

Case Study: How Agile built success at Your Homes Newcastle



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Written by Geof Ellingham, Director, Agile Business Consortium and former Head of IT, YHN.

Background

Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) is responsible for managing council homes on behalf of Newcastle City Council. Established in 2004, YHN manages over 27,000 homes in line with the government's Decent Homes Standard, and provides a range of support services for Newcastle City Council.

What was the challenge?

The high number of concurrent projects in the IT division of YHN made it difficult to establish priorities, and management involvement was significant. The reputation of IT suffered, with business colleagues feeling that IT offered unreliable delivery rates whilst the IT teams felt that the business was unable to explain their requirements clearly.

Geof Ellingham was Head of IT for Your Homes Newcastle at the time. "It was clear that we couldn't carry on doing things in the way we had always done", he reflects. "Digital transformation was moving ever faster, and it seemed we had to do things quickly just to keep up. In our joint work with Newcastle City Council (NCC) on digital transformation, the team had come to believe that Agile techniques may offer us a more efficient and robust way forward. We knew that having support from our senior executives and stakeholders would be important if we were to 'go Agile' successfully. It helped that central government was mandating the Agile approach for all of its digital work. Agile was no longer regarded as 'newfangled'."

Implementing an Agile approach

In April 2015, Geof took on a discrete project for NCC and elected to implement Agile delivery. The challenge was to convert the Council from cash Council Tax payments to a fully digital payment system. The original goal was to achieve this within nine months, but the transformation was completed within six. Agile had made a real difference.

"Initially our knowledge of Agile was limited to some basic Scrum-like techniques" says Geof. "When we became aware of the Agile Business Consortium's Agile Project Management (AgilePM®), we put around a dozen people through the AgilePM Practitioner qualification course and also ran 'Agile awareness' sessions for our senior executives and management teams. This was the first step towards embedding Agile thinking throughout the organisation.

"We realised that to benefit fully from Agile, we would need to engage in a cultural transformation, rather than simply 'doing Agile'. During the remainder of 2015, we restructured the IT organisation in a much 'flatter' way, so that self-organised teams could genuinely be empowered to effect delivery. By the start of the next financial year, 100% of IT projects were being delivered using AgilePM.



Your Homes
Newcastle

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“One of the ways we were able to demonstrate the value of Agile to business leaders and non-project management colleagues was by showing them how tools from AgilePM, such as MoSCoW prioritisation, could offer value in a broader context. Taking this ‘applied approach’ was critical to our success in embedding the principles, as teams could experience for themselves that Agile works rather than simply being told it would.”

By August 2016 the IT Division of YHN was truly Agile, with an expectation that improvements would continue to evolve. “We had a big team retrospective, where we discussed what was working well, and what was not working so well” Geof explains. “As a result we stripped back the process on fast-turnaround changes, so that we used a Kanban approach for small change and used the AgilePM whole lifecycle approach for projects of more than four weeks.”

It is expected that the organisational structure and processes at YHN will continue to evolve to meet the needs of a fast-paced environment where change is now the norm and new challenges need to be met. This is the nature of Agile.

How Agile helped YHN

“Agile helped us to achieve far more productivity from the resources we had available,” Geof affirms. “By prioritising based on genuine value aligned to business goals, we found that certain tasks could be delayed, or simply not done. This freed up capacity to do other things.

“In addition, the IT department enjoyed a more positive culture and was working faster. In the new organisational structure, they were working hand-in-hand with their business colleagues in new directorate groups. This broke down the ‘us and them’ culture where separate organisational functions had been quick to blame others when goals had not been reached.”

The Agile Business Consortium

YHN is now an organisational member of the Agile Business Consortium, and is able to share experience and knowledge with other members, and be involved in the evolution of AgilePM and other Agile frameworks and techniques.

This Case Study is published by the Agile Business Consortium. If you require any further information, please contact Jenny Bailey, Marketing Executive at jenny@agilebusiness.org or call +44(0)1233 611162.

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