

Bath & North East Somerset Council boost collection rates with powerful data matching and property inspections technology

Bath & North East Somerset Council is a prosperous area with two thriving Universities and attracts millions of visitors every year due to its beautifully preserved, elegant Regency townscape and architecture. Classed as a UNESCO world heritage site it also has a significant number of holiday lets and second home owners. Responsible for the collection of revenue for around 87,000 council tax properties and 6,700 business rate properties, the Revenues department consists of a Council Tax, Business Rates and Recovery team. One of their main challenges has been achieving a consistently high collection rate of around 97-98% each year with limited resource and no internal inspections team to conduct property visits.

Digitalisation through technology automation

Through their commitment to digitalisation with investment in technology and resource projects designed to boost revenue from properties, they have managed to meet this challenge head on. It was around five years ago that they first invested in HUB, a solution designed to identify small business rates relief fraud and NEXUS, a solution that identifies commercial and domestic properties not currently liable to pay tax.

With a total rateable value of £193 million in business rates and approximately £6.8 million awarded annually in small business rates relief (SBRR) it is important for Bath & North East Somerset Council to keep on top of any erroneous behaviour in this area and keep an accurate record of the relief awarded. HUB was identified as a solution which would significantly reduce the manual effort required to gather and verify data from multiple sources and

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Revenues Manager for Bath & North East Somerset Council

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improve the accuracy and efficiency in administering SBRR. This has helped the council save valuable staff time and resources and enabled them to redirect efforts toward more complex and high-value tasks. The HUB platform contributes to long-term financial sustainability by helping them recover lost revenue and avoid future losses.

Amanda Dalton-Jones, Revenues Manager at Bath & North East Somerset comments *“It is through the use of solutions like NEXUS and HUB that we effectively have more eyes on the street. The technology supplied by Destin Solutions acts as an extension of our team, I view it as having virtual visiting officers, flagging properties we would otherwise be unaware of that are either not paying the tax they are liable for or claiming relief they are not entitled to.”*

Outsourced inspections and investment in property inspection technology

In addition to these investments they have outsourced their property inspection and visit capabilities to the Inspections team at Reigate & Banstead Council. This was essential in boosting their ability to drive more revenue as they had issues with many void accounts which needed investigating as well as an influx of new developments being driven by conversions of properties to meet ever-growing student accommodation needs. In order to keep on top of these properties and maximise revenue through more prompt issuing of completion notices, Bath & North East Somerset invested in Destin Solutions' Aspire property inspection solution.

Bath & North East Somerset Council

Improving People's Lives

Amanda goes on to comment *“Aspire is simple to use and very user friendly, it’s great for being able to track what is on the Inspection team’s current to do list, we can see the schedule of inspections due to be carried out and what has already been completed. The colour coding feature to indicate when completion notices need to be issued within a certain time frame following a visit, is particularly useful as our team then know to act on the highlighted properties as a priority. We are more able to effectively monitor new builds, identify the stage of completion and when the next scheduled visit is, enabling us to bill on these more promptly.”*

Improving the customer experience

Not having the capacity to make physical property inspections themselves they are now able to direct the Reigate & Banstead Inspection team to investigate properties seeking exemptions or reductions and in the case of business rates, help in identifying the correct property owners. Using a combination of the Aspire inspections technology and the Inspections team they are also improving the customer experience. For example they can now quickly turn around requests for a Disabled Band Reduction by asking the Inspections team to go to that property. The team are able to check and update Aspire with any evidence to support whether doors have been widened for wheel chair use, kitchen units lowered, ramps built into the property or in the case of Autism or ADHD identify if there is a dedicated sensory room.

Identifying properties not paying tax or incorrect tax

Bath & North East Somerset consists of extensive farm land with outbuildings where annexes have been added, many multi-story flats, basement flats and instances where commercial buildings such as old print works and garages are being converted into student accommodation. Prior to their

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investment in NEXUS, many of these types of properties remained under the radar and were either not liable for tax or not paying the correct band of tax. Amanda comments *“We had no way to investigate missing or underpaying properties liable for tax before NEXUS. Now we are uncovering annexes, conversions of garages into Airbnb’s and outbuildings being converted into family homes. The level of detail provided in the NEXUS reports is surprising and collated in such a way that we can access links to planning references and sales and marketing information used by estate agents that help prove our case to the Valuation Office.”*

Additional revenue generation through newly identified properties

In some instances the annexes or conversions completed have meant the owner now has a second home which means the Council gains additional revenue from charging the second home premium. The NEXUS team were also able to identify a property missing from the banding list since 1993. Backdating the amount of council tax owed on the Band F property to the original occupation date has the potential to yield an additional £55,000 in revenue for Bath & North East Somerset Council.

Amanda concludes *“NEXUS has helped us significantly increase our council tax base and business rates yield. It makes everything visible to us that we were previously unaware of and does all the investigative work for us, the information it uncovers has been amazing and has proven to be really valuable. Approximately 95% of the cases flagged in NEXUS reports relate to unregistered business properties. These consistently result in new properties being set up and rated, which directly increases both our property base and revenue. Overall we have found the Destin team to be very responsive, our monthly reports come in on time and in a consistent manner ensuring we can allocate the right resources to getting properties added to rating and valuation lists.”*



Amanda Dalton-Jones (front left) with Council Tax Team



A few of the Business Rates Team