

## Peterborough City Council automate verification of SBR relief awards

Peterborough City Council (PCC) is a Unitary Authority in the East of England, with an estimated population of 202,259 spanning 132 square miles. The Peterborough Serco Strategic Partnership (PSSP) was formed in 2011 when Serco first took responsibility for a range of frontline and back-office services.

### Council Business Rates Overview

In the next financial year, it is anticipated that retained business rates will account for 15.1% of the Council's income. Collectively the Council are responsible for collecting business rates from more than 6,000 non-domestic properties, of which approximately 2,200 are in receipt of Small Business Rates (SBR) relief. In the last year the Council awarded more than £7.4 million in SBR relief. With this in mind, and the reliance on retained business rates for income, it is important that the Council thoroughly review revenue and relief awarded in this area.

Charlotte Hay, Business Rates Manager at Peterborough Council joined the Authority in 2021 and as part of her service delivery plan, took the decision to undertake a 'deep dive' review of the businesses being awarded SBR relief. Eligible businesses can claim the relief if they occupy either one business property in the UK, or one main business property, where additional premises have a rateable value of less than £2,900 or are empty.

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Business Rates Manager,  
Peterborough City Council.

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*Peterborough Cathedral, Church of St Peter St Paul & St Andrew*

### SBR relief awards verification process

Businesses applying for SBR relief in Peterborough typically complete an online web form, which can be accessed from the Council's website. Often, the Council will auto-award the relief where they are able to establish that a sole trader, for instance, meets the relief criteria.

Prior to the implementation of the HUB solution, Peterborough would conduct manual checks when receiving applications for SBR relief, to ensure that the eligibility criteria was met. This would involve checking their own internal systems for ratepayers that appeared to have two or more properties within the area, and reliance was placed on the business ratepayer to provide accurate and up to date information. Peterborough recognised that the approach had its limitations.

### The decision to automate SBR relief checks

A combination of factors led to their decision to invest in the Destin Solutions 'HUB' solution. They wanted to utilise advancements in technology, rather than taking the usual (costly) paper review approach.



They also recognised the need to be able to conduct a full review of relief being awarded beyond the borders of their own vicinity. Charlotte goes on to comment *"We wanted a solution that would not be a drain on resources and that would reduce the risk of awarding relief incorrectly on an ongoing basis. We still wanted the ability to be able to auto-award the relief but now we can check eligibility immediately. By investing in the HUB solution we are taking a more proactive approach to ensuring the awarding of SBR relief is correct, right at the start of the application."*



*Peterborough Council Business Rates Team at IRRV Awards*

#### **Instant notification of a business operating in another Authority**

Charlotte notes *"One of the really good features of the HUB solution is the email alerts that come through to notify us if a company in our area claiming SBR relief, starts to claim relief within another Local Authority. This prompts us to investigate and if necessary, remove the relief that has been awarded. It is a much more proactive approach, which is great."*

*We use a template within the HUB system that auto-populates all the relevant details and we can send it to the other Local Authority to verify. The level of support offered by Destin Solutions has also been great. Following requests from other Authorities to identify under what circumstances they should be releasing this information from a data protection perspective, Destin have created a short disclaimer within the template which addresses this and speeds up the process of verification for us."*

#### **Results - £97,000 worth of relief withdrawn so far**

The results speak for themselves. Within the first few months, 10 business accounts have had their relief withdrawn and in some cases the relief awarded has been backdated by several years, so that the Council can then recoup that lost revenue. So far £97,000 worth of relief has been withdrawn, resulting in additional revenue for the Authority and an ongoing protection of the public purse. Furthermore, thanks to the ability to check relief eligibility in real-time, the Council have also been able to reject

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applications made where the business has premises in another area from the outset, saving a further £17,800 to date.

The reporting capabilities from HUB have also been useful, identifying the savings they are making, the actual cases where they have withdrawn relief, and providing a breakdown of all the relief they have checked and verified.

#### **Identifying changes in a company's status**

According to Charlotte *"Our experience with Destin has been really positive; they have been receptive to our suggestions on how HUB can be improved and are quick to turn these around, for example once checking a relief is in fact correct, being able to remove that flagged business from future reports so checks are not duplicated. The system is very intuitive and self-explanatory and the report identifying a company's status has been really valuable and an added bonus. We have much more visibility of businesses that have been dissolved or are dormant, which helps us keep our business rates data more accurate as well as acting as a prompt to identify any new businesses occupying properties which may not yet be on our radar."*

With the addition of HUB the council are much more diligent and proactive in reviewing their SBR relief awards and have already recouped the cost of investment. It takes the manual handling element out of the review process and provides an ongoing mechanism for checking reliefs awarded.