

## The Highland Council – Resources Committee

### Digital First Programme – Progress Update

24<sup>th</sup> August 2016

Agenda Item	22(b)
Report No	RES/61/16

### Report by Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Development

#### Summary

This report provides members with an update on the progress of the Digital First Programme and benefits realised to date. The aim of the Digital First programme is for 40% of transactions with customers to be carried out online by April 2017. This includes payments, reports and applications carried out through the online forms available on the Highland Council website.

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 The Digital First programme is in its second year and is delivering access to online council services anytime, anywhere, on any device. The programme aims to increase the range and number of online services available to customers, improve automation between online forms and back office systems, and increase the number of customers who choose to engage with the council digitally.
- 1.2 The project is due to make £1.3m of savings over the four years of the project. In the first year, £275,000 worth of savings were taken, with a total of £344,000 worth of savings made to date. These savings are as a result of workload reduction due to process redesign, as well as customer channel shift to cheaper channels.
- 1.3 The development of online council services is delivering a range of benefits for both the council and our customers.
- 1.4 **Benefits to customers**
  - Customers can access Council services anytime, anywhere, on any device.
  - Increased availability of online processes and transactions, focusing on customer needs and experience.
  - Automated emails provide immediate acknowledgement of forms received and payments made.
  - Customers can upload evidence to support their application, reducing the need to visit service points or send documents by post.
  - As online forms are immediately received by the council, there is a reduction in the time to resolution for customers.
  - Digital tools and online services can increase accessibility for customers.
- 1.5 **Benefits to the council**
  - Mandatory information and evidence is gathered first time, reducing the need to contact customers for missing information and decreasing turnaround time.
  - Information is provided in a consistent, legible and usable format, speeding up

handling time.

- Increased automation with back office systems is reducing the need for manual data entry.
- Reduction in handling and storage of paper forms.
- Increased uptake of services due to improved access and promotional activity. Online forms have contributed to the increase in the number of people signing up for council tax direct debits.

## 2 Successes to Date

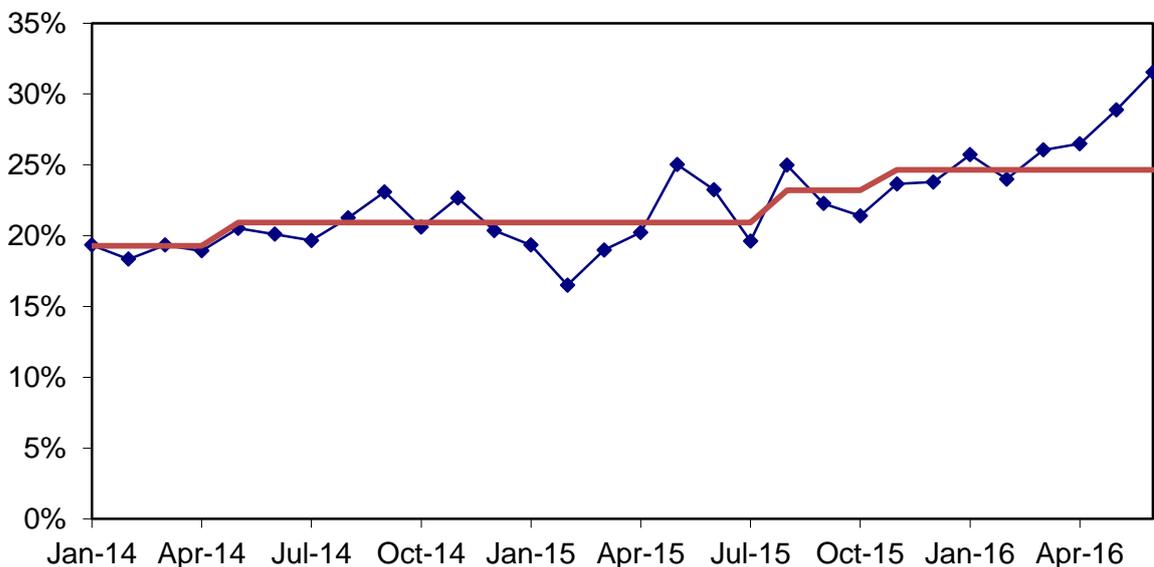
### 2.1 Forms

We now have over 90 online forms available on the Highland Council website, allowing customers to do a range of council business online. The forms range from reporting potholes, dog fouling and street light failures to paying rent and council tax, reporting housing repairs and applying for social housing. A full list of available online forms is included in Annex 1.

