

# Unleashing the potential

Investing in new technology is key to service improvement, but utilising existing software can also make a huge difference to efficiency, as Wealden District Council found out. Helen Steele and Nigel McAvoy report

Revenues and benefits services are at the forefront of the public sector drive to use technology to reduce costs and improve service quality. The vast majority use modern transactional systems, document management, workflow, citizen relationship management and web-based technology. But alone these systems can only provide incremental improvements to performance.

But if they are used to support new ways of working they have the potential to radically reduce costs and improve customer service.

Unfortunately many services have only scratched the surface in terms of the improvements possible, which means that the bulk of investment has been made, and with relatively little extra outlay they can make significant performance gains.

## The decision to change

Wealden District Council had been using a Document Image Processing (DIP) and Workflow system for over five years but had not been taking full advantage of it. Many processes were still paper-based with the DIP system used predominately to archive completed work.

Fortunately the ability and attitude of staff within the service made up for these problems, and Wealden's benefits service was performing well. Nevertheless the management believed that "the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining".

## What is possible?

Wealden brought in business process management experts to help it understand best practice in using DIP workflow systems.

Wealden was specifically interested in how DIP and workflow systems could support a move towards a more 'hands-off' management style.

Helen Steele, Operations Manager at Wealden explains: "Our supervisors were overly involved in the detail of processing, and this meant they did not have time to step back and look

at how work could be improved.

"We wanted a system which would automate repetitive tasks for assessors, allocate work to staff according to our processing priorities, and give our supervisors the time and the information they needed to identify how the service could be improved."

## First steps

Before Wealden could reach this goal it had to address the length of time it was taking for documents to be scanned into the system – up to a week in some cases. Duncan Baxter, a consultant advising Wealden said: "If a document management system is going to be used as anything more than an archiving tool, all documents must be scanned and indexed on the day of receipt. The system cannot manage work items or collect processing information if they are not on the system."

Delays caused other problems too. Do assessors risk sending reminders out for information that they may have received? Do they delay processing just in case extra information has arrived? Do they bypass the DIP and workflow system

## WEALDEN DISTRICT COUNCIL'S FOUR POINTERS TO SUCCESS:

### Culture

Scanning and indexing staff now realise that management view their work as vital, creating a working environment keen to improve performance.

### Ownership

The team looked at the process in its entirety, including aspects that were outside of their service's remit.

### Prioritise

Rather than try and improve the service in one go, Wealden picked a process where improvement would be felt throughout the service and laid the foundation for the next steps in the project.

### Streamline

By doing things differently Wealden radically reduced the effort required to complete scanning and indexing.

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altogether and search through paper correspondence? This all generates extra work and increases turnaround time, which in turn can cause an increase in enquiries from claimants and the possibility of overpayments.

Wealden formed a project team consisting of a mix of staff and external consultants to overhaul the scanning and indexing process so that same day processing would be achieved.

A number of key recommendations were made, including ensuring the early arrival of benefits service mail, which reduced the volume of documents needing to be processed and automating processing. But the biggest change was to how processing was carried out.

As Wealden was relying on paper-based processing for much of its work, there was little urgency attached to the scanning. This has now changed – the project team has redesigned the process to enable staff to work seamlessly together, and an improvement plan with clear targets has been agreed with the team leader.

“We wanted to engender a ‘can do’ spirit,” said Helen, “everyone in the team knows that management view their job as essential, and the performance of this team directly touches everything we do”.

The results speak for themselves. In one month the number of documents scanned in the same day increased from 25% to 80% and six weeks later the team was closing in on a 100% target. This is improving the performance of the rest of the service and, most importantly, staff know that the information in the system is up-to-date.

Over the coming months, *Insight* will feature further case studies illustrating how harnessing technology can provide effective revenues and benefits administration. ●