

Despite the complexities of its geographical situation, Argyll and Bute Council has implemented a series of initiatives that count as firsts in Scotland, and has emerged as a benchmark council for others. Spread across 2,765m² of Scotland's beautiful and often dramatic west coast, the council covers six main towns and 26 inhabited islands housing a dispersed population of over 91,000. It is Scotland's second largest local authority and boasts more than 2,700 miles of coastline.

By integrating Lagan's enterprise case management (ECM) solution with a telephony system from Macfarlane to link Revenues and Benefits from front office to back office, Argyll and Bute council in Scotland:

- **will see a saving of the equivalent of 8.5 full-time employees – a cost reduction of £765,000 over five years.**
- **has reduced the volume of lost calls from 25% to just 4%**
- **is fully satisfying 90% of calls at the first point of contact.**

Argyll and Bute council first identified the need to improve its handling of customer contacts back in 2004. The project forms a vital element within the council's Best Value Improvement Plan and Corporate Plan, which includes electronic service delivery targets over the next two to three years. Once funding was secured, the council set about an extensive programme to evaluate partners that could provide:

- a common infrastructure across the whole of the area to ensure the council benefited from common practices while ensuring consistency of information;
- deep integration to back office systems to allow enquiries to be resolved at first point of contact with minimal need to pass things through to the back office
- integrated telephony technology
- a choice of access channels for citizens, including email, telephone, letter and face-to-face
- self-serve facilities

- integration of the system with the authority's council tax system with full integration to the revenue and benefits systems that allow Customer Service Centre agents to pre-complete benefit application forms to send out to customers for signature and then carry out on-line the retrieval of benefit calculations. These provide an indicative benefit entitlement to the customer either on the telephone or face-to-face within any of the seven Service Points spread across the Council Area.
- an interface to the Local Land and Property Gazetteer to populate the database
- a way to eliminate duplication of call handling by Corporate Services and Operational Services
- improved payment facilities
- transactional online services underpinned by e-forms.

In addition, the solution selected needed to support the target of 90% of calls being answered first time as set by the Scottish Improvement Service, as well as its target of 75% of service requests being fully resolved at the first point of contact. Argyll and Bute is in fact achieving 96% first-time resolution.

A rigorous tender and review process – including a full functional evaluation, reference site visits and demonstrations - resulted in Lagan being selected to work in partnership with Steria, integrating with CallPlus from Macfarlane. Phase one of the project commenced in February 2007 and encompassed: council tax, FAQs, leisure bookings, online payments, library catalogues and roads and lighting faults. This included the creation of a single distributed telephony centre servicing the whole of the council area and which is now moving the council towards joined up contact with the public for a number of service areas.

The initial system was selected via an OJEU tender using the Most Economically Advantageous Tender evaluation approach. The validity of the choice of the Lagan ECM software has been verified through its subsequent selection by the Improvement Service as the national contact system for Scotland. This also means pioneering initiatives taken by Argyll and Bute have been readily transferable to other councils; results to-date have

been presented to other local authorities at seminars and an on-site workshop which demonstrated the system in action.

Mhairi Renton, Customer Services Manager at Argyll and Bute, comments, "Lagan's extensive experience in implementing government solutions, coupled with their ability to provide deep integration with other systems, were key in our decision-making. We have been particularly impressed with their work with MacFarlane to ensure the telephony system was fully embedded, and the application of their integration adapters in enabling us to link the front and back office tightly together."

Citizens' panel questionnaire

In addition to the extensive business review undertaken in order to justify the project, Argyll and Bute issued a citizens panel questionnaire entitled 'Improved Access to Public Services'. This survey revealed that the most popular method of contacting the council was by telephone (59%), followed by face-to-face (17%) with 13% preferring letter and that the aspects of public service most in need of improvement were 'responding quickly to enquiries' and 'getting it right first time'. Two of the most common reasons for contacting the council were concerning roads and lighting faults, and council tax enquiries/payments. Staff were also consulted, and 81% of them felt their service would benefit from being involved in a Customer Services Centres; 82% envisaged that routine calls could be dealt with at first point of contact, thus freeing up back office staff to concentrate on more specialist tasks.

Starting out with council tax

The first service to be launched was council tax which was implemented using the Lagan ECM solution powered by the innovative Hyfinity[®] technology (see boxed text) to ensure an effective link between the front and back office. Argyll and Bute was the first council in the UK to use this adapter. Staff were trained in systems configuration, scriptflow and e-forms as well as the functionality available through the Lagan ECM system. Full functional integration was achieved via Application Programming Interfaces. The Revenues Module within the Lagan system replicates the Northgate line of business application, allowing processes to be completed in the front office by customer service centre agents either on the telephone or face to face. The Lagan Revenues Module

updates real time to the back office presenting the up-to-date position of each account to all users in order to answer all questions in full.

Integrated telephony

In addition to being the first council to use an integration adapter for revenues and benefits, Argyll and Bute was the first IP-based implementation of MacFarlane's CallPlus telephony system in Scotland. This has provided a sound platform for seamless integration with the fully converged Cisco voice and data network being rolled out across the Highlands and Islands through the Broadband Pathfinder Project.

Macfarlane's CallPlus Screenphone was embedded within the Lagan customer services screen. This has context sensitive commands that change according to the status of the agent. The Screenphone replaces the need to use a handset to dial and display information on call activity. The Macfarlane CallPlus Contact Centre technology has been embedded within the council's newly implemented Cisco IP Infrastructure and will facilitate the roll-out of the Lagan ECM solution across the council area. The Macfarlane CallPlus System is tightly integrated with Lagan ECM software ensuring relevant customer and council information can be passed fairly and equally to appropriately skilled advisers as calls are answered. Features include computer Telephony Integration, intelligent call handling, skills based routing, interactive voice response, recording, and management statistics. Where details of the caller's number are held within Lagan, the associated customer details are popped up on the agent's screen as calls are delivered to their desktops.

In summing up the project, customer services manager Mhairi Renton says, "We knew we were embarking on a complex project of enormous scope. The approach of the Lagan and Macfarlane teams, and the way their software has been able to integrate with other systems enabled us to move from kick-off to go live in just four months. We are already seeing tangible benefits as a result, and these will only increase as we extend the solution across additional services."

Conclusion

The Lagan ECM solution, complemented by integrated telephony software from Macfarlane, has allowed Argyll and Bute council to overcome the challenges of providing improved access to information and a choice of channels across a wide and challenging geographical area.

The solution offers enhanced quality and consistency of approach as well as a single view of the history of each customer and the facility to monitor all transactions against any account. Customers have a better choice of how they access council services; enquiries are responded to quickly and dealt with at first point of contact.

Summary of key benefits

Benefits to the council

- A reduction of 8.5 full-time equivalents, delivering a saving of £765,000
- Missed calls reduced from 25% to 4%
- Significant reduction in calls being passed between services, and therefore being handled more than once
- Less than 5% of more complex calls passed to back office for further investigation
- Expensive professional staff have been freed up from responding to enquiries that can be dealt with by generic customer services agents = cost savings
- No need to provide reception services at every council office
- Performance and efficiency are recorded to enable continuous improvement

Benefits to citizens

- 90% of calls are now resolved first time
- Improved efficiency via a single customer service point for each main town
- Professional staff are available by appointment so people who may have had to travel some distance are not kept waiting
- Service requests are handled more quickly and escalated as appropriate if they are not resolved within agreed timescales
- More personal service as agents have access to the customer's previous enquiries and can report on the progress on any outstanding service requests