



FOREWORD
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Innovating for customer insight

Local authorities have access to many sources of help and expertise to gain deep customer insight and transform services, says Serco Local Government's Nigel Bates

In September's LGC survey into councils' channel shift strategies, only 37% of local authority respondents said they were already making full use of service users' contact data to gain customer insight.

Anybody who picked up on this fact might well have then been surprised by some of the conversations at the LGC roundtable on 23 November on 'harnessing customer insight for service transformation', hosted by Serco at the offices of our Experience Lab research company.

Here it became clear that gaining a deeper understanding of what citizens truly want is emerging as an essential element of service design as authorities increasingly focus on enhancing their ability to deliver the right services in the right way to the right citizens – the key to a successful citizen engagement strategy. So the core questions being addressed by many progressive local authorities and their partners are less about whether they should be seeking such insight, but rather how they should do so and what they should then do with it.

The first requirement is clearly to move beyond the mere collection of raw data to gaining understanding of what it really means. Examples of how this might be approached included the story of how one council is profiling focus group respondents – as 'settlers', 'prospectors', and 'pioneers' – to enable a better understanding of characteristics, behaviour and responses and to tailor services for improved outcomes accordingly.

Another highlighted the potential role of 'social listening', monitoring Twitter and other social media to hear people's opinions of a council and its services to modify in 'real time'. And a third proposed fostering closer relationships with the voluntary sector, to which a relatively modest contribution in exchange for guidance on gathering the required insights would be a significant help.

In my view, there is potential for councils to be more receptive to the support of citizens and other potential partners in helping to design and communicate services. There is, after all, a vast amount of expertise just sitting out there. Local authorities can collaborate with citizens, academia and the voluntary sector, and they can bring in expertise from places such as the Serco Experience Lab.

There is much for citizens to gain from more local authorities adopting innovative approaches to truly understanding what they need and want, and I hope that in the months and years ahead they can embrace this very real opportunity

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Ten steps to

LGC and Serco's recent roundtable shared ideas about how innovation can improve services and cut costs, writes **ALEX BLYTH**

On Wednesday 23 November five senior officers from local authorities met to discuss the issue of innovating on service design and delivery.

They met at Serco's Experience Lab in central London, and were joined by three senior executives from Serco. The discussion was chaired by LGC editor Emma Maier, and it produced a host of interesting revelations, insights, and ideas for future exploration.

Here are 10 of the most striking.

1 Local authorities are trying to become 'Councils of the Future'

There is a widespread and long-held view that local authorities are hidebound by convention and resistant to fresh ideas. The evidence of our discussion would suggest that nothing could be further from the truth.

For Sarah Pickup, director of health and community services at Hertfordshire CC, a key transformation in the past few years has been in how the local government sector approaches the whole issue of innovation.

"A few years ago colleagues would have resisted the very idea of trying new ways to design and deliver services," she said.

"Now this has all changed. We're all keen to become a 'Council of the Future', and I think there's a widespread recognition that we have to



up our game in this area."

Indeed, alongside this wish to innovate is a growing recognition that the sector itself is short of the skills required.

"We're all keen to understand our service users, and to work with them to improve our services," said Ged Curran, chief executive of Merton LBC.

"But we have to recognise that it's not easy to do. Too many local authorities think that you just need to give your managers a bit of training and they'll then be able to deliver this sort of advanced insight gathering and service design work.

"It's not the case – we need to bring in specialist expertise."

Transformation...



Left: Ged Curran; top: Sergio Sgambellone, Owen Daly-Jones

“We’ve realised that although we have a significant amount of data on people, unless we analyse it, there’s not much we can do with it
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Daniel Zammit, chief executive, Dacorum BC

2 We are moving from data to insight

Much of the conversation then centred on how to understand what citizens truly want. There was a general feeling that raw data is no longer enough – we need to gain insight into what that data means.

Daniel Zammit, chief executive at Dacorum BC, offered an example of how this is already happening. “Coventry is doing some really interesting work on this,” he explained.

“Rather than just holding focus groups and seeing each respondent as a person, similar to all the other people in the area, they are profiling them before they come to the

session. So, there are settlers, home-makers, expecters, pioneers and so on. This sort of profiling allows them to understand responses more fully, and to tailor outcomes more usefully.”

He continued: “There’s much that can be done in this area, but so far we’ve just dipped our toes in the water. We’ve realised that although we have a significant amount of data on people, unless we analyse it, there’s not much we can do with it.”

only finds out what people say: we find out what they actually do.”

Ms Pickup pointed to a real-life example of where a local authority has used data insight to give people something they didn’t necessarily know they wanted.

“In Herts we were trying to tackle obesity,” she said. “We discovered we had a hotspot in Stevenage, so we flooded the town with publicity.

“Basically, you couldn’t move in Stevenage without someone telling you to eat more healthily and get more exercise. No one had asked for it, but our research had revealed that they needed it.”

3 And foresight matters, too

Owen Daly-Jones, director of Serco’s Experience Lab, added: “Another issue is that service users are very often the worst people to design a service. Many of their desires are unspoken, and often they’re not even aware of them.

“So, that’s what we do here at the Serco Experience Lab. We watch people using a service. We see what works, what doesn’t, what people like, and what frustrates them.

