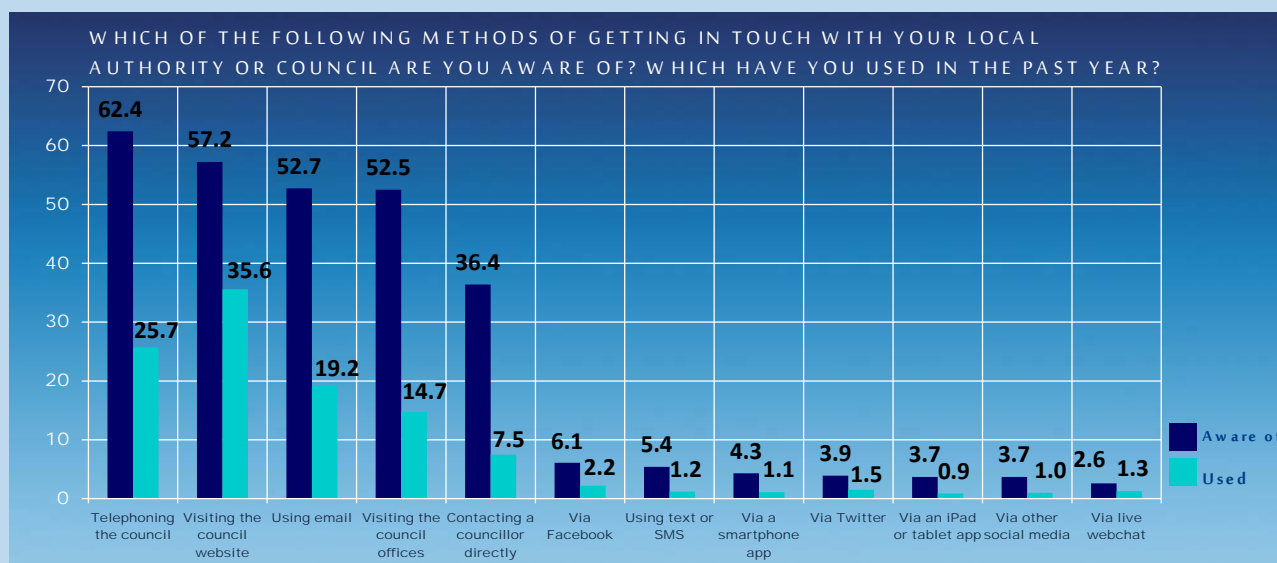
At the same time, local authorities remain under more pressure than ever before to reduce costs and increase efficiencies, while at the same time delivering better services to local communities. But while technology increasingly holds the key to helping tackle these issues, it seems that many local authorities haven't yet made the leap into the digital world.

The digital divide between councils and communities

The O2 Digital Communities Report 2013 was commissioned in order to explore the views and experiences of citizens across the UK today when dealing with their local authorities online. What it uncovered was an emerging digital divide between local councils and the communities they serve.

The report revealed a growing demand amongst citizens for their local councils to do more to engage them through

GRAPH 1: AWARENESS AND USAGE OF CONTACT CHANNELS

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING METHODS OF GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR LOCAL AUTHORITY OR COUNCIL ARE YOU AWARE OF? WHICH HAVE YOU USED IN THE PAST YEAR?

	Aware of	Used
Telephoning the council	62.4	25.7
Visiting the council website	57.2	35.6
Using email	52.7	19.2
Visiting the council offices	52.5	14.7
Contacting a councillor directly	36.4	7.5
Via Facebook	6.1	2.2
Using text or SMS	5.4	1.2
Via a smartphone app	4.3	1.1
Via Twitter	3.9	1.5
Via an iPad or tablet app	3.7	0.9
Via other social media	3.7	1.0
Via live webchat	2.6	1.3

technology. Almost half (48%) of people interviewed said that when it comes to essentials like paying council tax or getting information on local services such as social care and education, they would like to use the internet, mobile apps or social media.

But as it stands, councils cross the country aren't yet successfully delivering on this digital experience when it comes to engaging with citizens and communities. In the last 12 months, less than one in ten people (7%) say they have interacted with their local authority through the web, mobile apps or social media. By contrast, nearly two thirds (61%) have opted to use more traditional methods to get the information or support they need, such as going into the council offices or telephone, because they feel the digital services provided by their council are either unreliable, or simply unavailable (see Graph 1).

