



Overview

Drivers

Somerset County Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council wanted to improve service quality and simplify access to services, creating a more flexible customer contact organisation even while reducing the cost of handling customer enquiries.

Solution

By joining forces with IBM as part of the Southwest One public/private joint venture, the Councils created a new shared-service organisation to handle all customer contact. Starting from an innovative organisational design template, Southwest One merged the existing customer contact facilities, deployed new telephony and CRM systems, and built world-class training and quality management frameworks.

Southwest One transforms customer service, reducing costs and enhancing access

Southwest One is a unique public/private joint venture partnership formed in 2007 between Somerset County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Avon and Somerset Police and IBM. The organisation's goal is to improve services and save money for the authorities, through a combination of managing back office and transactional services through a single shared service arrangement, and delivering major strategic projects to transform and modernise the way the authorities work. This case study focuses on the Customer Contact project for Somerset County Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council, which did not involve Avon and Somerset Police.

Enhancing access to services and improving the customer experience are key goals for both Taunton Deane Borough Council and Somerset County Council. The Southwest One partnership is transforming how each organisation works using world-class technology, enabling consistent access to around 3,000 services through multiple delivery channels – including several self-service options.

A key project for Southwest One was to pool customer contact resources and benefit from greater flexibility and economies of scale. The first step was to put in place a single, focused management structure with a single leadership team, as Fiona Capstick, CEO of Southwest One explains:

“It was vital to establish a genuine shared-service structure for Customer Contact, and we worked closely with an IBM organisational design consultant to lay the foundations for the new shared service. Merging two organisations is never an easy task, but we successfully handled the change management in an open and collaborative way with staff to ensure fairness and transparency, and to achieve clarity in the new management structure.”

Three into two

Following the organisational design principles established in the first phase of the project, the team then planned and executed the consolidation of three existing contact centres into two: Wellington House for adult and child social care, and Deane House for all other services.



Business Benefits

- Consistently delivering high customer satisfaction ratings of 86.1 percent.
 - Reduced call waiting times from a high of 12 minutes to a position where the majority of calls are answered within 20 seconds.
 - Introduced a resource planning system to ensure a better match between staffing levels and demand.
 - Enabled fast, consistent service even during periods of peak demand.
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“Bringing together the contact teams from the County Council and the Borough Council in purpose-built centres was a great moment for everyone, and a tangible symbol of the broader project to create a shared-services organisation,” says Penny James, CEO of Taunton Deane Borough Council. “On a practical level, the new centres created the right environment, which helps ensure that we retain experienced staff capable of offering the highest levels of customer service.”

One of the key drivers for merging the contact centres was to provide a single point of access to services, as Penny James explains: “Citizens don’t usually care whether it’s the Borough Council or the County Council that delivers a particular service, they just want the service. The new Southwest One Customer Contact provides a select range of telephone numbers for all services, so that it’s quick and effective for customers to get what they need. What’s more, we’ve achieved this consolidation of service delivery while preserving the distinct ‘brand’ of each Council – enabling users of either Web site to reach all services without needing to switch sites.”

Best-practice approach

Creating the shared-services organisation enabled Southwest One to develop a single set of best practices for customer relationship management, supported by world-class training and quality-management programmes. A set number of calls per advisor are monitored, and feedback is provided to team members on their performance. This quality monitoring feeds directly into their personal development plans.

“We aim to build quality into all of our processes,” comments Sam Pike, Head of Customer Services, Southwest One. “With the quality monitoring, we’re helping team members develop their soft skills and measuring how this impacts customer service and how it improves customer satisfaction.”

Real-time performance monitoring

Southwest One has introduced an automated and randomised telephone survey to measure customer satisfaction. The responses feed directly into a Web portal, enabling Customer Contact managers to gain a real-time view of performance. Customers are encouraged to leave comments – positive or negative – about the service as voicemail.

“When customers leave voicemail, we try to return their call quickly and deal with any issues raised,” says Sam Pike. “This helps us to provide a very responsive service and to show that we’re genuinely taking action based on customer feedback.”

“The Southwest One partnership has enabled us to achieve significant improvements in the quality of our services. In particular, the agreement has given us access to shared resources that would otherwise be out of our financial reach, allowing us to reduce operating costs even while boosting quality.”

