

Richmond Council expands its customer service centre with focus on service excellence

London, UK, 5th October 2009. The London Borough of Richmond upon Thames has launched a new customer service quality initiative focused on improving service across all its customer 'touch points' (i.e. phone, web, email, face-to-face etc.), resolving more customer problems at first point of contact, avoiding unnecessary customer contacts, and delivering greater value for money.

The 'Customer Service Excellence' initiative will lead to a significant expansion in the Council's customer services operation and, in the first stage of this expansion, completed in August 2009, Council Tax enquiries (the second largest call volume area for the Council), along with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefits, have been moved into the Council's centralised customer service centre. The customer service centre was already handling Environmental Services (waste, recycling, planning, trees, street cleansing etc.) and general Council enquiries. The expansion sees the service centre grow to 30 Full Time Equivalent personnel, a 24 percent increase.

Since the opening of the Richmond Council customer service centre in 2005, the Council has focused heavily on service quality improvement. It has introduced a number of new customer 'touch points' (including a telephone contact centre and self-serve transactions on the website), invested in new Macfarlane, Lagan and Q-max customer contact technology (as detailed below), intensively trained its customer service personnel across all service areas, and instigated a four year customer service plan, 'Putting Our Customers First', in 2007.

As a result, service quality has improved markedly. Before switchboard calls were moved to the service centre in 2007, for example, between 12 and 30 percent of all calls were abandoned. Today, that figure is just 4 percent. The percentage of queries resolved at first point of contact has also risen sharply to over 80 percent. In addition, online performance has improved dramatically, with the level of quarterly

on-line payments improving from 7000 to 17,000 and the number of quarterly automated telephone payments improving from 5000 to 11,000.

The centre today handles around 150 face-to-face, 100 email and 1000 phone contacts a day. All Richmond customer service personnel are multi-skilled, enabling them to assist customers face-to-face in the customer service area, over-the-phone in the contact centre, or by responding to written correspondence.

When the Council conducted an automated customer satisfaction survey earlier this year, 80 percent of local residents stated that the service received was either 'good' or 'excellent'.

In December 2008, Richmond became one of very few UK councils to achieve contact centre quality accreditation under both the prestigious Customer Contact Association Global Standard© and the Customer Service Excellence standard.

Contact Centre Technology Improvements

Specialist contact centre technology has played a key role in improved telephone-based contact centre performance according to Dawn Cooper, Head of Customer Services, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.

“When we started operating the contact centre, we soon realised that we needed specialist call handling technology to move service performance to the next level.”

In early 2007, the Council selected a Macfarlane CallPlus contact centre to replace its existing telephony equipment. The CallPlus platform delivers an extensive and robust set of services including intelligent call handling with skills-based routing, management information, interactive voice response, computer telephony integration, (CTI), call recording, quality monitoring, Customer Satisfaction Survey, and support for home working.

In May 2007, the Council also purchased Q-max, a powerful workforce management solution. Q-max enables the Council to more efficiently forecast future customer contact volumes and ensure the right number of advisors, with the right skills, are available to handle customers – so optimising the way the Council manages its resources.

The Macfarlane solution integrates closely with both the Qmax software and the Council's existing Lagan Enterprise Case Management software to ensure that all contact centre functions work together seamlessly.

Technology Benefits

The use of advanced contact centre technology has made a huge difference to improving customer satisfaction, advisor performance, call quality and first call resolution according to Dawn Cooper.

“The Macfarlane CallPlus system is both current and cost-effective. It enables us to route calls to advisors with the right skill sets (rather than just to the next available advisor), play queue messages to callers to keep them better informed, view real-time statistics on how many people are calling (and why they are calling), and access detailed call and workforce management information every fifteen minutes. Armed with this detailed information, we can react quicker to what people are saying – noting which calls are avoidable calls, whether additional advisor training is required, and whether contact handling processes can be improved.

