

**0819 - Fund application - Discovery project : Entry  
# 1619**

**2. Lead authority details**

**1.1 Lead authority name**

Teignbridge District Council

**Full name**

Amanda Pujol

**Role**

Interim Head Service Delivery and Improvement

**Email address**

[Amanda.Pujol@teignbridge.gov.uk](mailto:Amanda.Pujol@teignbridge.gov.uk)

**Phone number**

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**Full name**

Tracey Hooper

**Role**

Revenue and Benefits Manager

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**Full name**

Martin Flitcroft

**Role**

Section 151 Finance Officer

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**3. Project details**

**3.1 Title of the project to appear on the Local Digital website**

To explore the feasibility of creating a true customer focused, configurable, cost effective IT system for processing Revenue and Benefits data

**3.2 Describe the common problem which you propose to investigate and the users involved**

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Every Council in the country is required to process Revenue and Benefits data, either in-house or using an outsourced model. In order to achieve this, each Council requires an IT platform to enable customer's data to be processed in a timely, accurate and efficient manner. Currently the market for these IT platforms is dominated by a few very large suppliers (approximately 3) and these suppliers are resistant to interoperability. The supplier systems were all architected some years ago (1990s) and are therefore designed on outdated technologies. None of the existing providers have expressed any plans to develop new core systems to take advantage of modern technology.

The current Revenues & Benefits software has not been developed by putting the customer at the 'heart' of the process. The cost of these platforms is significant to local authorities, with new modules costing tens of thousands of pounds to procure and implement plus additional ongoing maintenance costs, adding to the financial burden for local authorities. Any ongoing development is limited to what the suppliers see as having market value. Hence, the introduction of new features to address the individual needs of local authorities, is fraught with challenges. Often when Councils wish to "tweak" part of the system to meet business, operational or customer needs, they are required to purchase a new module with functionality they do not require or wish to use.

This approach by suppliers actively works to hinder the authority's ability to be innovative, to reuse logic across different systems, to reuse and analyse data in other parts of the organisation, to develop APIs to create platform based systems and encourage automation and deliver cost savings associated with this. It also limits the Councils abilities to adapt and remodel their processes from a user centred design perspective as many authorities are doing through their transformation programme and delivery of customer digital platforms. The IT platforms drive the process which means that where changes are identified which would benefit customers and the organisation, they are rarely implemented as the supplier will not accommodate it and if they do, it is often at significant cost.

The current systems do not always meet the Local Digital standards and work to prevent authorities being able to transform all their services to more digital, automated, customer centric solutions:

- Existing platforms fail to meet the users need with business processes dictated by the system
- There is a high cost and inflexibility for change to the systems, with any requested changes taking significant time to implement
- Poor integration capabilities lead to challenges in joining up the system with other systems commonly in use across the Council
- Poor reuse of data and ability to share and analyse data using modern Business Intelligence tools.

The primary cause of the problem is due to the limited supplier marketplace for such Revenues and Benefits systems, lack of competition and lack of capacity/expertise to develop in-house solutions.

Revenue and Benefits systems have to be able to adapt to legislative changes and updates in benefit entitlements from the DWP, which are released nationally and require implementation to meet legislative requirements. Other stakeholders include customers and their advocates; system suppliers, local authority departments such as housing, housing associations, private landlords, businesses and the valuation office.

### **2.3 Describe how you will research the problem area and user needs arising from it?**

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We will utilise the skills and experience we have from our partner authorities and seek to commission support to deliver user research and technical discovery. We would expect any consultant to adopt a sprint methodology for the project. We will build on the existing experience of Sedgemoor DC who 25 years ago developed their own in-house Revenue and Benefits system and have maintained a high level of performance, whilst supporting this system in-house. We would seek to understand how feasible it is to create an in-house option in the current market place and the ability to create an open source solution and have a community around the software to refine it, but maintain the overall integrity of the system.

