Improving Customer Access and Experience

Case Study by Renfrewshire Council

Developing a Knowledge Base of FAQs

An output of Scotland's A-Z and Knowledge Base Project

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Scottish Councils - supporting easier access for citizens to information

Service delivery not fully centred around customers' needs and methods of working and systems established over a long period of time can make the journey through public services a difficult one for customers and staff alike.

The result is that it is not always possible for the customer to identify the appropriate service provider, to get hold of the right person at the right time, or to get the right information. For staff themselves, it can be just as frustrating not being able to access the information needed and knowing that the person that you are dealing with is not getting the best possible service.

Scottish councils have been taking a number of practical steps to make it easier for citizens and staff to access services and to find, in a consistent way, what they are looking for, on council websites.

This is in support of the Scottish Executive's goal of 75% of citizen enquiries being answered at the first point of contact.

Two Scottish councils - Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire, together with the Scottish Local Government Improvement Service - have been leading a project to develop a common A-Z of council services, a common List of Services provided by Scottish councils (the Scottish Service List) and a user-friendly Scottish navigation structure (the Scottish Navigation List).

If that's not enough, these are all being linked to a comprehensive knowledge base of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Forms. Renfrewshire Council's been leading on developing the knowledge base of FAQs and forms.

This case study demonstrates the customer service benefits possible through better information management and how it has been working in practice in a major Scottish council, Renfrewshire Council.

Renfrewshire Council - some interesting facts

- Administers an area of around 270 square kilometres
- Mainly urban council located on Glasgow's south-western borders
- Population - 170,610
- Households - around 76,750
- Council employees - 9,169 (7,783 FTE)
- Principal town, Paisley, is Scotland's largest town
- Home of Glasgow Airport

What problems did Renfrewshire Council face?

The numbers of unique visitors to Renfrewshire Council's website have been increasing markedly month on month.

A SocITM website take-up survey in April 2006 showed that nearly 25% of visitors to the Council's website couldn't find what they were looking for. More than half of visitors (57%) successfully found what they came to the website to look for and 56% said that they were very likely to use the site in the future.

These figures, however, compared unfavourably to other UK councils' websites and fell short of the best performing UK council websites. Significantly, they were some way off meeting the Scottish Executive's goal of 75% of enquiries being resolved at the first point of contact.
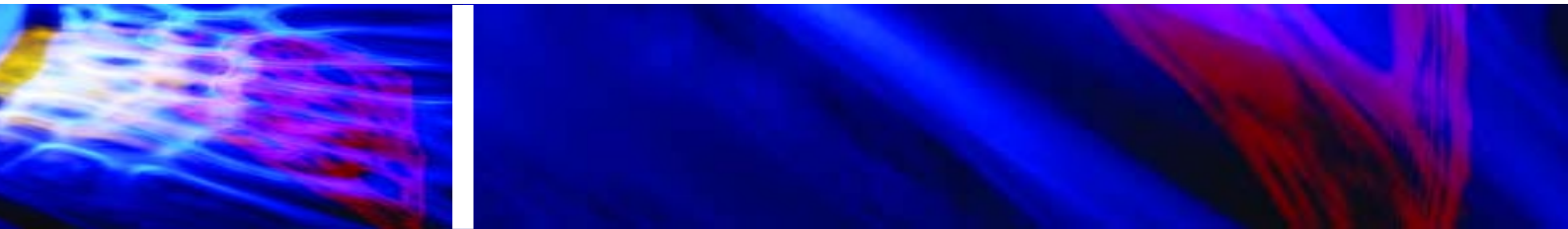
Taking on board Best Practice

Best practice suggested that provision of a comprehensive knowledge base of FAQs - integrated with website content - could help website visitors find information and encourage further take-up of the website.

Although Renfrewshire already had a number of FAQs on its site, many of the FAQs were peppered through the website and maintenance of them across the service areas was not always approached consistently.

No central co-ordinating role to manage content was in place - this resulted in no standard method of presentation.

Expected Benefits

Implementing the Knowledge Base comprising a core set of FAQs, localised for Renfrewshire Council, and with the Scottish Service List services mapped to Council's website, was intended to:

- increase visitors' success rates in finding the right information
- drive up the number of enquiries resolved at the first point of contact in line with UK Government and Scottish Executive goals
- drive up website visitors' satisfaction levels

The Council recognised that website visitors have different preferences on how they look for information on the Internet.

Implementing the Knowledge Base on the council website was viewed as an opportunity to increase visitors' choice in how they go about finding information about council services, by allowing them to search, to drill down, to use the website A-Z or to use the FAQs.

Making the Knowledge Base available internally to the Council's Customer Contact Centre staff would create an opportunity to provide and display information consistently regardless of individuals' preferences for contacting the Council.

What was the Council's Solution?

A Knowledge Base - an FAQ database - was initially collated using FAQs collected from Scottish councils' websites.

Officers in a number of councils also shared information in database or pair-form and examples of unsuccessful searches for information obtained from website feedback was also incorporated into the FAQ knowledge base.

All sources were amalgamated with the collated FAQs, duplicates identified and removed, and each FAQ associated with at least one council service.

The initial set of 5,500 FAQs was ultimately condensed and rationalised to form a Knowledge Base comprising a core set of 1,700 FAQs.

The Knowledge Base is available to councils to download and localise for implementation at a local council level. Access to the Knowledge Base is via the esd-toolkit, at Frequently Asked Questions.

The raw data obtained from the esd-toolkit was localised by Renfrewshire Council service areas and then imported into a Notes database, written for the council by a third party.

To assist with integrating the FAQs with website content, the website was mapped to the Scottish Service List (SSL). By mapping the council website to the SSL, the Council will obtain an added benefit in achieving e-GMS compliance with respect to metadata.