“Conventional research

4 Some exciting ideas are coming through playful design

Mr Daly-Jones wondered how well people responded to being told what to do. “I’m more excited by the possibilities of playful design,” he said and went on to explain what he meant. “In an area of the US they were trying to tackle obesity. In the subway they encouraged people to take the stairs”

PARTICIPANTS

- Owen Daly-Jones** director, Serco Experience Lab
- Diana Robertson** marketing and engagement director, Serco Channel Strategy
- Ged Curran** chief executive, Merton LBC
- Daniel Goodwin** chief executive, St Albans City & DC
- Sergio Sgambellone** head of shared services, Surrey CC
- Sarah Pickup** director of health and community services, Hertfordshire CC
- Daniel Zammit** chief executive, Dacorum BC
- Emma Maier** editor, LGC (chair)
- Nigel Bates** strategic development director, Serco Local Government



◀ rather than the escalator by marking the stairs as piano keys and having a sound played whenever someone stepped on them. People were going up the stairs, and then coming back down the escalator to have another go.”

He gave another striking example of playful design: “A park had a problem with litter, so they put motion sensors around the rim of half the bins.

“Whenever something was thrown into those bins it made a sound as if the object had been thrown from a great height. It was fun. People were going round the park picking up litter that wasn’t even theirs. The bins that had this playful design collected 43 tonnes more rubbish in just the first week.”

“ People were going around the park picking up litter that wasn’t even theirs
Owen Daly-Jones,
 director, Serco Experience Lab



Clockwise from top left: Sarah Pickup, Nigel Bates, Daniel Goodwin, Daniel Zammit and Diana Robertson

5 Social listening is a fast-growing area

In the commercial sector social media is fast becoming the most important forum for customer service.

People go on to Twitter to complain, so companies monitor this and ensure they intervene to resolve the complaint.

Others are going further and deploying a range of social media monitoring tools to proactively identify issues that they could tackle.

Sergio Sgambellone, head of shared services at Surrey CC, said: “We’ve begun to look into social listening. We’re tapping into social



LGC editor Emma Maier

media to listen to what people are saying about us and, more importantly, about the services in their area.

“This could provide a great opportunity to gather feedback from citizens, to understand what they want from us, but to be frank it is fraught with difficulties – not everyone is happy with us inviting this sort of criticism,” he said.

6 Councils are experimenting with co-design and real-time feedback

Nevertheless, there are signs that local authorities are beginning to involve citizens more fully in service design.

Ms Pickup gave one example: “Until recently our website had been led by technology, not customer service, and as a result it didn’t quite give our users

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Sergio Sgambellone, head of shared services, Surrey CC



can get too close to it, too caught up in your own preconceptions, to see how it can be changed for the better. “Getting a fresh pair of eyes helps, and what better eyes than those of the people who’ll actually be using it?”

7 This is not a project, it is a process

Involving citizens in service design and delivery involves a major shift in thinking.

For example, it is no longer enough to design a service, launch it, and then move on to the next project.

“The needs of users change over time and so must those services. For example, you don’t launch a website,” said Mr Daly-Jones. “It evolves over time. You must continually refine and adapt it, based on what your users want.”

8 Simplicity matters

It was a wide-ranging discussion in which some innovative and complex solutions were explored. However, several participants stressed that often the clever solution is not the best one.

“Some citizens have a lot to say but won’t talk to you; others are keen to talk but sadly have little to say,” observed Mr Curran.

“We’ve found that those who are perhaps more reluctant to speak up have the more prosaic comments

and the simplest ideas.”

Daniel Goodwin, chief executive of St Albans City & DC, agreed: “There’s a danger in leaping to huge databanks and expensive technical analysis when it isn’t always necessary. This can be a cause of inaction. Instead, we should consider whether there’s a simpler solution.”

9 We’re not constrained by the issue of affordability

While agreeing that this is the case, Mr Sgambellone added: “I’ve been very impressed by the fact that we’ve not talked about excuses not to do any of this.

“We’ve talked about how to innovate and improve life for our citizens, and we’ve not started out with an entrenched position of unaffordability. That is quite refreshing to hear in local government these days.”

10 Collaboration is key

The conversation came back to the point that many councils simply lack skills, and there was much discussion about where local authorities could look for advice on this.

Mr Goodwin suggested the voluntary sector. “I wonder if there’s a small organisation in our area we could pay £5,000 to, who would see that as a significant sum and would give us some useful guidance on how to gather the insights

we need,” he said.

Mr Zammit pointed out that universities can be excellent sources of this expertise. “We’re lucky to have Ashridge Business School,” he said. “After many years of trying, we’ve finally got them on board, and we’re about to begin a joint research project.”

Ms Pickup suggested that citizens themselves could be useful. “People do approach us,” she said, “but for some reason we tend to be suspicious of them. All too often people are fobbed off with a standard letter thanking them for the idea and saying ‘we’ll be in touch.’”

Nigel Bates, strategic development director at Serco Local Government, said that as a frustrated local councillor he knows exactly what she means: “Many of my colleagues in the area are keen to get more involved in helping design and communicate services.”

He concluded: “There’s a vast amount of expertise just sitting out there. Local authorities can collaborate with citizens, academia and the voluntary sector, and they can bring in expertise from places like Serco’s Experience Lab.

“There’s so much for citizens to gain from more local authorities adopting the kind of innovative approaches we’ve discussed today – I hope that in the years ahead they can embrace the opportunity.”

what they needed. So we pulled together groups of users and asked them for their feedback on site navigation.

“We did this a few years ago with our care service and it improved the service immensely. I’m not sure we do enough of this as a sector.”

Diana Robertson, marketing and engagement director at Serco Channel Strategy, agreed: “That sort of co-design with your citizens can be hugely effective. Often when you’ve worked on a project for a long time you