All 6 local authorities (Exeter, Teignbridge, East Devon, Basildon, Brentwood and Sedgemoor) are actively seeking to redevelop and transform their frontline services to improve user experience, and digitise processes through the development of customer platforms. These projects include user research and testing, process mapping and iterative development. Unfortunately, we are significantly limited in the way we use these techniques with regards to improving the Revenue and Benefits processes due to the structure and suppliers of the IT systems for this service.

### User Needs

We believe this is one of the flaws in IT systems provided by suppliers, in that they fail to understand user needs when they develop new components for their systems. In the term "user" we are including local authority staff as users and also customers. We would also seek to use a range of human centred design techniques to map claimant's journeys and experience of using current systems such as experience diagramming, heuristic review and affinity clustering.

The current approach, in which councils buy separate systems for each local government function, gives an inconsistent and fragmented experience for our customers, inflexibility for our staff, and an inability to drive out efficiencies and insight. As part of the 'discovery phase' the project team would work to understand the 'Art of the Possible' to improve our own knowledge of the solutions available that have been designed to integrate with other systems using GDS principles. This would enable a holistic understanding of 'best practice' to be developed, to enable any in-house solution to be scoped and defined based on real world examples.

### Hypothesis to test

1. That an in house system can be developed and successfully supported by local authorities which is open source
2. That the current offer from suppliers is not meeting users' needs
3. That there are cross authority benefits from having an in house system that cannot be realised through the supplier market
4. A modern approach to supporting a function like Revenues and Benefits should be a set of components, made interoperable by standards and APIs, so that Councils can jointly build solutions onto a digital platform. Local Authorities can then choose to plug in other local and national components, for example those from GDS like Pay, Notify, Verify, to offer joined up services to customers. New opportunities may then open up for data sharing, 3<sup>rd</sup> party apps, self-service, automation, and artificial intelligence. We will test the feasibility of this approach.

### 3.4 Describe the cost of the problem, at both a local and national level, and how you plan to size and validate that cost during the discovery phase.

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The annual cost of providing the Revenue and Benefits systems for 3 authorities (East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council and Teignbridge District Council) is approximately £350k per annum. For the Basildon BC and Brentwood BC Shared Service the Revenues & Benefits system costs for 2019/20 are £175k per annum plus 2% yearly up rating. For every new module purchased from Civica there is the initial cost plus 20% maintenance per annum.

When the GDPR regulations came into force there was a need to remove historic data from Councils Revenues & Benefits systems. For Teignbridge the cost was £30k with ongoing annual maintenance costs of £3,600. This was merely to make the system legally compliant. A separate recent request to tweak a suppliers system to accommodate a change in the authority's Council tax support scheme was quoted at £45k, with £9k ongoing annual maintenance costs.

These types of costs will apply to any Council across the country which does not have their own in-house system. There are only 2 Councils, Sedgemoor and Calderdale, who have an in house system, so essentially all Councils will face the same financial costs.

Most Councils employ a team of staff to manage these external Revenues & Benefits software systems, this is at a cost. The Basildon and Brentwood Shared Service employ three FTE's to manage the Civica Software, upgrades, patch releases, testing and maintenance, at a cost of £115k per annum.

The impact is that Councils are unable to change, improve or amend their current systems on the basis that it is cost prohibitive to do so.

The social costs are the inability for Councils to improve their systems and processes for residents. This directly impacts on the speed by which the customer's data is actioned, which can impact the speed and accuracy in which a customer has their rent, council tax and business rates are paid.

### **3.5 How will you set up the project to ensure a collaborative, iterative approach between all partners?**

4 of the 6 Councils are within a distance where face to face meetings /workshops could be arranged. We will also utilise a range of digital collaboration tools available such as Skype for Business for conference calls , Slack for communicating together and Trello or Kanban to monitor progress.