Despite a quarter of the UK population being signed up to Twitter[1] and 24 million active daily users of Facebook[2], use of these channels by local authorities to engage citizens is especially low. Just 2% of people have interacted with their local council on Facebook and 1% via Twitter and of those that have, 74% say they have been left frustrated by the slow response times.

A number of councils are making great steps towards using these channels – such as Islington Borough Council in London, which uses Twitter to respond to a variety of enquiries from local residents, from local school places and cycle lanes, to updates on local parks for parents. But the findings suggest that more must be done to build awareness amongst communities.

Furthermore, despite widespread adoption of tablet devices (with technology research house IDC predicting that sales of tablets will overtake PCs for the first time at the end of 2013), just 0.9% of people say they

have used a tablet app to access local council services.

Preparing for the digital future

While the adoption of digital tools and devices spans a wide demographic, the findings to our research were more acute amongst young adults. This is the generation that has grown up with the internet – the digital natives, for who technology is an inherent and engrained part of day to day life.

The O2 Digital Communities Report highlighted the differences in expectations between different age groups. For example, three times as many 18-24 year olds say they expect to interact more with their local council via tools such as live web-chat in the next few years, compared to those in the 55-64 age bracket.

Similarly, when it comes to smartphone adoption, one in seven 18-24 year olds say they expect to use their apps to interact with their council, compared to less than one in twenty of those aged 55+.

With generations of digital natives to come, these findings indicate that embracing technology to connect with citizens will be a crucial investment when it comes to helping maintain connections to local communities of the future.

The experiences highlighted by the report point to a crucial need for councils to reassess the way they deliver services and information to communities – or risk fuelling the emerging disconnect between local authorities and Britain's nation of digital citizens.
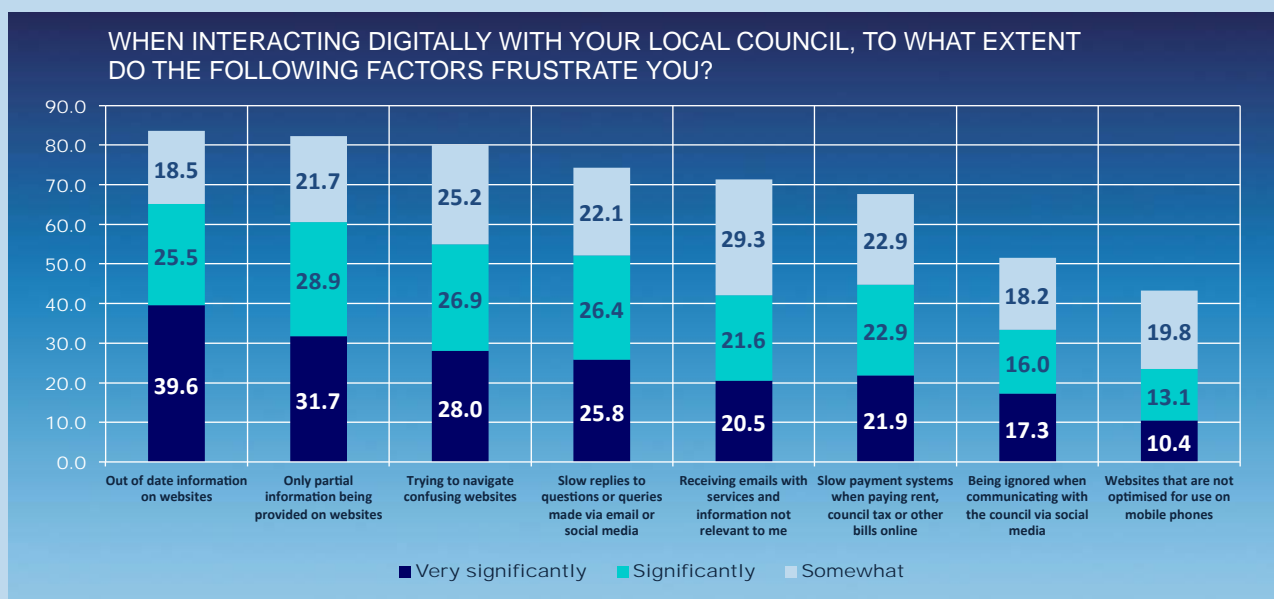
Delivering seamless service to local communities

In addition to tackling the challenge of the best way to engage citizens, local authorities must also address the growing

1 Twitter now claims 15m active users – approximately a quarter of the UK population: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/10291360/Twitter-claims-15m-active-users-in-the-UK.html

2 24m UK users are active on Facebook daily: http://www.thedrum.com/news/2013/08/14/facebook-claims-daily-active-uk-users-now-number-24m

GRAPH 2: FRUSTRATION FACTORS

WHEN INTERACTING DIGITALLY WITH YOUR LOCAL COUNCIL, TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE FOLLOWING FACTORS FRUSTRATE YOU?