Making a Difference

The latest SocITM website take-up survey in January 2007 revealed a marked reduction in the number of visitors to the Council's website who couldn't find what they were looking for (from 25% in April 2006 down to 19% in January 2007).

Further improvements in the figures are expected when the Council integrates the FAQs with the website content.

Some unexpected benefits

Having the FAQs localised by service areas resulted in improved ownership and buy-in of the Council's service areas.

Comparisons of the FAQs with existing website content identified gaps in information provision on the website and resulted in more comprehensive information being added to the website.

The process of linking the FAQs with content and mapping the website to the Scottish Service List appears to have resulted in website information being arranged better.
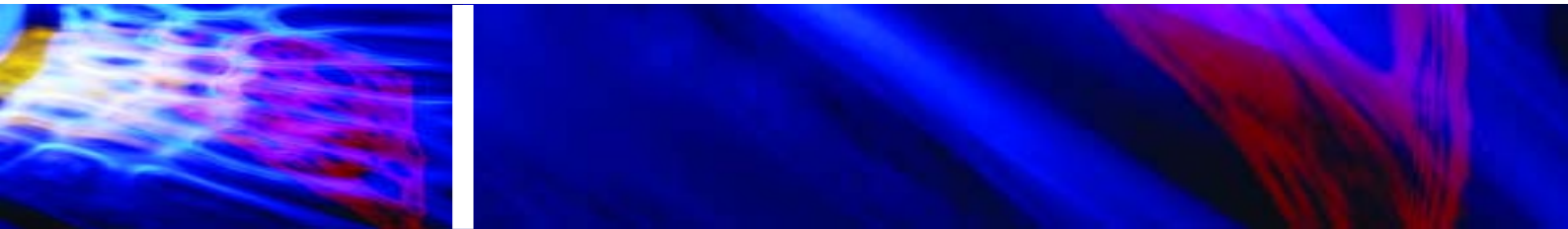
Problem Areas

The Council's biggest challenge was implementing the Knowledge Base of FAQs in a tight 6-week timescale allocated and in time to be on the website for the start of the SocITM January 2007 survey.

Obtaining consistency in the presentation and format of FAQs from all the service areas proved a big issue.

It was also important that FAQs and website content was harmonised so that information was kept updated and synchronised in both places and not repeated, in order to avoid website visitors being sent in circles from content to FAQs and back again.

Who was involved?

Not surprisingly, developing the Knowledge Base meant many people and groups were involved.

The Council's Portal Development Officer co-ordinated and revised the FAQs.

The A-Z & Knowledge Base project's Project Officer collated, categorised and re-wrote the core FAQs.

Representatives from the Council's service areas updated the FAQs.

Business change analysts specified the brief for the private partner to develop the Lotus Notes database to ' house ' the FAQs.

The private contractor developed the Lotus Notes database.

Critical success factors

The implementation within the timescales wouldn't have been possible without a champion determined to drive the project forward and deliver within the time allocated.

Lessons Learned

- Run workshops, provide extensive guidelines and templates for the FAQs and ensure that everyone involved knows what they are for and why they're important.
- Consider the impact on your current navigation and content.
- Consider who/which department should be responsible for FAQ maintenance and how you will develop and grow the database in the future.
- Consider timescales and incentives.
- Consider how you will measure the success of implementation and take measurements before and afterwards.
- Test the FAQs on real users.

Acknowledgements

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- Stuart Beresford, Business Change Analyst, Renfrewshire Council
- Staff in Renfrewshire Council's Service Areas
- Contributors of content for the Knowledge Base from officers based in Scotland's 32 councils

Interested in finding out more?

More details are available at www.improvementservice.org.uk or 'phone 01506 775558.
or
www.esd.org.uk/esdtoolkit/Communities/ProjectScotland
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The Improvement Service - brief overview

The Improvement Service is a partnership between the Scottish Executive, COSLA and SOLACE.

Our purpose is:

" To work with Scottish Councils, their partners and Stakeholders to improve the efficiency, quality and accountability of local Public Services across Scotland ".

The core objectives of the Improvement Service are to:

- Promote a learning culture across local government and with its partners
- Build capacity within local government
- Promote good practice
- Promote the use of Knowledge Management within local authorities and between local authorities and others
- Access opportunities to learn that exist beyond Scotland
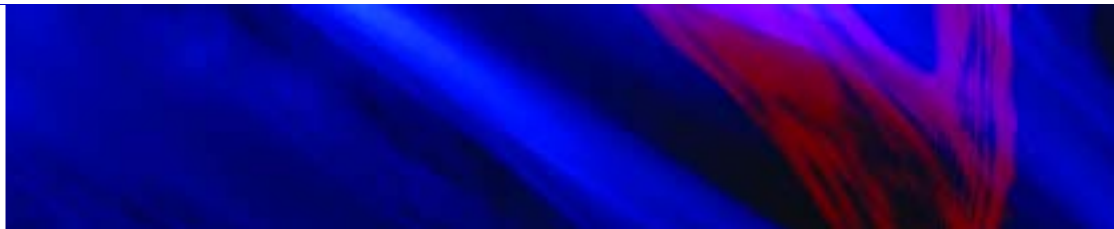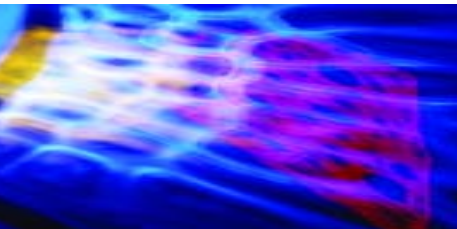
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Improvement Service is devoted to improving the efficiency, quality and accountability of public services in Scotland through learning and sharing information and experiences.