With regards to governance structure, with agreement of the Councils involved, we would appoint a role of Project Manager to oversee delivery of the project. In addition to the consultant commissioned to deliver the project it is proposed the wider project group would comprise of :

- Digital/IT Lead from each authority
- Project Lead
- Revenues and Benefits Lead from each authority
- Service design /service improvement representative
- Other identified stakeholders from the authorities
- Communications Lead

We would adopt an Agile Development methodology working in Sprints to enable planning and management of iterations of the product. Utilising work collaboration tools such as Trello will allow for transparency and joint working across the councils and successful monitoring of project activity.

### **3.6 Who are the relevant service owners and senior stakeholders that will need to be bought into the project to ensure its success?**

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Service Owners- Councils (Chief Executive, Elected members eg portfolio holder for transformation, IT, Lead digital officer), Strata, Department of Work and Pensions, Valuation Office (business rates)

We would expect the Councils lead digital officer or Head of IT to be part of the project delivery group. In the case of East Devon, Exeter and Teignbridge we have a teckal company, Strata which provides IT services across the 3 authorities and we would ask the CEO of Strata to become involved in the project. Oversight of the project at a corporate level could be addressed by reporting into the Councils digital transformation boards. In the case of Teignbridge this board comprises of the CEO of Strata, the Managing Director and the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services. Similar transformation boards exist at Exeter City Council (their Transformation Board includes the Director for Customer Access, Corporate Manager Executive Support, relevant Portfolio Holders and Member Champions) and East Devon District Council. Sedgemoor has a customer access programme, chaired by the Chief Executive which this project would also report into.

With regards to the DWP, each of the authorities already has existing links with their regional DWP advisors and meet with them regularly. Sedgemoor is also part of the DWP Digital Suppliers Forum as they have their own in-house Revenue and Benefits system and can use this forum to link with the DWP.

We would also work with the LGA and IRRV to establish their opinion on success criteria and access other Revenues and Benefits Managers to survey their thoughts and recommendations.

**3.7 Describe how your project team will have the skills and time available to deliver the project in an iterative / agile, and user-centred way?**

The Project Lead and Service Improvement representative on the project group have both undertaken training through the LUMA Institute on Human Centred Design. The Project Lead also has experience of managing projects through the Design Council Public Sector by Design programme. Several departments have experience of being involved in projects that have employed these techniques so have an insight into the key benefits. The Revenues and Benefits team at Teignbridge were previously involved in a Design Council led project involving customer profiling to improve engaging with benefits recipients. At least two of the Revenues and Benefits Managers are trained in Systems Thinking and this is applied in current process design within the Revenues and Benefits environment.

The service improvement representative has undertaken the GDS agile course offered to signatories of the Digital Declaration. This has provided an overview of the benefits of implementing the tools of Agile Methodology. We would seek to access any training that the GDS offer whilst undertaking the project where appropriate, particularly where partners have not undertaken any of the courses previously.

We are fortunate in that Sedgemoor are already an IT supplier for the DWP. As two authorities have existing relationships with two different Revenue and Benefit system suppliers, if as part of the project we need to engage with suppliers we have some established contacts available.

**3.8 Describe any additional support you might need to run the project beyond the award of grant funding**

We would welcome any support and guidance from the Local Digital team and we would seek to access any of the relevant GDS training courses that would be useful for members of the group.

It would be helpful to explore how the DWP Universal Credit system was designed as it was built to interact with other government systems (HMRC) and also with the customer as a user. Any assistance in relation to this area would be of benefit to the project.

We may need some assistance to recruit a consultant to support us with the project.

**3.9 How will you share openly the learning and outputs from the project as the work develops, both with the sector and MHCLG?**

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We would establish an agreed communications plan from the outset and share the learnings and outputs of the project through our existing networks; these include the South West Councils Transformation Board, SOCITM, District Councils network, Shared Services Board, the LGA and through IRRV forums.

All Councils have social media accounts and we will provide regular updates on these for partners and residents.

