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Birmingham
City Council

Case study

Designing a new digital strategy for Birmingham City Council

Summary

Methods worked with Birmingham City Council (BCC) to develop a new digital strategy for the organisation. We took an agile, human centred design approach, speaking to citizens, businesses, staff and stakeholders. We worked collaboratively to develop the skills and knowledge of the team, learning through doing.

As a project team we understood what was happening elsewhere in government by speaking to local and central government colleagues. The strategy has five themes, and each has three elements: what we will do, how we will do it and what this means for citizens, businesses and staff.

We developed a delivery plan to ensure the strategy was meaningful and leads to practical change.

Challenge

In 2021 Birmingham City Council partnered with Methods to develop a new digital strategy to replace the outgoing one, developed in 2016. We needed to design a strategy that underpinned the council's strategic objectives and its ambitions of digital and data transformation. The strategy needed to tackle pain points of both staff and the people of Birmingham, embedding digital into every decision and our ways of working. It also needed to be concise, engaging, measurable, and remain relevant.

Birmingham City Council partnered with Methods to develop a new digital strategy

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Approach

We sought to understand the experiences and needs of Birmingham's citizens, businesses and staff by conducting user research through interviews, workshops and surveys. Internally we spoke to IT and Digital teams, front line staff in directorates, Councillors, senior leaders and managers. Externally we had over 350 responses from the the surveys that went to citizens and businesses, and we conducted 20 citizen research interviews.

We also wanted to understand what was happening across the public sector and particularly those making exciting things happen and the challenges they are facing. We know that Birmingham is a unique city in so many ways, but we also know that when it comes to digital transformation in the public sector, it is very similar to many other local authorities. We spoke to Hackney, Greenwich, Dorset, Adur and Worthing, Coventry, Norwich, Wales, Department for Education and LOTI who shared their approach. We reviewed strategies and pulled out recurring themes to help shape our initial thinking.

We found that:

Citizens want to see the beautiful city of Birmingham showcased on the council website

The website is very text heavy in places and some users find it difficult to find what they are looking for

The BRUM account is a very popular service and users would like to see it expanded

Some people are using the BRUM account on behalf of elderly relatives, but it's not always clear how to do this effectively

Not all businesses are aware they can use the BRUM account for commercial matters

Some council staff find it difficult to get their IT issues resolved quickly

Training on new software isn't always sufficient for staff and Councillors

We learnt that:

We have to quickly demonstrate the value of an agile, design-led approach to get buy in and build credibility

We need to work with teams that are keen to engage with us

Neutralising our language will help to bring the digital people and technology people closer together

We need to understand how to de-prioritise things that are not aligned to our strategy

Upskilling existing council staff is going to be crucial to empowering them to adopt digital ways of working

Building the capability of the teams in IT & Digital first will facilitate and support the upskilling of the rest of the council

We need to remain open to different ways of approaching challenges

Conducting desk research helped us to understand what the existing landscape was across the council and to establish a baseline that we could measure performance of the strategy against in the coming years. Our timing was fortunate and meant we were able to take advantage of the digital maturity analysis done by GDS across England, which helped us to better understand the current level of digital maturity using the Local Digital Declaration as a benchmark.

Themes

After conducting analysis and synthesis of our research, and much discussion and iteration with senior leaders we landed on five strategic themes:
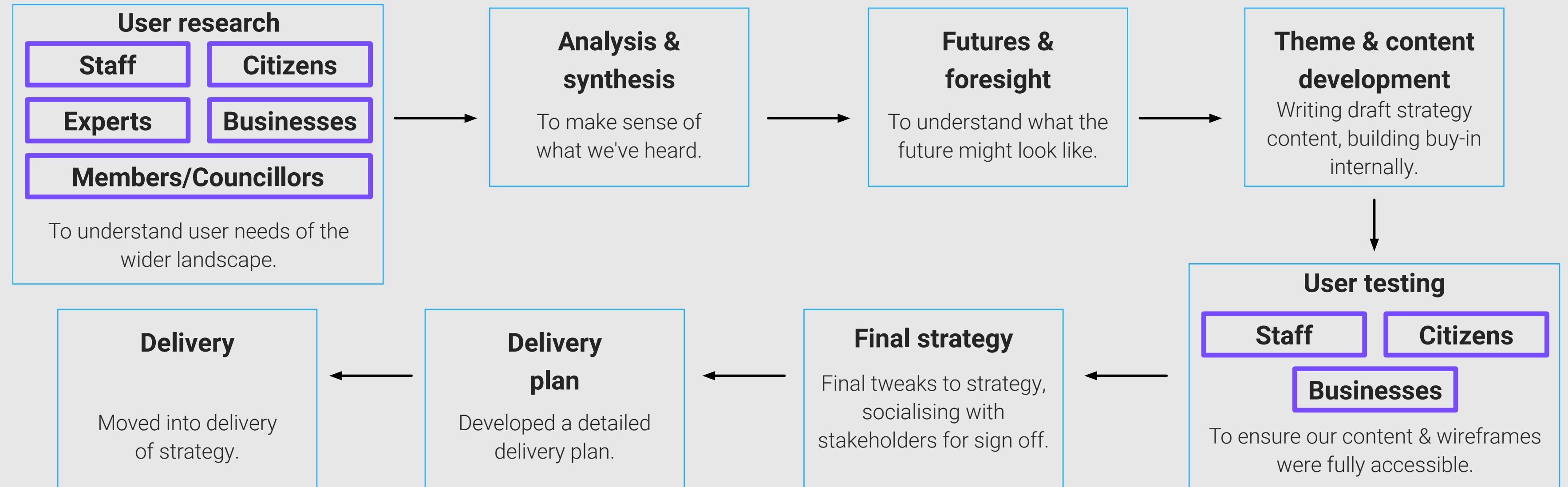
Building the council's digital and data skills

