

Report to: Place Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 25 November 2020

By: Chief Operating Officer

Title: Utilising Automation to Support the Core Offer

Purpose: Introducing Robotics and Virtual Assistants to support the Core Offer, ease demand and help embed new ways of working

RECOMMENDATIONS

Place Scrutiny is recommended to:

- 1) note the update on the Council's work to utilise automation to ease demand and increase efficiencies to support the Core Offer.
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1 Background

- 1.1 With ongoing pressure on Council funding, as well as the increased demand due to the COVID-19 response and recovery, there is added demand on stretched services at an accelerated and unsustainable pace. Further, consumers' expectation of digital channels and modern ways of living require the Council to provide services outside of the traditional nine-to-five.
- 1.2 Robotic Process Automation (RPA) software can replicate front and back-office routine processes automatically. This means that daily tasks previously performed by employees can now be conducted without human effort, reducing cost and increasing efficiency, as well as freeing up time for employees to focus on skilled and complex work. Virtual Assistants, otherwise known as Chatbots, can also help services extend their hours of operation, augment capacity, help our partners to work with us and our residents to access our services.
- 1.3 Automation technology has the potential to be a core enabler for the Council, and when RPA and Virtual Assistants are used together, they can bring many benefits to the workplace:
 - i. Inclusion – Virtual Assistants, via their ability to personalise, can help to make interaction more human and can aid navigation through or across multiple websites. Virtual Assistants allow users to chat using natural language, possible in other languages and with almost any device. They help our residents to talk to us.
 - ii. Customer empowerment – Empowering people to do more for themselves through online services, in real time, at their convenience. Opening channels that enhance citizen perception of our services. This can lead to reduced wait times, better quality of service and increased satisfaction.
 - iii. Productivity – Virtual Assistants and automated processes can potentially work 24/7 enabling services to be accessible beyond core hours without adversely impacting on staff or resourcing requirements.
 - iv. Efficiency – Automation can decrease the repetitive workload, reducing pressure placed on staff, saving time and enabling colleagues to focus on more complex and motivating tasks where human contact or intervention is needed.
 - v. Improved accuracy – Robots are programmable machines; they carry out a defined set of instructions repeatedly and consistently without making mistakes for as long as instructed. Accuracy and quality are improved, throughput is increased and the need for rework is reduced.

- vi. Augmented Capacity – Robotic process automation and virtual assistants can potentially help to support staffing levels at times of reduced capacity (for example if COVID adversely impacts resources.)

- 1.4 The successful use of automation can be seen at other local authorities – some examples are included in Appendix 1.
- 1.5 In 2019 the Corporate Management Team (CMT) agreed to the development of a proof of concept Chatbot to support the Blue Badge process. The idea was to exemplify the technology and demonstrate how the use of automation could help to reduce transactional cost, improve outcomes and increase value for money. Feedback on the resulting product has been positive, with the team welcoming the conversion of the proof of concept into a live product, recognising the benefits it would bring.
- 1.6 On 9 September 2020, CMT approved the business case for wider investment in automation services across the organisation, including the development of the Blue Badge Chatbot into a live product. It was agreed to take a programme approach to identify and prioritise proposals and help support the capturing of benefits and return on investment.

2 Supporting Information

Citizen Services Virtual Assistant

- 2.1 The East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Blue Badge proof of concept currently exists in a development environment. Work has now begun on a production version that residents will be able to use - the product is described as a *Citizen Services Virtual Assistant*. The Assistant is outward facing and possesses other functional capabilities (known as 'skills'), meaning it will be able to multi-task and do other things once the Blue Badge assistant has been implemented. For example, the Virtual Assistant could use a Covid-19 skill to connect our website to other trusted information sources such as Gov.uk and NHS.uk, to help people navigate across multiple sources in a seamless way.
- 2.2 The remaining skills in the native Citizen Assistant could be further used to reduce inbound contacts via phone and email and to enhance the searchability of the website, empowering more self-service. These could be used to automate forms, for example, to ease the demand on the Health and Social Care Connect (HSCC) service. It has been agreed to utilise a structured programme approach to identify and develop the other skills.
- 2.3 As a subsequent phase, and at additional cost, it may also be desirable to deploy an inward facing *Employee Virtual Assistant* to work alongside the outward facing Citizen Services Assistant. The Employee Virtual Assistant is a different 'personality' and comes with five further skills. It is suggested that once the outward facing skills of the Citizen bot are operational, skills to support employees with remote working are further explored - this will require CMT approval at such a time.

