

Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC) won the PSMA Digital Transformation Project of the Year award in 2017. Here they explain the background to their impressive digital journey.

Aylesbury Vale District Council: a council for the future



“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence – it is to act with yesterday’s logic.” Peter Drucker

Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC) was honoured to win the PSMA Digital Transformation Project of the Year in 2017 for our Right Here Right Now programme. What started as a simple website refresh had turned into a complete overhaul of council services culminating in our award. And this was just one of a number of steps on the journey that we have undertaken since realising in 2010 that government grants were not coming back.

AVDC is leading the way in transforming local government. With lower budgets and greater resident expectations, the council recognised the need to change the way it delivered public services to the 78,000 households in Aylesbury Vale, northern Buckinghamshire. We embarked on a digital transformation programme to cut costs but most importantly to improve services to customers. To do that we realised that we needed to think differently. Councils across the UK have worked hard to reduce costs and implement efficiencies, but the cuts in grants continue and economising will only get us so far.

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.” Lao Tzu

We concluded that only the complete automation of online processes would help

deliver the dramatic savings the council needed. We had already set the target of becoming infrastructure free and 100% cloud based in our IT strategy. Having already saved £11m, we set our sights high to drive council wide savings of a further £5m by 2020.

Right Here, Right Now

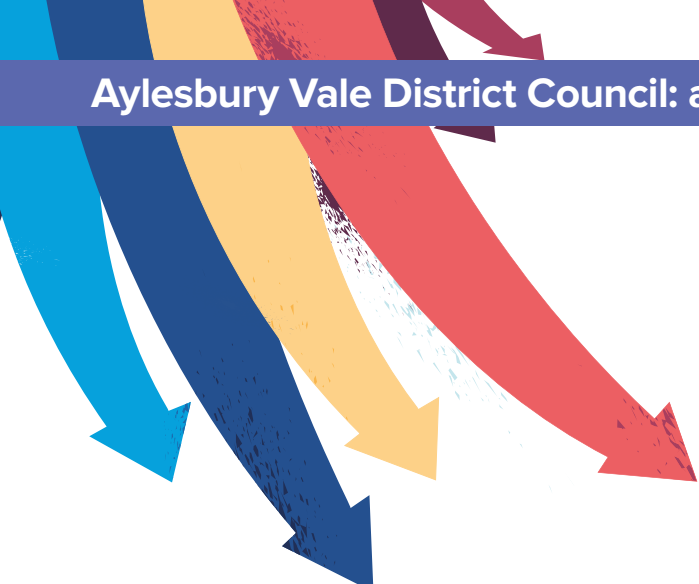
We initially wanted a smart form-integrated customer account, but quickly realised when talking to suppliers that we just couldn’t get what we wanted. We needed more out of our system along with a development partner to enable us to get the end-to-end process automation that we needed to save money and improve services. We knew that just producing forms was not going to be good enough; we needed full API integration and a complete overhaul of the back-end systems used. This required an open platform and we chose Salesforce and worked with an established partner of ours, Arcus Global, who could customise Salesforce and make it fit our purpose.

The digital element of the programme was then split into a number of strands. This included a new website, a new intranet and a

customer self-service portal, Aylesbury Vale My Account, with end-to-end automated transactions fully implemented in the back office.

Any major transformation programme comes with issues and barriers. It became apparent that the programme wasn’t just about deploying new digital





technologies but about creating a more commercially-minded, customer-centric council. This would allow us to push channel shift as a more sustainable option and a full restructure of the council staff to match this vision would support the council going forward. This put cultural change at the heart of our digital transformation.

Get the principles right

The customer is always our top priority and ensuring we could produce a system that was not only beneficial and attractive to use for our residents, as well as saving us money long term, was the key goal through the entire programme. Our starting point was to scope out the project with many 'discovery sessions'. These included working with all sections of the council to understand the different customer entry points, including process flows and systems in use.

We found it invaluable to establish underlying core principles for the project at the outset. As already mentioned we had established cloud first as one of our core drivers. We set about adding customer centricity and ensuring that data drives our relationship with the customer, enabling better interactions now and creating opportunities for the future. We examined customer journeys based on different requirements and identified how we could deploy the technology to best effect, and used customer focus groups to understand our residents requirements better. Transformation is a complex journey and we concluded that we needed a three-track delivery plan. We had to manage our legacy systems to keep our house in order while identifying our strategic digital platform at the same time as finding where we could innovate and develop new commercial opportunities.

Working in a public-facing authority there was a worry that our council members might not be as ambitious as our officers and that we'd receive criticism from the public via the councillors. We were fortunate to have the full backing of our cabinet, senior executive board and the full council when it went to be approved. Stakeholder management was key to this success and our preparation included offering presentations and drop-in sessions for anyone who wanted to know more before taking it to full council for approval. We continue to keep all stakeholders updated and involved in major decisions.

