

Case Study: South Ribble Borough Council and Firmstep
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Fast and flexible customer service in the cloud

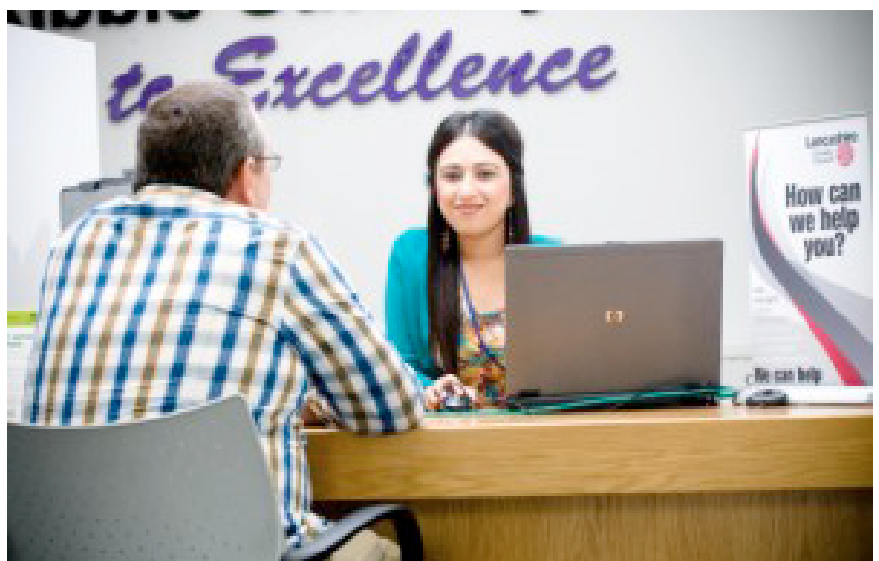
It's unfortunate but true that many councils' customer relationship management (CRM) systems are over-engineered and under-used. In other words, money is being wasted: and these days, that is hardly acceptable.

This was certainly found to be the case at South Ribble Borough Council back in 2009 when a team led by Director of Business Transformation Ian Parker ran a cost-benefit analysis of the authority's old CRM system only to find it had become too expensive and too cumbersome.

"Several years ago, under the electronic government agenda, many councils moved to CRM," Parker says. "Those systems though were predominantly developed by private sector companies for use in the private sector, and were essentially customer profiling software to monitor people's spending through credit card or store card analysis. We all receive unsolicited quotes for car insurance a month before the existing one runs out – private sector CRMs are used to push additional products.

"But of course that's all about products for me to procure, whereas most of what councils provide are services. We were trying to fit a very complex product-based software that was very cumbersome and very expensive to maintain, into a relatively linear environment."

Looking around for alternatives Parker decided to try AchieveService from Firmstep, a cloud-



Welcome to the cloud: the 'Gateway' One Stop Shop is underpinned by the same back-office system

based, public-sector-specific system that was pared down to a 'CRM-lite' – flexible, proportionate and development-friendly.

"Firmstep had already started developing their own CRM system in-house after ditching their old system for the same reasons. We were an early adopter, and we have not looked back."

In a matter of weeks Parker's team migrated forms, processes and scripts from the old CRM to AchieveService, integrated with back office processes across myriad service areas including council tax, housing, street scene services, waste collection and event bookings.

The new system went live in September 2010, taking service requests through the council's 'Gateway' One Stop Shop, whether customers were speaking with the council's agents face to face or by telephone.

In the past, if someone reported something like a missed bin a lot of work was involved going backwards and forwards to the relevant service department, but now such enquiries are managed at the first point of contact, Parker says.

The agent just needs to check their address to find information about collection days, or gather the information they need to execute a service request using preset scripts.

“Overall now our resolution at first point of contact is over 80%.”

From December this year, using the same underlying system residents can log onto the council website at home, register with their name, address and postcode and report issues such as uncollected bins, he says. They will also soon be able to call up location-based information such as a list of all planning applications within a radius of a quarter of a mile, one mile, or across the whole of the borough; or sign up to receive minutes of specific council meetings.

The fact that AchieveService is a cloud-based technology – Firmstep is of the first ‘software as a service’ providers to use the Amazon cloud - brings other advantages, Parker says.

Not only does it bring a high level of security to features such as citizen authentication, but it means back-up processes are far more robust than anything the council could achieve on its own.

“The whole system is critical for the council, so being web based and cloud based there is quite an elegant disaster recovery solution in place. All our data is additionally backed up internationally in Germany, Italy and who knows where – South Ribble working on its own couldn’t have a disaster recovery structure anything close to that.”

Another advantage of working in the cloud is removal of the need to maintain, update or replace expensive servers if they were hosted at the council, he says.

“Server platforms tend to change all the time, whether through virtualisation or other developments, but this takes us to the next level with no extra effort. It’s the way all computing is going – your own PC is going to

be in the cloud before too long.”

The system also supports mobile working, Parker says, which is not just convenient for citizens in the age of mobile access devices but for the council in offering better mobile working options for staff.

“We already hold surgeries out in the community, and by using the cloud based web we can hook up to exactly the same services, our office



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is completely mobile.”

Fuelled by these early successes, South Ribble is now looking at how it can expand the cloud-based system, Parker says. “We’re now reviewing other long-standing back office IT systems with a view to seeing how Firmstep can replace them in part or in whole.

“We’re pretty certain that as some of our systems coming up for renewal and replacement, Firmstep will take a big chunk of that.”

And because the system is so flexible, he says, when business processes change, the front end is flexible enough to change with them. “We are looking at new processes around housing and homelessness and migrating those into the one-stop shop,” he says.

“The new kit means it is quick for us to respond to new processes, easier to get from A to B”.

And what of the all-important cost savings, one of the main rationales for switching across to the cloud-based system, and a priority which is becoming ever more urgent for local government?

“We measured the efficiencies generated and they exceed £200,000 since going live six months ago,” Parker says. “And the council estimates real cashable savings set to be achieved across five years will exceed £400,000. It’s been a breath of fresh air.”

For more about Firmstep visit:

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