



Case study

Industry sector:
local government

Partnership with BT propels councils to the top of the league

Suffolk joins forces with BT to launch UK's first two-tier customer service partnership with seamless links between County and District levels

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Councillor Jeremy Pembroke
Leader
Suffolk County Council

Executive summary

Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council sought a private sector partnership to overhaul their customer services by providing integrated access to users and dramatically improving efficiency. The aim was to combine disparate functions in a single, new joint venture and so establish an innovative model structured according to customer needs rather than administrative boundaries. Delivery was to be based on walk-in centres, phone lines and a public access website, with seamless integration between them.

BT was chosen as the councils' partner in a new company – Customer Service Direct (CSD) Limited – and agreed to invest £50 million in business process re-engineering, change management, and training over the 10-year lifetime of the contract. BT was also responsible for

implementing the infrastructure required to support the councils' business functions and public facing website, using the BT metroVPN (virtual private network) service to create a converged platform, enabling new applications such as voice over internet protocol (VoIP). Front line agents were empowered by BT Contact Central – a powerful eCommunity Relationship Management (eCRM) solution.

CSD opened its first service centre ahead of schedule. The integrated communications infrastructure has enabled many queries to be resolved in one visit or call, while the partnership has propelled Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council to the top of local authority efficiency league tables.

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Marketplace

Suffolk is home to nearly 680,000 people, many living in rural areas. Two tiers of local government are together responsible for a wide range of service provision. The first tier is the County Council, which delivers services to customers throughout the area. The second tier, represented in Suffolk by five District Councils and two Borough Councils, delivers a separate array of services to geographically defined subsets within the county's overall population.

Long-standing public confusion over demarcation lines between local government responsibilities had affected the efficiency of service delivery across the board. Customers often contacted County Council officials about issues that were part of the District Council's remit, and vice versa, causing frustration and delay. In 2000, the functioning of the two-tier system was reviewed in the light of an emerging e-government agenda – later formalised in the Gershon Report – an efficiency initiative requiring local authorities to make year-on-year savings.

In particular, Mid Suffolk District Council was keen to explore options for ramping up service delivery. With three-quarters of its 87,000-strong population living in villages of less than 500, some lacking a bus service, seeing council representatives to resolve problems was often difficult. It therefore joined forces with the County Council to carry out a joint assessment, and sought to broaden the process to involve all seven of the Suffolk local authorities.

Business opportunity

Knowing they had to deliver real efficiency savings, the councils seized the opportunity to exploit the latest IT innovations. During 2000/2001, market testing was carried out on the feasibility of making the conventional two-tier system more transparent though the innovative use of technology. A two-year procurement process followed, attracting 149 notes of interest.

BT was granted preferred bidder status and, after completing due diligence, won the ten-year contract, with an optional five-year extension. The object was to transform the County and District Councils' service provision by amalgamating disparate functions in a single joint venture. “The whole perspective of this was: how does the customer want to access our services? It was not an inward-looking case of how we wanted to provide those services to them,” says Andrew Good, Chief Executive of Mid Suffolk District Council

An integrated strategic venture, the Suffolk Technological Partnership, was created by the two councils and BT. Launched in 2004, the partnership examined the technology requirements of seamless service provision through an integrated local government network using walk-in centres, phone lines and a public-facing website. Next came a new company, Customer Service Direct (CSD) Limited – with 600 staff running networked IT services for 27,500 internal customers and 680,000 residents – to deliver against those goals.

Councillor Tim Passmore, Leader of Mid Suffolk District Council, says: “Our predominantly rural district council was faced with making corporate efficiencies to deliver service more effectively. This pioneering partnership between private and public sectors is tailor made to achieve these outcomes.”

BT solution

In June 2004, a BT team of 50 specialists began to shape the business process and technical improvements needed to fulfil the councils' shared vision of integrated services. The BT team's initial focus was on implementing the networked IT services infrastructure to support the councils' service provision ambitions, including a public facing website. The solution was to use the BT metroVPN service, creating a managed regional IP-based virtual private network as the convergence platform for the Suffolk partnership.

BT's partner throughout the project was CGI Group, a Canadian company specialising in information technology and business process services. Twenty-five CGI staff worked on site, managing the cultural shift towards a customer-centric service. Setting up CSD was not simple. By delivering a package of specialist IT skills and access to credible business process change management, BT created a seamless service that would transform public perceptions of customer service.

"Among the companies trying to do business with us, BT was quite unique," Andrew Good comments. "It had the only model of public access that excited us and CGI, its choice of implementation partner, provided the wherewithal in terms of a platform to build upon."