Be agile

Our ambitions for the programme meant there really was only one way of working – agile. Our discovery sessions had underlined that we needed to not only provide an incredible customer experience but also a whole new way of working in the back office. As an example, one of our old processes, to order a new bin, had nine touch points with actual people.

We were also concerned that development periods can often be longer than suppliers promise. This is a concern that stems from experience with legacy systems. Once appointed we were upfront with partners around expected deadlines and worked with them to produce the 'sprints'. This is simply a defined period during which a specific piece of work must be completed and reviewed. Working in an agile way ensured that we are limited to three-week sprints with a delivery at the end of those periods to work towards. We ensured sufficient programme resources internally by seconding people to the project and employing specialists into the roles for which we didn't have the expertise. Resourcing the programme sufficiently was key to keeping us as on time as possible.

Sometimes our ambitions simply meant we had to adapt plans. Instead of going live on time with a solution that we weren't happy with, we delayed implementing a process in order to get it right, which usually meant more automation.

Change the people or change the people

We may have changed the systems but, more significantly, we have changed the people. From our experience digital transformation requires cultural transformation.

To try and integrate the new ways of thinking quickly we created a new team, our Customer Fulfilment Team, who would be in sole charge of managing the customer contact via the new My Account. Getting the team in during the development phase was key to the success of the integration. The team had previously worked for the departments whose processes were being automated and brought into My Account, e.g. Revenues and Benefits, Waste and Council Tax. They developed a real sense of ownership for these new automated processes and were

able, once My Account became 'business as usual', to spread their enthusiasm and become champions for the new way of working.

Since Right Here Right Now was rolled out, the whole council has been transformed by a commercial programme which has streamlined management and removed departmental silos.

A council for the future

We went live with our customer-facing portal, Aylesbury Vale My Account, in November 2016. Our target to sign up 10,000 members within four months was quickly met (around New Year time) and we now have almost 58,000 residents and businesses in the district signed up for an account. We are also now almost 100% in the cloud.

Via My Account, residents can check and pay their council tax, apply for benefits, sign up for new services, apply for licences and update their personal information, as well as talk directly to staff using web chat. We identified the most expensive and time-consuming tasks and set about automating them first, and we are well on our way to our cost-saving targets. Remember that process to order a new bin that involved nine different touch points? It's now fully automated, which frees up staff for other activities.

Successful implementation of the waste reporting/ordering/buying of new bins has led to a reduction in phone calls to the waste service of 23%. Calls into our benefit helpline have dropped 20% and council tax line calls have dropped by 26%.

Our webchat service is now dealing with 1,500 enquiries a month, up 83% on 2016-7, and is fast becoming one of the most popular ways to contact us. Recent feedback on the service from webchat users includes "Very quick and efficient", "Quick service and got my issue sorted first time" and "Much better than waiting in a phone queue".

The Right Here Right Now team estimates that My Account saved more than 900 hours of officer time in the first six months after go-live. We now receive two-thirds of all direct debits via My Account and all taxi and vehicle licence requests; and although launched later than originally planned, up to 25% of council tax single person discount requests come via My Account, with no requirement for human contact.



We did have concerns about excluding older members of the community who aren't so tech-savvy, but we've had over 1,500 residents aged 75-plus sign up, including two 92 year olds! The success with older residents is partly due to the council's assisted sign-up programme, where we help people over the phone to sign up to an account and use the service the first time they enquire. This upfront investment means that those assisted initially can go to self-serve in the future.

With far more accurate resident and business information, the council can identify cross-selling and up-selling opportunities. This data also feeds into marketing campaigns and council newsletters, which is something we were unable to do before.



AVDC's achievements have been recognised by our peers within the public sector and beyond such as itSMF UK. We are regularly invited to share how going digital has helped the council deliver substantial improvements and savings. The Right Here Right Now programme has matured into our Connected Knowledge five-year strategy. And it's working; despite the ongoing local government grant cuts we have published a

four-year balanced budget. Overall savings from AVDC's transformation in the last 8 years now stand at £18.5m. We have rebuilt ourselves from the inside out and gained a reputation for innovation and doing things differently.

Andrew Grant, CEO of AVDC says, "We exist in a world where the customer is king and convenience rules. Although the initial investment in digital may seem high, the potential long-term savings are much higher. It's about great customer service whilst making cost savings. You can't afford not to do it."

We understand that the pace of change doesn't stop and we have to continue to

set our sights and goals high. We are the first council in the world to launch an Alexa skill and we are now implementing Artificial Intelligence processes within our customer portal. We are starting to look at areas not traditionally in a district council's remit such as social care because we believe the opportunities with digital are only just starting to be realised.

And we remain ambitious. We want to be the council of the future.



The Connected Knowledge Team at Aylesbury Vale District Council