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) Accelerator

- 2.4 In parallel with the virtual assistant development, we are also working to implement a number of exemplar automations to provide a practical demonstration of the potential value of RPA. This will establish a repeatable model from which to scale. Services have been engaged from our automation partner UiPath, to work alongside our own resources to initiate and accelerate automation across ESCC. A four-stage model is being adopted:
 - i. Identify – suitable candidate processes, establish the core technology capability and grow the skillsets needed. (See Appendix 2 for first exemplar)
 - ii. Orchestrate – through sprints enable rapid deployment of identified exemplars
 - iii. Evaluate – review, check benefits are realised and recalibrate approach as needed
 - iv. Scale – establish a formal pipeline, prioritisation mechanism and create an ongoing roadmap to exploit investment in the platform technology

2.5 Through a Programme approach, a process will be established by which ideas can be collected, their return on investment assessed and prioritisation agreed across the organisation. This will be the method through which benefits will be captured.

Financial Case

2.6 By drawing on existing resource and exploiting the learning from across the Orbis partnership, IT & Digital are providing the technical expertise to deliver these projects. However, strategic investment has been approved to purchase the automation software and associated IT infrastructure and specialist resources on an invest to save basis. This investment provides the foundation technology capability and functionality that will be used to scale across ESCC in support of sustainable service-led efficiency and transformation initiatives.

2.7 The investment to implement the proposals is detailed in the table below:

Proposal	Year 1 (£000)	Year 2 (£000)	Year 3 (£000)	Year 4 (£000)	Year 5 (£000)	Funded by
<u>Implementation cost</u>						
Proposal 1 - Citizen Services Virtual Assistant	50					Strategic Capital Funding
Proposal 2 - RPA Accelerator	81.5					
	131.5	0	0	0	0	
<u>Ongoing revenue cost</u>						
Proposal 1 - Citizen Services Virtual Assistant	45	45	45	45	45	RPPR
Proposal 2 - RPA Accelerator	75	75	75	75	75	
	120	120	120	120	120	
<u>Total costs</u>	<u>215.5</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>120</u>	

2.8 The one-off implementation investment costs are being funded from the Strategic Capital Reserve. This work forms part of the Core Efficiency Enablers proposed in the 2030 IT Capital Strategy, but as a strategic item a business case is required to access funding.

2.9 The business case is predicated on the basis that the ongoing revenue costs, and the implementation costs, would be offset by efficiency savings that would be enabled and identified through the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) process as Departments develop their proposals for delivering to the priority outcomes for the Council within the available budget.

2.10 At this stage the specific areas where these capabilities would be focussed, and the efficiencies deliverable, have not been identified and quantified. Experience has shown us that having a central / corporate savings target in the RPPR to reflect this creates the wrong dynamics and a barrier for effective engagement with Departments.

2.11 The ongoing revenue costs do ultimately however need to be reflected in the RPPR and captured through the pressures protocol.

2.12 In addition to the investment costs, the ongoing revenue costs will be funded from reserves in 2020/21 and 2021/22 and from then on will be incorporated into the RPPR as a pressure. The incorporation as a pressure is supported by the monitoring of benefits that have been enabled by this investment.

2.13 The revenue costs for each proposal include software, licences and support from the supplier. This includes one off support for implementation, as well as up to 6 hours support per month.

2.14 Additionally, the RPA Accelerator costs include £11,000 for premium support (including a dedicated named person for support and code review) as well as £6,500 licensing and hardware costs for the operating environment.

3 Conclusion and recommendations

- 3.1 Automation technology has the potential to be a core enabler for the Council and depends on central investment to establish as a Council-wide technological capability. The technology can provide greater efficiency, improved accuracy and customer empowerment, and will provide the Council with the tools to respond to increased demand and modern ways of living.
- 3.2 It has therefore been agreed by CMT to the invest in Robotic Process Automation and Virtual Assistant capability as detailed in the report.
- 3.3 A programme approach will be taken to identify and prioritise needs throughout the organisation and a reporting mechanism will be implemented to report on the return on investment.

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