— Penny James, CEO of Taunton Deane Borough Council

Efficient organisation

To ensure an effective service without putting undue pressure on budgets, Customer Contact aims always to have the right number of team members in the right place at the right time. The organisation uses Q-Max workforce management software that takes a direct feed from the telephony system and produces forecasts of future workload. Managers can incorporate additional variables into the forecasts to take into account such factors as bad weather or periods of peak demand for services, in order to keep staff resources aligned with the expected call volumes.

“By paying close attention to how we use our team members, we can ensure that we meet our Key Performance Indicators in a cost-effective and efficient manner,” says Councillor John Williams, Leader of Taunton Deane Borough Council. “With a combined pool of people to draw on, Southwest One can offer fast, consistent service even during periods of peak demand. The shared service is also more resilient: if one contact centre is unavailable for use, perhaps through a power cut or adverse weather, we can seamlessly switch communications and staff to the other centre.”

Consistent service

Southwest One has put in place clear Operating Level Agreements (OLAs) to guide the relationship between the Customer Contact team and front-line service delivery areas, for example, Roads and Transport at Somerset County Council. When any variance is identified, managers from both sides discuss the issues, looking at data from the CRM system to see what improvements can be made. “One of the key factors in improving customer service is to maintain a close and effective relationship with the front-line service delivery areas that actually serve the customers,” says Sam Pike. “With the OLAs and the management structure we’ve built around them, we can easily flag up areas for improvement and learn lessons for the future.”

Once the new contact centres were up and running with a single voice-over-IP telephony system, Southwest One deployed SAP CRM to manage customer interactions, and ran a six-week training course for contact staff ahead of the SAP go-live. “Introducing a single, standard CRM tool meant reduced software and training overheads and enabled us to ensure greater consistency in service levels,” says Sam Pike. “We’ve also ensured consistency between telephone and Web access by creating a single repository for all content: the citizen portal. This provides content for both the County Council and the Borough Council Web sites, making all the services available in exactly the same form whether citizens visit a council office, call the contact centre or visit one of the Web sites.

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Improved satisfaction

The creation of a single shared service has delivered significant benefits in terms of customer satisfaction. Across the most recent 12-month period, more than 80 percent of calls were answered within 20 seconds, and 86.1 percent of all customers reported satisfaction with the service, with 74.8 percent choosing one of the two highest service ratings (‘good’ or ‘very good’). The contact centre currently handles 37,000 calls per month.

For Taunton Deane Borough Council, the percentage of queries answered at the first point of contact has risen from around 58 percent to more than 95 percent, with Somerset County Council achieving an improvement from 76 percent to 92 percent. There have also been significant reductions in the percentage of calls abandoned.

“All the evidence points to a very clear improvement in customer service levels since we created the new shared service,” says Fiona Capstick. “In addition to saving money through greater economies of scale, Southwest One Customer Contact was designed to improve access to services and increase customer satisfaction – and we’ve achieved both objectives.”

A bright future

A number of factors have contributed to the improvement in service levels: the sharing of a larger pool of resources, the creation of formalised training and development programmes linked to quality management programmes, and the ability to develop and share best practices. In the coming months, Southwest One is planning to launch a number of initiatives to give customers greater choice around how they interact with their local authorities, supporting a wider range of self-service tools while also maintaining and improving traditional voice-based communications.

“Southwest One brings together the best aspects of the public and private sectors, creating a seamless marriage. The partnership provides significant added value for its constituents, with the economies of scale we’ve achieved enabling both Councils to punch substantially above their weight while making tangible cost savings.

“The partnership between the Councils and IBM means that Southwest One can easily call in expertise from across the globe, and draw on tremendous intellectual capital across all service lines,” says Fiona Capstick. “This is a vital benefit in bringing best practices to the large number and broad range of services the councils deliver.”

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“The guiding principle behind the whole Southwest One organisation was to make it scalable and extensible. Many of the initiatives that we have pioneered could be re-used elsewhere and applied to other authorities. We’ve effectively created a set of templates for repeatable success, which other public authorities could use to deliver greater value for their stakeholders.”

Penny James, Taunton Deane Borough Council, comments:

“Southwest One Customer Contact has enabled us to reach a new level of excellence in customer service, improving our performance and providing greater flexibility and resilience. The Southwest One partnership as a whole has enabled us to achieve significant improvements in the quality of our services. In particular, the agreement has given us access to shared resources that would otherwise be out of our financial reach, allowing us to reduce operating costs even while boosting quality.”

For more information

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