

case study

1st Touch technology sets Powys County Council on the path to enterprise mobile solution rollout.

The challenge

Powys County Council is responsible for an extensive, largely upland and extremely rural county covering 2000 square miles - about a quarter of the area of Wales. With only one person in every 10 acres (4 hectares) it is one of the most sparsely populated local Authority areas in England and Wales.

As a Unitary Authority the Council manages all the local government services in the county, including education, social care services, roads and bridges, leisure services, tourism and planning. Within its remit are local Authority and private housing, over 120 schools, 12 community sports centres, five leisure centres, libraries and civic buildings.

The Council employs around 8,000 staff working in many locations across the county in a wide variety of roles, from refuse collector to social worker, from teacher to highway engineer.

With such a large geographical area to cover, Powys was early to realise that reducing the need to visit the office regularly would save time and costs for mobile operatives.

The Council introduced a mobile technology solution for the 50 operatives who provide maintenance and repairs to public buildings, but it was not perfect. In particular, coverage in difficult areas such as basements was poor.

Replacing the existing system for better performance opened up new potential, as Powys System Administrator John Jones explains: "We wanted to use the opportunity to introduce greater flexibility into the solution so that we could bring on board everyone in the Authority, without the overhead of managing multiple systems"

The solution

Powys was already using a back-end job costing system from ROCC, and was interested to hear that ROCC already had a working relationship with electronic forms specialist 1st Touch that had seen the two companies integrate their technologies to deliver complete mobile solutions. This led Powys to take a



closer look at how 1st Touch Mobile could be used to drive jobs and the flow of information to and from operatives and the back office.

The overriding advantage that 1st Touch offered was flexibility, says Jones. "Business changes fast and we wanted to be able to change forms and develop new solutions for a growing number of users ourselves." The working relationship between 1st Touch and ROCC has also been a factor: "As far as I was concerned I was working with two companies who were providing one solution," says Jones. Learning from 1st Touch, Powys developed forms that reflected the familiar paper-based systems that operatives had been using.

As Jones explains, each job requires a different set of forms , and the forms that are needed in each job will differ as well.
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Powys System Administrator John Jones

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continued... A single job could involve up to 30 forms being loaded onto the PDA, with operatives being taken down through the forms according to answers that they provides along the way.

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An added bonus, and now a distinct benefit, is that with 1st Touch Mobile managers can access all the maintenance and service information relevant to their role through web based portals."

The benefits

Time savings and greater availability of information are the outstanding benefits of the mobile solution, together with its potential for application right across the Council organisation.

In the first phase of the project, the early mobile system was replaced for the 50 operatives providing repair and maintenance services to public and civic buildings. In the second phase, this was extended to another 50 operatives working on housing.

The mobile solution covers all the tasks that the operatives need to undertake, from receiving job details through van checks, imprest stores used and bought-in parts, to schedules of rates for each completed job. Working electronically saves time in office visits and paper form filling. It also speeds up processes when further action is required.

John Jones gives an example: "An operator might be due to fix some guttering, perhaps on a school. Using the forms on the PDA the operative can carry out a risk assessment before starting work. If the assessment fails, that gets reported straight back into our back-office system, which will alert the manager to the fact that action needs to be taken. Previously the manager would have no idea that there was a problem until it was reported by the operative later."

In the latest phase of implementation, Powys has taken the first steps to rolling out mobile solutions beyond buildings maintenance and repairs to applications across the Authority.

"Legionella tests are a completely different ball game, involving tasks such as taking various temperatures at leisure centres," reports Jones. There are very specific tests that need to be carried out, some of which are statutory.

Guidance and reporting on testing have all been transferred onto the PDA in the shape of forms, ensuring all required tests are correctly carried out and properly reported. The same process has been applied to boiler maintenance, ensuring that annual tests and servicing are fully carried out and reported.

The benefits of the solution extend beyond more efficient working for operatives. It is also delivering better information to managers, enabling them to make more informed decisions, faster. Jones explains how: "1st Touch provides us with portal technology that means we can provide a browser-based window on the information we hold in our databases. So a leisure centre manager can, for the first time, easily find out what maintenance has been carried out in the last few years, when waste is collected, and, say, the results of the latest legionella testing."

The portals provide controlled views for each user, providing only the information that is relevant to their role. What information and how it is provided is driven by a working group of users, such as head teachers. Not only is this invaluable to managers, but it is a truly low-cost solution. "Users don't need to learn any skills to use the portal," explains Jones.

"The portal is a major development for us," comment Jones. "It's a big winner for us internally, giving the mobile solution a high profile across the Authority." At present the portal is widely used internally, and as Jones suggests, it could even be rolled out to external users, such as tenants, to give them a view of their service and maintenance history.

Future developments

Now the Authority is looking at other applications that would benefit from 1st Touch Mobile technology, across the county. Collection of clinical waste is on the plan, ensuring operatives know when and where they need to collect waste and how to manage it securely.

Another possibility is the reporting and management of road traffic accidents. Currently incidents are reported by phone to a helpdesk which then has to contact the necessary individuals to take actions. 1st Touch Mobile could send out automatic alerts, not just within the highways department, but across the Authority, right down to alerting gritters if the incident was caused by icy conditions.

John Jones is enthusiastic about the potential of a mobile solution for every department of the Council. "We have achieved a great deal already, but we don't intend to stop. We bought this product so that we could keep moving, not stand still."