Improving our data and evidence-based decision making

Creating online services that are easy to use

Giving our council teams the right digital tools to do their jobs

Building the best technology to support council services

User research

| Staff | Citizens |
| Experts | Businesses |

Members/Councillors

To understand user needs of the wider landscape.

Analysis & synthesis

To make sense of what we've heard.

Futures & foresight

To understand what the future might look like.

Theme & content development

Writing draft strategy content, building buy-in internally.

User testing

| Staff | Citizens |

Businesses

To ensure our content & wireframes were fully accessible.

Final strategy

Final tweaks to strategy, socialising with stakeholders for sign off.

Delivery plan

Developed a detailed delivery plan.

Delivery

Moved into delivery of strategy.

Each theme was assigned an owner who was a member of the senior leadership team within the Digital and Customer Services directorate. This gave responsibility for effective delivery of the strategy across multiple stakeholders with senior sponsorship residing with the CIO and Director.

We mapped our user research findings to each theme to surface what areas we should focus on. This enabled us to discuss with theme owners what shape we wanted each theme to take.

We then began the process of putting pen to paper, working with our content designer to craft the statements, getting feedback from stakeholders and honing the words further. We aimed to stay true to the user research findings, often coming back to the evidence to justify choices. We aimed for a meaningful document that was accessible for citizens and staff across the council, which includes an easy read version.

Our UX Designer designed some initial wireframes of the strategy web pages, and we tested these and our draft content with a number of internal and external users, aiming for a breadth of digital literacy amongst our participants. These findings were fed into the design and content of the strategy, resulting in the final strategy.

We then began to develop a delivery plan which details how the strategy will be delivered in practice. It will help the relevant teams fulfil the promises of the strategy. It remains a live document and will be iterated on a quarterly basis.

Outcome

The process has been a learning experience for the whole project team, with agile delivery and human centred design new concepts to some BCC staff. The team involved in delivery have gotten their hands dirty and truly embraced working in an agile way, using human centred design to underpin our approach.

We have been applying these approaches to developing a digital strategy, something that we hadn't done before, and there are not many examples of elsewhere in government.

We are really proud of what we've achieved through this process, as a team and as a council. We've got a delivery plan that sets us up for success and we're already getting moving on some of our priorities. The real fun (and work) has now begun.

Reflections & learnings:

Groundwork
A lot of the 'digital' groundwork was laid for this strategy by Birmingham's previous CIO's Sam Hall and Jane Fallon. It took time to get to this point, but it was time well spent, because when we came to write this strategy, we were pushing at an open door.

Sector support
We had so much support from our local government colleagues throughout the process. When we asked for help, we found it, and the conversations we had were fundamental in shaping our thinking. No local authority needs to start its digital transformation journey from zero – there is so much learning and experience already out there in government, and our colleagues across government are very generous with their time and support.

Demonstrating through doing
Taking this approach to developing a digital strategy was a great way of selling in the benefits of agile delivery and human centred design to a council that had limited experience of this thinking at that stage.

Work in the open
We knew we wanted to purposefully work in the open, and we had regular show and tells and wrote sprint notes that were circulated within IT and Digital from the get-go. However, we could have started publishing our thoughts externally earlier. Maybe it felt too exposing to talk about developing the strategy before we were confident we were going in the right direction. Now we are on the journey there's no stopping us!

Leadership support
BCC's new CIO, Cheryl Doran quickly became engaged with this work and put her full trust in the team, despite us being halfway through the process when she started her new role. This really highlighted that with the right support and leadership, any council can get started on its digital transformation journey.

Trusting the process
Trusting the process is crucial. Agile delivery is scary if you've never done it before, but for digital projects it does work. Stick with the rhythms and rituals and deliver in two weekly sprints and you'll get the value from the process.

Human centred approach
Taking a human centred design approach to developing a strategy takes time, but if it results in a strategy that is fit for purpose and delivers seamless services and crucially value to citizens more quickly – surely it's worth it?

Building buy-in
We invested a lot of time in getting buy-in from stakeholders both within the IT and Digital directorate and across the wider council. Across the council the strategy was really well received, within the directorate it was a harder sell and we could have done more to bring some key people closer to it. We found it was often that old chestnut of bringing the IT people and the digital people closer together which takes time and can be a delicate matter.

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INFORMATION SECURITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
DNV·GL
ISO/IEC 27001

ENVIRONMENTAL SYSTEM CERTIFICATION
DNV·GL
ISO 14001:2015

QUALITY SYSTEM CERTIFICATION
DNV·GL
ISO 9001:2015

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

CYBER ESSENTIALS PLUS