



Department
for Education

A silhouette of a family of four (two adults and two children) holding hands, standing on a beach at sunset. The background is a gradient of purple and blue.

Adoption Support Fund makes application submission easier, more efficient and dramatically increases satisfaction with new Fivium Digital service

key facts.

The Adoption Support Fund provides funding to Local Authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies to support the therapeutic needs of children who have left care through adoption or a special guardianship order. Since its launch in May 2015, it has processed 36,000 applications releasing £126m to support nearly 46,000 families.

Problem

Since May 2015, the demand for the Adoption Support Fund had increased. Applicants and administrators were finding the original online application system increasingly complex and time consuming to use, rendering it no longer fully fit for purpose. Reporting of data for strategic decision making purposes had also become heavily reliant on manual processes.

Solution

Teams from across the Department for Education, Mott MacDonald and Fivium Digital delivered a multi-phase project to redesign the whole online application process, focussing on user engagement to create a new system with users' needs at its heart. This resulted in a new digital service, created from scratch, that was easier to use and made the application process straightforward.

Benefits

Social workers say they spend less time on application admin, potentially freeing up their valuable time to deliver more support directly to children and families. User satisfaction rates also increased three-fold, from 26% to over 78% of users being either very satisfied or satisfied with the service. The reporting function on the new system is supporting better strategic decision making on the service.

“This really is the blueprint for all digital projects. This was a true genuine partnership which had meeting user needs at its heart.”

Vas Patel, ASF lead, Department for Education

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) provides funding to support the therapeutic needs of children who have left care either through adoption or a special guardianship order.

The ASF involves a wide network of stakeholders including the Department for Education (DfE), Mott MacDonald (the Fund Manager), Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs)/Local Authorities (LAs), including social workers who apply for funding, as well as providers commissioned to deliver services funded by the ASF.

Since it was initiated in 2015, there had been a significant increase in demand for funding from the ASF. To date, the Fund has processed over 36,000 applications releasing £126m to support nearly 46,000 families. In late 2017, the DfE retendered the existing contract for the delivery of the Fund. This provided an opportunity to streamline and improve the usability of the service, reduce the level of admin required, and modernise the technology to meet GOV.UK open standards.

the business problem.

Feedback from users identified several concerns with the usability and complexity of the existing ASF service. These were causing delays in the application process and potentially delaying the provision of therapy to children and families.

To submit an application, frontline users (predominantly busy social workers) had to enter the same information multiple times, manually perform tricky cost apportionment calculations and then complete lengthy pages, which many found confusing. The result was an application system with which nearly 50% of users were dissatisfied. The platform upon which the portal was based could not scale sufficiently to meet the demand for the service or effectively accommodate the number of users, so many were restricted to one concurrent user per site. This often meant application work entered into the system was lost when a different user logged in.



The Adoption Support Fund helps children and families receiving a wide range of support, such as play therapy

fivium digital's approach.

The DfE were clear that a new system was required. They set a hard deadline: the system needed to be up and running, with all data migrated, by mid-July 2018. This meant that all project elements had to be completed in a very short time frame.

To achieve this, Fivium Digital ran workstreams following an agile methodology. The approach comprised four stages: gaining a thorough understanding of the issues and requirements through a discovery phase; creating prototypes to address them; iterating; and then building and refining in Alpha and Beta. Due to time pressures,

some of these streams, such as back-end build and user testing, had to run concurrently.

Co-production was at the heart of all stages of the project

and involved a cross-section of users at all levels, all with different requirements.

During the discovery phase, users were asked to identify their needs as well as the challenges they'd been experiencing with the previous system. A number of knotty issues were identified, such as the difficulty in completing the forms, finding details of a child or provider, adding up funding costs, and reporting. This information helped create user journeys for each type of user and mapped the users' satisfaction at each point in the service. This helped to identify the core problems experienced in the existing service. Prototypes were developed to test hypotheses on how to resolve these problems.