Factor	Very significantly	Significantly	Somewhat
Out of date information on websites	39.6	25.5	18.5
Only partial information being provided on websites	31.7	28.9	21.7
Trying to navigate confusing websites	28.0	26.9	25.2
Slow replies to questions or queries made via email or social media	25.8	26.4	22.1
Receiving emails with services and information not relevant to me	20.5	21.6	29.3
Slow payment systems when paying rent, council tax or other bills online	21.9	22.9	22.9
Being ignored when communicating with the council via social media	17.3	16.0	18.2
Websites that are not optimised for use on mobile phones	10.4	13.1	19.8

demand for a more seamless experience when it comes to information they provide.

The Digital Communities report revealed significant frustrations amongst the public when it comes to the quality and accuracy of information being delivered by councils. A staggering 84% of people claimed that the information they receive from their local authority is often out of date, incomplete (82%) or simply not relevant to them (71%).

If a bank were to deliver inaccurate or incomplete information time and time again, there's absolutely no doubt that it would result in a permanent impact on reputation, eroding the trust of the customer. This is no different. A series of disappointing or frustrating experiences will inevitably have an impact on long-term reputation, resulting in less engaged communities and frustrated citizens.

Our recommendations

So, having identified the biggest challenges, what are the solutions? The findings of the O2 Digital Communities Report 2013 revealed three vital recommendations for local authorities if they are to bridge the digital divide between themselves and the communities

they serve.

1. Create choice across channels

The first is for councils to create choice across channels when it comes to communicating with people and communities. As we explored at the beginning of this paper, the rise of the digital citizen has changed the way people expect to receive services.

For example, over two fifths (43%) of people are frustrated that they still can't access the information they need from local authorities on their mobile or tablet. Local authorities should look to build clear strategies to tackle this issue to create a range of contact points for people to access the information they need, when they need it.

Reliance on traditional channels (with 40% of people still opting to go into their local council office or telephone a contact centre to get the support they need) is also having an impact on councils' ability to deliver efficiencies. With local authorities under continual pressure to reduce costs, digital services have a crucial role to play in saving money. A 2012 SOCITM study across 120 local councils estimated that the cost of contact for face to face transactions averages £8.62, for phone £2.83, but for

Embrace new channels to help get information out into the community

web only 15 pence. The money saved can then be spent on people and services that really need help from local authorities.

2. Go social

Take the leap into the social world. If local authorities are to shake the perception amongst citizens that getting access to the information they need is a slow, time consuming process, they should consider embracing new channels to help get information out into the community, more quickly.

Councils could gain from investing time in alternative customer service channels – from a Twitter handle to update on local road closures so people can check their route before they set off for work, through to a Facebook page that invites people to contribute their questions or views on new housing developments.

3. Deliver a more targeted, seamless customer experience

The investment to deliver accurate, joined up services to communities – from council office, to mobile handset – will help councils transform the customer experience. As a business, we operate over 450 stores and have more than 23 million customers in the UK, so we understand first hand how mobility and people's expectations are changing in the digital age. Local authorities need to tap into technologies that allow them to deliver the right information, to the right people.

Employing data analytics solutions for example, to gather specific information about demographics and behaviours in local communities would enable greater targeting when it comes to delivering more accurate, relevant information. Perhaps information on local playgrounds could be distributed straight to parents of under-fives, while local job alerts could be shared directly with students via email or even a

dedicated feature on a mobile app.

Technology holds the key to better community services

As the O2 Digital Community Report 2013 reveals, the UK still has a road to travel when it comes to meeting the Government's aspiration for a 'digital by default' nation. For local authorities, investment in digital technology can have a real impact on social value and improving services.

From empowering front-line staff to be more productive on the move through mobile devices and apps, to making it easier for local authorities to engage with their communities via social media – technology can bring local councils and communities closer together.

Technology can bring local councils and communities closer together

About this study

The O2 Digital Communities Report 2013 was conducted by consumer analyst house Conlumino. In order to compile this research we surveyed a nationally UK representative sample of 2,027 consumers. Within this survey we asked consumers a number of questions about their habits and preferences in terms of using digital channels or services as a means of contacting and engaging with their local authority.

To find out more about our Local Government work, go to o2.co.uk/localgovernment or call us on 01235 433 507.

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