We will learn from the examples of other projects that have been successful in obtaining funding from the last round. These include use of regular updates using Weeknotes and linking these and use of video/media on Pipeline.

**3.10 How much funding are you applying for to complete the project?**

£71,000

**3.11 How will the total project budget be used?**

Resource (e.g. staff time, supplier, contractor, etc.)	Time / Quantity	Total cost / Value	Who will pay (e.g. Local Digital funding or a particular project partner)
Staff time	100hrs per authority across the duration of the project	£18,500 (based on £37 per hr average)	Local authorities
Independent consultancy -Understand the current restrictions and the art of the possible for any new system and propose a model digital architecture using a mix of digital components and propose a governance approach to support open source product that welcomes contribution from the local authorities		£60,000	Local Digital fund
User research -Consultancy to assist with the user research element of the project and capture user experiences		£10,000	Local digital fund
Travel costs and room hire		£1,000	Local authorities
Travel costs and room hire		£1000	Local digital funding

**3.12 What do you think will be your biggest barriers to success?**

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Barrier	Mitigation
	Strong project plan and common vision from the outset
Disengagement from Councils who have signed up to the bid	Senior Officer commitment Communication plan
Lack of senior management buy in	Ensure we have senior officer buy in from the outset and a strong governance structure feeding it to transformation board with CEX representation
Failure to recruit consultant with appropriate skills/experience to deliver project	Use of existing networks across 6 Councils. Link into GDS service for recommendations

**4. Further details**

**4.1 Nation or region:**

- 23
- 24

**4.2 Services to which this proposal applies:**

- 38

**5. Project partner details**

**5.1 List all the project partners working on the project, and the single point of contact person for each:**

Project partner name	Name of single point of contact	Role of single point of contact	Email of single point of contact	Phone number of single point of contact
East Devon District Council	Libby Jarrett	Service Lead-Revenue & Benefits	LJarrett@eastdevon.gov.uk	01404 515616
Exeter City Council	Laura Fricker	Service Lead-Revenues , Benefits & Customer Acces	laura.fricker@exeter.gov.uk	01392 265394
STRATA	Laurence Whitlock	IT Director (STRATA)	Laurence.whitlock@strata.solutions	01392 265800
Basildon Council/Brentwood Council	Robert Manser	Shared Services Revenue & Benefits Manager	Robert.Manser@basildon.gov.	01268 208039

**Name of project partner**

Sedgemoor Council

**Full name**

Bob Brown

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**Role**

Strategic Director

**Email address**

[Bob.Brown@Sedgemoor.gov.uk](mailto:Bob.Brown@Sedgemoor.gov.uk)

**6. Agreement with MHCLG**

**6.1.1 A business case or benefits case that explains the cost of the problem and the potential for savings - both to the councils involved and on a national scale.**

- I agree

**6.1.2 A user research report, justifying the projects conclusions.**

- I agree

**6.1.3 A conclusion justifying why the project should either move into an alpha phase, extend the discovery phase, repeat discovery with a redefined scope, or if the project should stop altogether.**

- I agree

**6.1.4 A funding application for a subsequent phase of development.**

- I agree

**6.2.1 We are happy for MHCLG to publish this application online so that local authorities can see what we are working on. This will include the name and email of the single point of contact of the lead authority to enable potential partners to contact you directly.**

- I agree

**6.2.2 We are happy for all outputs from this project to be published under open license with a view to any organisation accessing, using or adopting them freely.**

- I agree

**6.2.3 We understand that our application will only be considered if all the project partners on this application have signed the Local Digital Declaration by the time our application is reviewed.**

- I agree

**6.2.4 We agree to work collaboratively with MHCLG's lead contact, share project related data, take part in MHCLG organised events as appropriate and have regular meetings and open conversations about project scope, delivery and outputs.**

- I agree



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**stage**

discovery

**round**

round3