

# Newark and Sherwood Council cuts costs and boosts efficiency with OPENRevenues

Council moves revenues & benefits customers online with OPENAccess and OPENChannel



## The Challenge

A looming office move and budgetary pressures prompted the revenues & benefits team to seek a paperless solution

Back in 2015, Newark and Sherwood Council's Revenues & Benefits Business Unit was predominantly paper-based. An ongoing resource squeeze meant that the council had to find ways to boost efficiency; moving customer interactions online was an obvious route. An impending move to new premises added impetus to the imperative to go paperless. The council's Business Manager - Revenues & Benefits, Phil Ward, turned to Civica's OPENRevenues product for a solution.

With a paper-based system, council residents were unable to access to their accounts without making a phone call or visiting in person. Making changes to an account, for example to register a new address, required a telephone call, letter or personal visit.

Dealing with those in-person interactions was absorbing substantial council resources. And once the call or visit was over, the staff member would have to create a work order and wait for the back office to update the system. Paper-based billing was also an expensive process for the council, particularly when reminders had to be sent to residents who were in arrears.

With the team struggling to deal with the volume of phone calls, finding a way to reduce that demand without compromising the service to residents was a matter of urgency.

## Pre-implementation:

"The Revenues & Benefits team was taking 5-6,000 calls per month and they were finding it difficult to manage the demand."

## Post implementation:

"The implementation process was painless. We procured a Civica resource for two days, which gave us extra confidence, and then it was done. They are a really good partner to work with and the people who come in are familiar faces. Consistency of personnel means you're not starting from scratch every time."

**Phil Ward, Business Manager -  
Revenues & Benefits**  
Newark and Sherwood District Council

## The Solution

**Customer self-service and e-billing at the heart of the online solution**

The OPENRevenues solution that Newark & Sherwood adopted has two elements.

OPENAccess provides a 'citizen portal' allowing customers to see their account information and also includes an e-billing module. OPENAccess went live in August 2015, giving residents 24/7 online access to their accounts. E-billing was implemented shortly afterwards, eliminating the need for paper bills.

## Benefits

- ▶ **Shifting customers to the online channel minimises manual intervention and reduces cost**
- ▶ **Frees up staff resources**
- ▶ **Cuts training time and cost**
- ▶ **Improves service and convenience for residents**

## The Solution continued

A few months later, OPENChannel was introduced to facilitate customer self-service. Using a series of simple e-forms, customers can amend their account details – registering a change of address, for example. The council's database is automatically updated, eliminating the need for manual intervention by revenues & benefits staff.

OPENChannel has been introduced in phases. The first covers the highest volume activities such as change of address and Council Tax Single Person Discount claims. Phase 2 includes council tax refund requests and changes in methods of payment.

The use of OPENChannel forms has risen sharply since their introduction in January 2016, when forms were used 76 times per month. By June, monthly usage had risen to 500 and Phil expects that to hit 1,000 by year-end.

And efficiencies have been realised even where residents still choose to contact the business unit by phone since staff can make amendments to records using the same e-forms. Again, this is a much less resource-intensive system than the old paper-based model.

The e-billing take-up has also risen steadily. On housing benefit, for example all major landlords (more than 3,000 benefit claims) are now receiving their monthly benefit payment schedules in electronic form.

### OPENChannel is already delivering substantial cost and service benefits

Increased customer usage of the self-serve portal has started to bear fruit. As Phil says: "Every time we use an online form we probably save 10 minutes on the process. Now we're up to about 500 forms a month, a saving of 83 hours. And that's without any public marketing campaign for the service. We should be able to double that within the next 12 months."

And that translates into increased staff capacity, meaning that Phil might not have to replace a staff member who leaves or, alternatively allowing him to redeploy people to other areas. As he says, "Even now – before it's at its full potential – we must be looking at a saving of 1fte with potential for 2fte."

**"I'm a big Civica fan and wouldn't hesitate to recommend them to colleagues in other councils. They have good people working for them who know what they are talking about."**

**Phil Ward, Business Manager - Revenues & Benefits**  
Newark and Sherwood District Council

There are also cost and time savings on staff training since there is no longer any need to know how to update the core revenues & benefits system since the e-forms automatically update the back office – this is especially valuable in the customer services business unit. Phil says; "We're pushing as many customer service queries as possible to the front office. They don't need to know the back-end stuff, which cuts out that training requirement and gives a consistency of service."

The impact on customer service has also been positive. Response time for the customers using self-serve has improved as back office systems are updated immediately. It's more convenient for customers as they can view and update their accounts at any time through OPENAccess. And, of course, there's no need to spend time phoning in or travelling to the office. As Phil says, "More self-serve options have a positive impact on the customers."

Finally, the introduction of e-billing has also reduced costs, especially with the integration of SMS reminders to prompt residents on imminent payment dates. That has cut the need for reminders to be sent to tardy payers.

### Plenty of potential for further shift to online channels

The implementation of Phase 2 and the introduction of Phase 3 – incorporating the rules on rescheduled payment arrangements into an e-form – will mean that everything that can be automated will be covered. At that point, the usage of online forms will increase further, with all the accompanying benefits in terms of time and cost.