“It also gives us a lot more flexibility in the way we handle calls. It's easy and fast to add new services to the CallPlus system (such as Highway Changes, which we added in July 2007, and Integrated Switchboard, which we added in October 2007 – while the automated Customer Satisfaction survey module enables us to measure improvements and gain valuable feedback from customers on an on-going basis. Overall, it means we can be a lot more responsive to customers.”

Other technology features that have proven key to improved service performance include:

- Extensive **call recording and Quality Monitoring** functionality. The Macfarlane platform provides powerful quality monitoring for supervisors/managers to listen in to calls, and facilities for supervisors, managers and advisors to record and index calls. The system allows for the selective or 100% recording of calls based on DDI, CLI, Advisor and Advisor Group – with recordings easily retrieved against a range of criteria (date and time, service type, identity of agent etc.).

- Tight **Macfarlane/ Lagan integration** which enables customer service advisors to make/receive calls and take advantage of powerful 'softphone' capabilities using a telephony toolbar embedded within the Lagan software. They also receive information about callers on their screens as calls are delivered to their desktops, and are able to more easily control CRM and telephony applications and features through access to a single screen (rather than having to switch between two applications). Administrative staff and customer service supervisors benefit too through the ability to configure and control a wide range of telephony applications (including ACD, Recording, MIS and IVR) and CRM capabilities (including business processes and workflow, and authority and authentication) through a single management interface.
- **Detailed and customisable management reporting.** The CallPlus MIS allows analysis of specific service statistics and advisor behaviour on a group and individual basis. This information can be cross-referenced to short and long term performance data to identify and analyse quality and performance issues and - alongside Q-Max workforce management - indicate possible solutions. This approach enables tailored training and performance programs to be directed at the advisors who need them most, where appropriate in conjunction with CallPlus recording and monitoring functions. The CallPlus MIS reports allow a top down approach to performance analysis, with high level reports indicating general areas where problems exist, and a drill down approach beyond that to the level where each individual action taken by an advisor can be scrutinised and cross-referenced.
- The Council uses the Macfarlane **interactive voice response** (IVR) facility to aid the smooth resolution of customer queries by playing recorded messages to customers queuing to speak to advisors. Messages are used to promote the use of the council web site, inform callers about wait times, resolve queries like missed bin pick-ups, place orders for recycling containers, and inform customers about serious service issues (such as providing local flood updates during the Summer of 2007). When playing recorded 'close messages', the Council will also frequently give customers the option of transferring to an automated payment system to make payments for Council Tax, and parking fines etc.

- Because of the integrated nature of the Lagan **enterprise case management** system, the Council was able to introduce a one stop Change of Address service in August 2008 that enables citizens moving into and out of the Borough to take-up or cancel services on a single phone call. Multiple services can also now be accessed on a single phone call – so, for example, if a customer was to call in with a Council tax query they could also enquire about a ‘missed bin’ pick-up without the advisor having to transfer the call.

The new Macfarlane and Lagan technology has also facilitated a successful home working trial. Initiated in January 2008, the trial set out to assess the impact of home working on the way the customer services team can deploy human resources. Two advisors were selected for the home trial and given access to the same systems as if they were in the office. The trial was extremely successful with agent productivity consistently high and the use of home workers providing managers within the Customer Services team greater flexibility in the way they were able to manage workloads – especially when contact volumes were high.

“The London Borough of Richmond has achieved remarkable improvements in its service performance and we are delighted to be playing a part in the Council’s service plans moving forward” said Paul Skinner, Sales Director, Macfarlane Telesystems.

About Macfarlane

Founded in 1987, Macfarlane Telesystems develops and implement open standards-based contact centre systems that lead the field in supporting multi-media contacts so that your customers can contact you in whichever way suits them, be it telephone, email, web, text, IM, picture or video message.

CallPlus manages and routes these types of contacts in a unified and intelligent way, thus ensuring optimal efficiency of operation and maximising on agent skills.

Macfarlane has established a strong position in the public sector, assisting over 80 local councils in reaching e-government targets.

Macfarlane has established business partnerships with key CRM vendors including Lagan, Northgate and Microsoft; and managed service providers such as Steria, Capita and Serco. <http://www.macfar.co.uk/>

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