A can-do attitude with a real desire to work together quickly to produce a quality product was a striking feature of the collaboration. Whilst Fivium Digital ran the technical user testing on the prototypes, the DfE and Mott MacDonald were heavily engaged at each stage, providing clear direction on priority areas of development and content at daily stand-ups and at regular 'show and tell' sessions. This level of engagement and partnership working were critical to the project.

Not all the feedback gathered related to the digital service itself; some focused on the way that the ASF operated and how well the ASF was working to help achieve its desired outcomes. As this project was about balancing the data requirements with the overall goals of ASF, the core team worked with an extended group of subject matter experts, including the DfE content team, to ensure all aspects

were scrutinised and addressed and that the user experience was as straightforward as possible.

Focus then shifted to Alpha and Beta phases, fully building out the solution and ensuring it was easier for those working on cases to do their jobs, particularly that the application form was straightforward. During these phases, co-production continued with ongoing end user research, including usability testing and collaboration with users at working groups. This helped to ensure the digital service being built met the needs of the users. Regular communications meant that users at all levels were aware of, and ready for, the change: it was almost universally welcomed.

the result.

The ASF digital service was delivered on time and, from launch, was met very favourably by all users including the DfE, the Fund Manager and the applicants themselves as it gave them the tools to deliver services more quickly to those that needed them.

And, in the ASF 2019 annual satisfaction survey, one year after implementation:

- The respondents who were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service rose dramatically, by 300%, from 26% to 78%.
- Of the improvements made to the service, satisfaction levels for the screen layout, information discoverability, ease of navigation and ease of application tracking soared, some by 300%.
- Single attempt application completions increased by 25% and application completion times were improved.
- Respondents who agreed that 'Application submission is easy' rose by over 200% from 35% to nearly 75%.
- The percentage of respondents who found the service intuitive doubled, from under 35% to over 70%.

200%
increase in users
who said application
submission is easy

300%
increase in service
satisfaction

“I made a cheer when I saw the reporting function. It is going to make reporting so much easier. Thank you for the new portal.”

User feedback

business benefits.



Efficient

Reduced completion times and more single-attempt application completions mean that social workers now spend less time on application admin, potentially freeing up their valuable time to deliver more support directly to their children and families.



Intuitive and transparent

The ASF portal's usability and navigation improvements have made it easier to access and input information in all areas of the service, improving the user experience and timeliness across the board.



Better, more accurate reporting

LAs and RAAs no longer need to request reports for management purposes; they can now use the built-in reporting function to give them all the relevant data that they need. In addition, Mott MacDonald and the DfE have better, more relevant statistics and reports, which support their decision making at a strategic level and help them manage, monitor and improve the service as a whole, both nationally and locally.

Comments from Local Authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies include:

“The new template is a lot simpler and less confusing – everything flows in one document which ensures I don't jump between pages or miss something, thus causing delays – I like that it calculates things up at the end in big numbers.”

“It took only 10 minutes to produce my application, compared to 25 minutes on the old system. It is much quicker, guided, and easier to follow. Makes me think I can complete more applications.”

“I made a cheer when I saw the reporting function. It is going to make reporting so much easier. Thank you for the new portal.”

“We are delighted with the new ASF service. What really stands out is how the highly inclusive and iterative approach, with broad stakeholder engagement, has delivered such a successful outcome. A 300% improvement in satisfaction is a fantastic achievement. This really is the blueprint for all digital projects. This was a true genuine partnership which had meeting user needs at its heart. All elements, way beyond the technical, were considered and addressed while delivering on time to very tight timescales.”

Vas Patel, ASF Lead, Department for Education

“The improvement in application visibility and the ease of reporting has made a huge difference. Our efficiency has improved tenfold.”

Sharon Smith, Project Manager, Mott MacDonald

Our core purpose is to make the work of the public sector easier and simpler whilst creating opportunities for our people.

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