In public access, front-line agents gained access to BT's Contact Central – a powerful eCommunity Relationship Management (eCRM) solution. Contact Central is used to track individual enquiries. It provides a greatly enhanced service, with more than 80 per cent of public queries resolved at first contact compared to 60 per cent previously. In addition, the use of voice over IP (VoIP) on various campuses is providing further integration benefits, and will ultimately result in significant cost savings and service enhancements.

The enhanced version of the public website – launched in March 2005 – allows residents to log queries, complete transactions, or view detailed information or advice on births, council tax, housing and transport. From the agents' side, the website offers prompts and suggestions to progress enquiries without the need for further referrals. Online information can be called up during telephone and face-to-face enquiries, so that all questions are channelled through the

Why BT?

- BT's business case was based on upfront investment and business process change that met the councils' aspirations
- BT provided specialist networking and IT skills, and access to credible business process re-engineering and change management resources
- BT's experience and resources were matched by its financial stability and technological capacity
- BT had a track record as a longstanding supplier to government

same system, with unique reference numbers allocated to each customer query enabling quick retrieval.

A web-enablement tool, gBIZ from CGI, was deployed to act as a real time interface between the agents' computer terminals in the contact centre and back office systems, including key customer databases. This ensured that the web-based capabilities of Contact Central could interact with legacy systems seamlessly – with relatively little software development or associated costs.

While committing itself to a £50 million investment during the ten-year lifetime of the contract, BT has delivered business process re-engineering, change management and training – as well as career development opportunities for council staff through secondments.

Bob Cunningham, CEO of CSD, explains: "BT scores heavily in both financial stability and technological capacity, and has a track record as a longstanding supplier to government. BT brought the best blend of private sector focus, discipline and structure; and public service ethos."

Results

The ten-year partnership between BT, Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council is in its infancy. Yet BT's expertise has already helped make significant gains. While much of the first two years of the joint venture will focus on the drive to change business processes – including the introduction of an Oracle financial management system – there have been some immediate customer benefits.

The customer service centre in Stowmarket – equipped with six face-to-face public station areas, and a 30-seat call centre for telephone and internet enquiries – opened within five months of contracts being signed. It is the first of three facilities opened in Mid Suffolk. Customer satisfaction rates are already in excess of 80 per cent and further efficiencies will be realised in the coming year.

"We would not have been able to meet these timescales without BT," says Bob Cunningham. "BT was able to react quickly and bring both its experience and significant resources into play. It was thanks to BT that the service centre opened so quickly, and the process ran so smoothly."

The partnership has helped both Suffolk County Council and Mid Suffolk District Council to reach the top of local authority efficiency league tables. And in the longer term, BT's financial stability underpins a secure business model, whereby upfront investment in networked IT services could be paid for through process change over time.

Councillor Jeremy Pembroke, Leader of Suffolk County Council, concludes: "The objective of this partnership was to equip our staff with the right tools, so that they could provide an even better level of service. This would not have been possible without BT's financial commitment, systems improvement knowledge, and joined up approach to networking services."

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Technology blueprint

In order to achieve the far-reaching changes required to the way that the councils worked and interacted with their customers, an early focus of BT's involvement was on implementing a networked IT services infrastructure. The BT metroVPN service – creating a managed regional IP-based virtual private network – was selected as the convergence platform for the Suffolk partnership.

Built upon Cisco Systems multi-protocol label switching (MPLS) technology, metroVPN offers Class of Service (CoS) functionality to enable critical voice traffic to share the network with data that does not require such high priority treatment. In fact, voice over IP (VoIP) ‘islands’ have been created, notably in the councils’ headquarters. In addition, using the network, an integrated multi-channel contact centre is integrated with back office systems and processes.

This involved revamping the councils’ existing LAN and WAN services and enabling front-end access to back office operations through the gBIZ web-enabling tool.

These improvements were introduced in conjunction with BT's Contact Central technology, which also utilises the converged metroVPN IP infrastructure. Contact Central is as an end-to-end CRM solution that allows voice calls, faxes and emails to be routed through to agents – with immediate visibility of customer information – in a virtual contact centre. The system enables fine-tuning of routing strategies, and can be fully integrated with existing systems to ensure access from any part of the network. It features Siebel's IP-based enterprise CRM application and connects geographically dispersed resources via the BT metroVPN infrastructure.

Main BT products & services

- Business process re-engineering, change management and training services
- BT's Contact Central CRM solution, featuring Siebel's enterprise CRM application with IP communications technology
- Implementation of Voice over IP and convergence platforms, and development of a transactional public access website



Offices worldwide

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