

Rapidly increasing benefits claims with further increases anticipated, pressure to save money and a constant drive to improve efficiency cause authorities problems. Throw a huge organisational restructure into the mix and you've got an impossible situation for any revenues and benefits department. However, the team at Cheshire West and Chester Council begs to differ.

In March 2008, through local government reorganisation, legislation was passed to create the new unitary Cheshire West and Chester Council (CW&CC). It was created with approximately half of the former Cheshire County Council and three district councils – Chester City Council, Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council and Vale Royal Borough Council. The newly branded authority went live at the same time

“The whole communication process is much slicker, costs are reduced and the perception of the council is enhanced”
Nick Joinson,
revenues and benefits

as eight other unitary councils, taking a total of 44 local authorities (LAs) and turning them into just nine. The primary aim of the reorganisation was to improve the quality of public services, while delivering significant efficiency savings.

CW&CC now looks after a population of 327,500, spread across Ellesmere Port, Neston, Winsford, Northwich and Frodsham and the city of Chester. It looks after 146,000 households, 10,400 businesses and 27,000 benefit claimants, making it the fourth largest unitary authority in the North West.

The councils that made up CW&CC were already categorised as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ with a strong revenues and benefits performance by the Audit Commission’s Comprehensive Performance Assessment. It was recognised that CW&CC would face a huge challenge to maintain service performance and efficiency. Despite this, CW&CC looked at ways to make savings across the business, as well as coming up with innovative ways to become more efficient. Thanks to the skill and dedication of Ian Roberts (senior analyst programmer), Trace Lovell (senior systems and e-processes officer) and

Perfecting the process

Nick Joinson (revenues and benefits), CW&CC didn't lose any of its momentum.

CW&CC doesn't shy away from relying on its communities to help shape the council's service planning and delivery. When it comes to responding to customer requirements, CW&CC has got the right balance. The council's 72 elected members represent 24 wards, and regularly engage with residents, businesses and partners to create real and valuable channels of communication. It is this kind of mentality that allows CW&CC to go that one step further in the quest for customer satisfaction.

The award-winning revenues and benefits team at CW&CC (its recent accolade was winner of the service transformation category in the Society of Information Technology Managers' (SOCITM's) IT Excellence Awards for their Revenues and Benefits Systems Convergence project) believed they could make improvements to the way they distributed council tax (CT) bills, housing benefit (HB) and CT benefit letters and direct debit letters.

THE PROBLEM

Before the restructure, the authorities that made up CW&CC mailed new year CT bills separately

“The challenge is to keep coming up with new and innovative ways to save money”
Ian Roberts,
Senior Analyst Programmer

Insight investigates Cheshire West and Chester Council and Gandlake's back-office streamlining and cost-cutting exercise

“If you can achieve these savings at the same time as making you and your citizens' lives easier, then you are on to a winning formula”
Nick Joinson,
revenues and benefits

to HB letters and council tax benefit (CTB) letters. The back-office systems generated separate print runs, and it simply wasn't cost effective to match the output together manually.

The time frame between the two mailing runs created unique problems. It often meant bills and letters landed on doormats on different days. As a consequence, this generated a large volume of unnecessary customer service calls, visits to the council office and additional incoming written communications, many of which just required a simple clarification response.

CW&CC wanted postage costs kept to a minimum, and had to find a cost effective and simple way for customers in receipt of benefit to receive their CT bill and benefit notification letters together in one envelope. They had the added challenge of the bills and benefit notifications having to be issued using the new CW&CC branding. On top of this, they had to ensure that the requirements of their outsourced mail fulfilment service were met.

A direct debit letter informing the customer of a change of reference number also had to be sent out with direct debit bills. CW&CC saw this as a means of making an additional saving.

“We look to make cost savings, but not at the cost of customer satisfaction. Our services better meet the needs of local residents and businesses and deliver greater value for money”
Trace Lovell,
Senior Systems & E-processes Officer



By this stage it was December 2008, and the tight deadline of March 2009 had to be met to ensure the documents were issued to be compliant with the first payment date for CT.

THE SOLUTION

CW&CC approached Gandlake, whose expertise lies in these types of cost-saving projects for the public sector.

Using the Chester City area data as a pilot, CW&CC and Gandlake were able to quickly merge the two print streams, combining the associated documents into a single mailing so that the recipient could receive all the necessary information in one envelope. Out of the 9,359 HB and CTB letters CW&CC could legally match 8,115 with a newly branded CT bill, generating a mailing cost saving in this area of 86%. The multiple documents were stapled as they were printed, and the merge was fully automated from start to finish. Where no merge was required the documents were produced on the correct template for distribution. All documents met the specific optical mark requirement of the outsourced mail fulfilment company, reducing extra costs with the external supplier. A saving on printing costs and paper was achieved by printing duplex benefit notifications.

Receiving the two documents at the same time removed the confusion and significantly reduced unnecessary contact from the customer allowing CW&CC more time to focus its skills on other areas of the business and towards those in genuine need.

It didn't stop there. As part of the 2009/10 annual billing, CW&CC used this same functionality to merge 100% of the 33,466 direct debit letters saving even more money. They are planning to use the same process for daily CT bills and benefit letters throughout the year. This will result in even greater savings and further enhance the image of the council.

The project started and finished during the restructure. CW&CC commenced the project in December 2008 and successfully completed it in March 2009. Next year CW&CC proposes to use the technology across the whole area covering roughly 146,000 CT bills. Watch this space! ✦

MAILING FIGURES FOR THE CHESTER AREA PILOT:

CT bills: **52,805**
 Direct debit letters: **33,466**
 Housing/CTB letters: **9,359**
 Total pieces of mail: **95,630**

Direct debit letters eligible to be matched: **33,466**
 Housing/CTB letters eligible to be matched: **8,115**

Direct debit letter mailing savings: **100%**
 HB letters mailing savings: **86%**
 Total mailing savings: **43%**