

Integration simplification

Rob de Felice profiles the progress of four London boroughs harnessing the web to facilitate communication between councils and citizens

Who would use the web to communicate with their local authority (LA)? What's in it for us and how do we justify the investment? These are questions that are regularly asked when LAs talk about offering secure online services to their citizens and businesses.

Four innovative London Boroughs; Croydon, Haringey, Richmond upon Thames and Sutton, are proving that there are significant improvements in customer service and efficiency gains to be had, if you do it right.

Communication difficulties

The 'London four' used to provide their range of services, covering nearly half a million households, and the bulk of their communications, via individual call centres.

Call centre staff across LAs are often stretched and find themselves tied up and handling small enquiries from citizens, such as taking payment for council services, providing council tax (CT) balances or confirming receipt of payments.

Citizens served by the London four could actually pay for council services by multiple channels: phone, in-person or by establishing a direct debit. It was also possible to pay for council services via an e-payment facility present on each council's website. However, the ability for citizens to query their council tax bill, for example, was only possible in person or by phone. The availability of personal account information online for self-service (e.g. council tax bill, balance or housing rent account statement) was missing.

Online aims

Within a short time of introducing the online facility, all four boroughs made plans to enhance their

existing online payment facilities to offer an online account through which they could access, view and interrogate bills, balances and statements for various key council services. The aim of this was to improve access and customer service at the same time as delivering efficiencies. These queries could include making balance enquires, checking payments/instalment plans and automatically creating and saving statement of account information.

The London four also hoped that this enhancement would free up call centre staff to focus on more complex queries.

Richmond upon Thames and Sutton launched their online account services in March 2007, Haringey in April 2007 and Croydon in March 2008.

The solution

The Gandlake Citizen's Account has been installed at each authority.

Citizen's Account is a secure web portal service, enabling councils to offer citizens a personal online account to view and interrogate

bills, balances and statements for council services.

It is a vendor-managed service, ensuring quick and effective implementation without additional infrastructure costs, software licenses or ongoing support.

The installation of this solution took just three months to complete at Richmond upon Thames Council.

Registration, authentication and enrolment for the online account service across the London four is fully managed by Gandlake and also adheres to Government Gateway design principles.

Outstanding results

Collectively, nearly 25,000 citizens and businesses in London have registered to access their own secure online account, finding answers to their questions relating to a range of council services, day and night, as the figures (right) demonstrate.

The ability to view and interrogate account information online is reducing the number of basic enquiries the authorities receive, which helps free up their time for more complex cases with

hcsr + g = internet => efficiency

Rob de Felice is
Group Sales Manager
with Gandlake Limited

QUICK FACT

Since implementing the new system:

Haringey Council has approximately 5,000 registrations and can present council tax and business rates.

Richmond upon Thames Borough Council has over 8,000 registrations and can present council tax and business rates.

Sutton Council has approximately 5,000 registrations, continues to secure around 180-200 registrations per month and can present council tax and business rates. Work here is already underway to integrate authenticated e-forms into the service.

Croydon Council the newest member of the group, boasts over 3,000 registrations in little over seven months (over 2% of its total households) and can present council tax, business rates and housing and council tax benefits.

people who require their help and assistance the most.

In Sutton, for example, the ability of citizens to answer fundamental queries themselves through a combination of self-service technologies, including the e-presentation platform, has enabled call centre staff to increase the number of telephone calls answered from 50% to 80% and maintain this impressive percentage throughout 2007/8. Predictions are that this will remain at 80% throughout 2008/9.

The success reaches across all the councils, with Croydon forecasting that if just 10% of its citizens register for an online account, and 60% of those registered answer at least one query online, it will free up approximately 752 fulltime staff hours each month. Graham Gadle, Director of Customer Services at Croydon, says: "The online accounts we are providing give customers instant access to their information 24-hours a day, seven-days a week.

"Interactions with customers take, on average, eight minutes by telephone and 20 minutes to reply to written correspondence,

which places a real pressure on our resources, especially at times of peak demand such as annual billing. As we switch even just a small proportion of this communication online as well as improving access, we will make considerable time savings freeing up staff to focus on other more complex queries."

Croydon has also successfully extended access to the online account service to some of its third-sector support agencies, where staff can use Citizen's Account to help more vulnerable residents to better understand their CT bill and staff can directly answer any smaller enquiries they may have.

The future

The authority-wide approach of the Gandlake platform means an increasing number of council back-office services are candidates for web enablement.

In the future, each council is planning to offer account information online for a host of other services. For example, Sutton is considering the launch of supplier invoices, so the council's suppliers can check payment progress.

Croydon Council, working in partnership with Gandlake, is due to launch a range of additional functionality through Citizen's Account, including:

making a selection of forms available through Citizen's Account so that citizens can notify changes of circumstance or make payment arrangements without direct interaction with a council officer; and automatically distributing a Citizen's Account PIN letter with any reminder or summons the council sends out. This will encourage further take up of the online services as well as speed of payment or arrangement as a result.

At Richmond upon Thames, the Citizen's Account Customer Service Access Module (an extension of Citizen's Account) is being rolled out in its main corporate contact centre by staff handling change of address telephone enquiries. For the first time, the change of address team will also be able to answer secondary enquiries relating to CT.

The Citizen's Account Customer Service Access Module will reduce the number of CT-related calls routed through to the back-office revenues and benefits department. This means that call waiting times are reduced, helping the council to deliver on its 'Tell Us Once' policy, which aims to improve service by eliminating unnecessary repeat contact. ●