### 2.2 Uptake

2.2.1 The aim of the programme is to have 40% of transactions carried out online by April 2017. To date, the project has met all intermediate milestones and in June, the digital uptake was at 31.5%, currently on track to make the 40% uptake target. This equates to over 10,000 online transactions per month. The increase in uptake demonstrated in the graph below is a result of the increase in available online forms, communications with customers and frontline staff directing customers to the website.

Percentage Take-up of Digital Services



2.2.2 The increase in digital uptake not only flags an increase in the number of customers choosing to use the online forms but also highlights a shift away from the more expensive face to face and telephone channels. Whilst these channels are important to ensure that all customers have access to council services, the online forms provide customers with a choice that is both cheaper for the council and can be more convenient for customers.

## 2.3 **Myaccount**

Highland Council's customer portal MyAccount was launched in February 2015 and is run by Scottish Government's Improvement Service. The portal allows users to register an account, which will then prepopulate online forms with their personal details, allow customers to save applications to return to them later, access previous applications they have made, and through enhanced security verification, reduces the amount of evidence required when completing online applications. To date, over 15,800 Highland Council customers have registered with myaccount.

## 2.4 **Functionality**

The design and development of our online forms has led to the development of improved functionality and features to improve customer experience.

2.4.1 *Evidence* – customers can upload any evidence that is required in support of their applications, avoiding having to visit services point or posting evidence in and allowing the customer to complete the end to end application online. The council now accepts photographed as well as scanned copies of evidence, enabling customers to use a camera rather than need to have a scanner.

2.4.2 *Intelligent Forms* – using intelligent forms, it is possible to only ask questions that are relevant to the individual customers' circumstances, reducing the number of questions a customer needs to wade through. For example, if the customer states they do not have any children, the online form will not ask any child-related questions. The forms also deter customers from completing forms if the form is not appropriate to their circumstances, for example if they are not entitled to housing benefit, the housing benefit form will not allow the customer to proceed with the form. This prevents the customer having to waste time filling in an application, and reduces the time that staff need to spend dealing with unsuccessful applications.

2.4.3 *Device Compatible* – The website and online forms are compatible with a range of mobile devices including smartphones, tablets and laptop or desktop computers. Some forms make use of smartphone technology to improve the customer experience, including using the phones camera to automatically upload photographs of potholes or evidence.

2.4.4 *Automation* – Integrations are currently being developed to pass information directly from customer applications into back office systems. Routine housing repairs was the first process to make use of the integration functionality and similar integrations are in development for environmental health, housing and finance processes. By passing the information directly into back office systems, customer data is immediately received and ready for processing, and staff do not have to manually re-enter the data, reducing workload.

## 2.5 **Online Payments**

The convenience of anytime, anywhere, any device access to council services is particularly beneficial for those making payments to the council. A project was undertaken last year to rationalise and improve the payment functionality, providing a standardised and simpler user interface and customer experience. Customers can now make a range of payments online, include council tax, rent and schools meals.

Currently, 33% of payments made directly to the council (excluding direct debit and paypoint payments) are carried out online. This equates to an average of £750,000 worth of payments per month.

## 2.6 Customer Feedback

2.6.1 The Digital First programme uses a number of methods for collecting customer feedback, to help identify areas for improvement. Every time a customer completes an online form, they are asked to provide a rating out of 5 for their experience, and given the opportunity to provide comments. Overall, our forms are achieving an average of 4.3 out of 5. We also contact customers on a regular basis through the citizens' panel survey and through follow up phone calls. The following provides some examples of recent positive feedback received from customers.

