

Housing Benefit Applications

Dramatically improving the new claims process to reduce assessment times

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The Challenge

Southwark Council were not achieving BVPI targets on processing new claims for Housing Benefit. They were languishing at the bottom of the league tables for London Boroughs. Apart from the pressure from Central Government to improve this situation, it also affected housing rent arrears and caused genuine hardship for some of the most vulnerable citizens in the borough.

The evidence required to support a benefits claim is relatively complex, and the existing paper-based procedures - writing to claimants and asking them to post further documents - were simply not working effectively, exacerbated by the demographics within the borough. At the start of the project, average processing times were over 40 days, with maximum durations significantly in excess of that.

The demographics of this inner-city borough, with high turnover rates and several languages, made communications issues particularly important. Additionally, Southwark Council have outsourced their Benefits service to one partner, and the customer service centre to another. Thus the solution we developed would not only affect the front/back office boundary, but also have organisational and contractual implications.

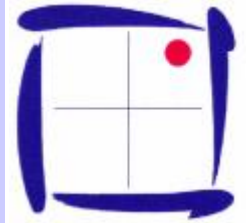
Southwark Council had aspirations of regaining a position in the top quartile of London Boroughs for processing new claims, delivering improved customer service and making back office efficiency improvements.

The Solution – Redesign the End-to-End Process

ValueAdding.com led a cross-organisational team in designing a vision that focussed on reducing the processing time by tightly managing the difficult part of the process - rapid assembly of all the correct evidence. The team's aspiration was that the customer should attend one interview only, knowing what evidence to bring, and should leave that interview with their claim assessed and in payment.

Once the design phase was completed and the design signed off by the council, ValueAdding.com managed the project implementation across the borough. Work elements included:

- Ø Geo-demographic analysis of demand across the borough to assess the most appropriate face-to-face contact points
- Ø Deriving capacity and location requirements to deliver the service
- Ø Facilitating workshops to understanding the existing issues and design the vision for a one-stop, benefits process
- Ø Designing an implementation plan and project structure which would ensure that the three organisations involved (Southwark and their two contractors) would deliver the team's aspirations
- Ø Managing the implementation process via a multi-organisational team
- Ø Project closedown criteria that enabled us to hand the project over to 'Business as Usual'.



What We Delivered

We completely redesigned the benefits process to bring 'assessment of the claim' forward to the initial interview, and integrated information technology to capture claimants' details on line. Southwark termed this e-Benefits. Key changes were:

- Ø An e-Benefits service where the customer gets their claim assessed in the initial interview; at least 80% of claims will be processed this way by end 2006.
- Ø A flexible team of e-Benefits Officers at five locations covering the whole borough, including the Homeless Persons Unit.
- Ø Central appointments booking in the CSC and at the One-Stop Shop locations.
- Ø A capability to integrate the e-Benefits process into the new systems environment when Southwark implements a 'one-touch' process of citizen management.
- Ø A comprehensive management information pack that is used by operational and strategic management and which demonstrates the benefits of the project, see below.
- Ø A plan to continue to improve performance during the rest of the financial year.

The Benefits

The management information data shows:

- Ø Average time to process claims through e-Benefits (now 39% of all new claims) down to just over one day compared to previous BVPI over 40 days.
- Ø e-Benefits claims completed at initial interview increasing from 40% in first full month of operation to 65% in following month.
- Ø BVPI performance:
 - § prior to project, average processing time was 41 days – BVPI failure
 - § two months after implementation, reduced to 28 days - top quartile performance for London Boroughs
- Ø On track for significant further gains after new systems implementation and as the 'tail' of old claims works out of the statistics. It is also targeted to increase the proportion of e-Benefits applications to 80% in the next 12 months.

Additionally, we have piloted an extension of the process to integrate e-Benefits with the Housing Department's 'New Tenancy Signup'. Feedback has been excellent, as the customer now gets their new council property and benefits assessed all in the same visit, dramatically improving the customer experience and preventing the potential build-up of customer debt and council revenue loss.