

About Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council

Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council provides services to 422,500 residents and is based in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. In common with councils everywhere, it faces huge financial pressures.

Delivery of statutory functions in Kirklees currently costs the council £270m. Beyond this, non-statutory services account for an additional £87m.

As part of a long-term requirement to save £152m by 2017/18, the council is faced with shrinking non-statutory services to around £20m over the next few years.

About channel shift technologies from Govtech Solutions

Govtech delivers its channel shift solutions via two primary services, **eCAPTURE** and **webCAPTURE**. These are hosted services which facilitate channel shift by acting as a web form conduit to the back office, through which citizens' online self-service requests are routed, delivering content validation, back-office integration and process automation. They fully automate up to 80% of online transactions, enhancing productivity and freeing staff to attend to other work. **eCAPTURE** and **webCAPTURE** eliminate manual intervention by delivering 'straight through' automation from web form to decision and outcome.

The context and the challenge

Since many non-statutory services are preventative in nature, simply cutting them would not result in sustainable savings. Consequently, the council embarked on a strategy to transform and modernise the delivery of all services to its residents, in order to retain an ability to provide essential non-statutory services to vulnerable residents.

The council accepted that, with the average cost of an online transaction being £0.16, compared to £3.70 for a telephone call and £9.11 for a face-to-face engagement, it was both necessary and inevitable that services should be moved online as quickly as possible, with citizen self-service becoming the de facto method for contacting the council.

The Revenues department has been in the forefront of this transformation and faced additional challenges. The introduction of CTR in April 2013 meant residents had to pay a minimum of 29% of Council Tax. This had already affected collection, provisions and arrears. The council wishes to reduce the burden of CTR from 2015, but any change would have to be funded and requires the Revenues department to reverse trends that were heading in the wrong directions.

Steve Bird, Head of Welfare & Exchequer Services, summarised the immediate future: **"Revenues must shoulder a greater burden and achieve a new set of targets and challenges, when CTR and other changes mean that collection is becoming more difficult, and the work associated with collection activities is rising significantly"**

The Revenues strategy would be to move all services online so that the back-office automation provided by **Govtech's webCAPTURE** service could be exploited to free up resources for redeployment onto recovery activities.

Revenues would also pursue achievement of new, more challenging, targets and objectives, including:

- ✓ **Achieve a 2014 collection rate, which itself had been adjusted by less than impact of CTR**
- ✓ **Reduce provisions, which had doubled to £4.5m, back to normal levels within 3 years**
- ✓ **Eliminate arrears, which had risen from £16.5m to £19m, within 3 years**

Project Overview

A Project Board oversaw the deployment of **webCAPTURE** in 14 weeks. Live running was timed to coincide with annual billing, to maximise returns on investment.

The Project Board was single-minded in its determination to

- ✓ **Channel shift services online**
- ✓ **Make this the de facto method for service delivery**
- ✓ **Maximise and fully exploit the resulting automation rates in back office processing**

Changing Behaviour

The Project Board had to achieve a change in attitudes and behaviour. Members were anxious about the impact on citizens, whilst staff displacement meant many people were concerned about jobs.

There was uncertainty at how residents would react but, as Kirklees discovered: "Citizens were fine. So long as the process worked and was easy."

Critical Success Factors

The **Project Board** had to implement change so it was vital it had control of all the areas affected. The right people had to sit on the Project Board to represent those areas and be empowered to agree changes. Also "it's a channel shift project; it doesn't start or end with **webCAPTURE**" so the Project Board continued to meet weekly after **webCAPTURE** went live.

A **Communication Plan** was developed to reassure Members and brief staff. The overall strategy and direction of the council was explained and the specific challenges and targets for the Revenues department. The links to resident benefits were highlighted so employees could understand and support the changes. But it was emphasised there could be no exceptions and no passengers. Managers had to understand the principles and hold the line. Nobody could be permitted to bypass new service delivery methods. Visits and training obtained buy-in from Partners and briefings continued after live running to ensure that those who felt out of their comfort zone could be supported and assisted to adapt.

Good Publicity helped to achieve rapid adoption. Annual bills explained the new ways to engage; press articles appeared and web searches were optimised. De-publicity played an important part. Old stationary, email addresses and general enquiry telephone numbers were withdrawn, service point advertisements removed and old payment methods no longer publicised.

An **Internal Re-deployment** process was used to move displaced staff onto new priority activities in other areas. Equipping service points with self-service terminals meant one person could look after six customers simultaneously, facilitating a front-to-back-office redeployment via targeted recruitment.

Statistics were very important. "If you're closing channels, you need to understand what's happening." Since the aim was to maximise automation, all staff were trained to use web forms when dealing with calls or visits. Deviations from this were challenged and addressed. Volumes of online transactions were tracked every week to ensure a steadily rising trend.

Paper volumes were also reported, with deviations from a steadily declining trend investigated and, if necessary, fixed.

Outcomes

Once testing was complete in February 2014, web forms were used to clear and automate the backlog of work items. 1,203 address changes were completed in the first week with 18,000 items submitted in the first 23 weeks. Staff quickly became confident, which helped them to encourage residents to have a go themselves. Three months after annual billing, 85% of address changes were submitted online, with around three-quarters of these fully automated by **webCAPTURE**.

Automation provided the means to improve working practices and processes. "These were changed to suit automation, not the other way round." The Recovery demarcation was removed; staff were trained to work generically on the most important activities. All staff now answer the telephone in any area, using web forms to capture information. Consequently, 38 more members of staff are now engaged in Recovery activities - and around 50% of calls result in a payment. Revenues is on track to meet its Collection target and it may yet prove possible to release some provision this year. A new team of 8 staff is now dedicated to clearing arrears within 3 years.

And there has been a change in culture. Billing staff no longer check 100% of everything. The new working presumption is that the council will be charging and **webCAPTURE** with auto-indexing will trigger and prioritise interventions, which now happen only when the council stands to make a financial gain.

Steve Bird says it will be 18 months before all the benefits of channel shift are seen. But these early results are encouraging and Kirklees is facing the future with new confidence.



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