<i>"Faster and easier online forms as live far from council"</i>	<i>"I found applying on line ... much easier than a paper application; I would definitely use the online service again."</i>	<i>"The online application was very quick and straightforward to fill in. It took less than 5 minutes overall."</i>
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2.6.2 Feedback is also used to highlight areas for improvement. Currently, we are looking at ways to improve customer experience in relation to collection of evidence and guidance for the myaccount portal.

## 3 Case Study: Apply Once

3.1 Apply Once is the Council's newest online form, launched on the 4th August 2016. Customers can enter basic personal details and find out all the benefits they are entitled to within the council, and how much. They can then apply for everything they are entitled to within one form. This reduces the number of forms a customer needs to complete, as well as the amount of information and evidence they need to provide. And it also ensures that customers are aware of everything they are entitled to from the council.

3.2 The form brings together assessment for a number of entitlements and benefits covering multiple services. This includes:

- Housing benefit and council tax reduction
- Free school meals and assistance with school clothing
- Council tax discounts and exemptions
- Second adult rebate
- Disabled Band Reduction
- Discretionary housing payments
- Garden aid
- Free parking permits

Highland Council are one of the first council's in Scotland to provide a single form for assessment and application that includes such a breadth of benefits and entitlements.

## 4 Case Study: Free School Meals and Assistance with School Clothing

- 4.1 The Free School Meals and Assistance with School Clothing online form was launched in May 2016. This form allows customers with children to apply for free school meals and assistance with school clothing online and was previously a paper form available from schools, service points and to download from the Highland Council website.
- 4.2 While developing the online form, we were able to make improvements to the process. This form was previously assessed and processed by Business Support and Care and Learning. By moving the assessment of the form to the Finance operations team, the processing of these forms could be more closely aligned to the systems and information available to support assessment of entitlements, reducing the need to ask customers for information the council already holds. We were also able to link the assessment for free school meals and assistance with school clothing into the housing benefit application process, resulting in customers being assessed for both benefits at the same time. This reduces the amount of forms that the customer needs to complete, the amount of evidence they need to provide, and helps ensure the customer is aware and applying for everything they are entitled to.
- 4.3 We have also been able to reduce the need for customers to reapply each year. If a customer is on housing benefit or council tax reduction, and they are in receipt of an income based benefit (income support etc), the council are already updated when a customer's situation changes and therefore we can ensure continual entitlement for these customers. Customers will only need to reapply if they are not in receipt of housing benefit. This reduces the volume of applications the council has to deal with by 2/3.
- 4.4 The form has been well received by customers with feedback so far indicating that the form is quick and easy to use. The uptake of this form so far has been 56% (June), with schools being pivotal in the promotion of the online form.

## **5 Digital Inclusion**

- 5.1 While we are continuing to expand the range of online services, we also appreciate that for some customers in the Highlands, going online is difficult or in some cases impossible. Through the Digital First project, the Digital Highland project and work within our customer services team, we are also looking at how we can support customers not only to make use of the council's online services but also to realise the benefits of being online.
- 5.2 A plan is currently being developed to roll out training for customer services and other frontline staff to create staff who are Digital Champions. Frontline digital champions will direct and support customers in using online forms, and signpost customers towards further support and training. Customer services managers and finance staff have already attended training designed both to improve their digital skills and to help them understand the difficulties customers may face.
- 5.3 Opportunities are also being explored at Highland Council service points to support and encourage customers to self serve. Public access devices have been installed in Inverness Service Point and will feature in the new Kingussie service point, allowing customers who do not have access to a device at home to use the council's online

services. These devices will also allow customers to complete online forms in an environment where they can seek support if they are unsure. A recent evaluation of the self service devices in Inverness service point by Citizens Online highlighted that customers are happy to look at the website and what is available online while they are waiting in the service point, with 50% of customers who tried online in the service point able to complete their business without speaking to a member of staff. A trial is now being developed along with the Work Based Learning scheme to provide an interactive and supportive digital environment in service points.

