



Council puts benefits online

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Andrew Unsworth
Head of eGovernment
The City of Edinburgh Council

Faced with improving the efficiency of Housing and Council Tax benefits processes, The City of Edinburgh Council implemented a web-based system in partnership with BT

Marketplace

In April 2001 The City of Edinburgh Council formed a strategic partnership with BT to deliver its ‘Smart City’ vision. The vision is a fifteen-year plan to transform the way in which the Council organises its activities and interacts with citizens. The aim is to place the Council at the centre of seamless delivery of public services to the people and businesses of Edinburgh. Having supplied the networked IT services infrastructure to support the Smart City vision, BT is now working on the more visible, public facing aspects of the transformation. One such project involves the Council’s Revenues and Benefits department.

Business opportunity

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are national social security schemes administered by over 400 local authorities throughout Great Britain. Each year The City of Edinburgh Council receives around 50,000 applications for housing and/or council tax benefits. The benefit schemes are complex to administer and, like many local authorities, the Council was facing significant challenges to assure accurate and timely processing and payment of validated claims.

Applications were paper-based, requiring the completion of a complex 28-page document. Many citizens found this process daunting and sought help in completing the document. Others were even put

off submitting what would have been a valid claim. Even so a large proportion of the claim forms returned to the Council’s Revenues and Benefits department were wrong and Council staff were spending a significant amount of time contacting citizens to obtain further information.

In line with its Smart City vision, the Council sought to address these issues by applying for Performance Standards Funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The ‘Benefits Online’ project suggested would transform the application process into a truly interactive experience between citizen and Council.

The solution

With funding secured the Council and BT set in train the implementation of a solution that would empower citizens to create, submit, validate, and advise any change of circumstances online. The goal was to develop a replicable and integrated solution that could be utilised by other local authorities countrywide. Prior to implementation, the Council undertook a wide-ranging stakeholder analysis, involving citizens, Revenues and Benefits Officers, the Citizens Advice Bureau and Registered Social Landlords. With a structured communications plan to inform all stakeholders about the new system, this exercise would be central to the future success of the project.

Case study

The City of Edinburgh Council

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Mike Peterson
Head of Revenues and Benefit
The City of Edinburgh Council

The project team chose core technology offered by third party supplier EzGov – a specialist provider of eGovernment transactional applications – selected due to its experience and track record in providing innovative citizen-centric solutions. The integrated suite of applications included a fully integrated electronic document management system and bespoke housing and council tax benefits application system. Delivered in partnership with BT, these core applications formed the heart of the new Benefits Online service.

The new system is set to radically transform the way the citizen interacts with the Council. Now, rather than being faced with a complex paper-based application form, citizens have the option to complete the form online. That can be done either at home, at one of the City’s 26 public libraries, or with assistance in the offices of the Council or other partner bodies. People can also phone in for help.

Offices worldwide

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When a claimant elects to start a new claim or advise a change in circumstances they are issued with a PIN number. This PIN, along with their surname, enables them to access their online claim/change of circumstances notification for 32 days. After this period, the claim is purged. Once submitted the citizen has one calendar month from the date the Council receive their online claim to provide any necessary supporting evidence.

The online application ensures the citizen submits data in the correct format in all required fields and validates answers across the whole application on submission. A Benefits Calculator then offers the applicant an estimate of benefit entitlement, which is accurate to within a £5 margin. On submission the completed electronic application enters the Council’s document management system and all claim information and supporting evidence is available to the Council officer through the workflow system on their desktop.

Following verification, the application is processed for payment. At present, the applicant is required to print off and sign the final page of the form and send this to the Council. However, it is anticipated that the DWP will accept digital signatures in the future, enabling the citizen and the Council to develop an even more streamlined and efficient service.

Results

“This will revolutionise the application process,” observes Mike Peterson, Head of Revenues and Benefits at The City of Edinburgh Council. “The whole paper application process can be daunting for many people. With the online version, people will only have to answer questions directly relevant to their circumstances and they will get an idea straightaway of how much benefit they may receive.”

With Benefits Online the applicant gets an immediate confirmation that the Council has received their application. The system also offers the ability for people to track and monitor the progress of applications. For the Council the new online system has radically improved both service to citizens and efficiency within the organisation. Processes have been streamlined, customer enquiries have decreased in volume, and service delivery costs have reduced – all achieved whilst providing a more responsive and timely service to citizens.

The solution is replicable and can be offered to other local authorities on a commercial basis, supporting the drive for shared services. It is a clear example of how new technology can offer tangible benefits to the citizen, while improving business processes and Council effectiveness. Following the success of Benefits Online the Council is set to consider the development of further citizen-focused online services, for example, other benefit schemes and parking permit applications.

Andrew Unsworth, Head of eGovernment at The City of Edinburgh Council, sums up: “This project is a genuine win-win for both the citizen and the Council and is an excellent exemplar of how our Smart City vision is delivering practical IT solutions which make a genuine difference to people’s lives.”

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