- 5.4 Highland Council also continue to participate in the Digital Highland project, a partnership project run in conjunction with digital participation organisation Citizens Online. The aim of the Digital Highland project is to develop a sustainable, partnership approach to dealing with issues around digital inclusion.
- 5.5 The Digital Highland project has recruited over 90 volunteer digital champions across the highlands to support communities to go online and stay online. The project has also established the Digital Highland partnership, a partnership of 15 local and national organisations who are working together to tackle digital inclusion, support customers and staff and to reduce duplication and maximise impact. Citizens Online are also running training sessions and providing support to residents across the highlands to improve their digital skills.

## **6 Next Steps**

- 6.1 This project will continue to develop new online services and opportunities for customers to engage with the council digitally. Work is already underway to explore the potential of the new CRM system to provide new functionality for customers. Further integrations will be developed to link customer facing forms with back office systems. And further communication and promotional activities will continue to direct customers to Highland Council online services.

## **7 Risks**

- 7.1 There are no current or anticipated risk implications

## **8 Resource Implications**

- 8.1 The project is due to make £1.3m of savings over the four years of the project. In the first year, £275,000 worth of savings were taken, with a total of £344,000 worth of savings made to date. These savings are as a result of workload reduction due to process redesign, as well as customer channel shift to cheaper channels.

## **9 Legal Implications**

- 9.1 There are no current or anticipated legal implications

## **10 Equalities and Rural Implications**

- 10.1 The Digital First programme is offering customers a choice of how to access council services. Online services can provide a more accessible way of accessing services

for customers with particular disabilities or those who find it difficult to access service points.

- 10.2 The Digital Highland project continues to offer support to those who do not have the skills or the devices to allow them to access online services. Recipients of this support can realise additional benefits to being online e.g. access to education, training and work, reduction in social isolation etc.
- 10.3 Traditional face to face and telephone channels will enable customers who struggle with online services to continue to access council services.

## **11 Climate Change / Carbon Clever Implications**

- 11.1 The use of online forms can support the reduction in printing and paper forms as well as the production and postage of paper letters, reducing the impact on the environment.

## **12 Gaelic Implications**

- 12.1 There are no current or anticipated Gaelic implications

## **13 Recommendations**

- 13.1 Members are asked to:

- Note progress made and benefits delivered to date by the Digital First project.

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Date: 24<sup>th</sup> August 2016

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# Available Online Forms

Highland Council has online forms available through our website, to help you access our services anytime, anywhere, on any device.



[www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)

## Request...

Boat Hire Licence	Disabled Band Reduction
Cinema or Theatre Licence	Planning applications*
Civic Government Licence	Blue Badge*
Dangerous wild animals Licence	Benefits advice
Taxi or Private hire licence	Money and debt advice
House of Multiple Occupancy Licence	Disposal of large household items
Liquor Licences	Food premises registration
Trading Licences (e.g. second hand dealer, knife dealer)	Freedom of information request
Late hours catering Licence	New and Replacement Parking Cards
Street trader Licence	New household bins
Public Entertainment Licence	Housing Benefit
Petrol or Explosives Licence	Council & Housing Association Housing
Parking Permit	Pre-application advice for local development
Export Certificate	Development Enquiries
Road Opening Permit	Commercial waste
Road Closure Permit	Council Tax Direct Debit
Road Occupation Permit	Replacement birth, marriage, civil partnership and death certificates
Garage or garage site	Free School Meals and Clothing Grants
Vacancies	Garden aid
Choice based lettings enquiry	Discretionary Housing Payments
School transport	Apply Once benefits form
Council Tax Discounts and Exemptions	

## Pay for...

Council Tax	Parking Fines
Non Domestic Rates	Other fines (dog fouling, littering)
Rent	Planning and Building services
School Meals	General Invoices

## Report...

Bonfire or smoke problem	Issues in parks and cemeteries
Breach of planning control	River or stream issues
Damage to bridges or bus shelters	Roads maintenance issues (potholes, road surface or pavement issues)
Comments, compliments and complaints	Street Cleaning issues
Dog Fouling	Change in Circumstances
Blocked or damaged drains	Environmental Health Concern
Fly Tipping	High Hedge
Light or traffic light faults	Routine Housing Repairs
Missed Bin Collections	

\*Uses a national website