



TOPLEVEL'S SPEED AND FLEXIBILITY HELPS DELIVER MERGER SUCCESS AT BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCILS



Hitting the ground running on Vesting Day is the key objective for any newly formed council. When you have just 12 months to go from a standing start to getting all the processes and systems in place needed to run the new council, you need solutions that work with you and not against you. That's why the councils coming together to form a new unitary authority, Central Bedfordshire Council, chose Toplevel's Office Forms as a key component in the new council's IT strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

Serving a population of 250,000 and managing a budget of £135 million, the new authority will have responsibility for delivering all the services formerly provided by South Bedfordshire and Mid Bedfordshire District Councils, along with services previously provided by Bedfordshire County Council to residents in the two Districts.

"The only way to handle the change has been to create an entirely new infrastructure, because to merge them would have been impossible within that timeframe", explains Rob Wood, ICT lead for Central Bedfordshire Council.



"In some cases, we're taking the best of each of the existing systems used in each of the councils and rolling it out to staff formerly with the other councils, and in other cases we're buying entirely new solutions."

WHY TOPLEVEL

A key requirement is to be able to launch a new website for Central Bedfordshire Council on 1st April 2009 which can deliver a full range of online services to citizens.

"All three councils involved in the merger previously used the same product to create online forms", explains Rob Wood, "but our experiences with the vendor and the product meant we didn't feel it was a suitable foundation on which to move forward."

"It wasn't easy to develop in, lacked some of the features we wanted to use, and every upgrade seemed to create more problems than it solved.

While it would have been cheaper in the short-term to continue using it, we were able to make a case that throwing it away and starting again would be more cost-effective and better for the new council over the long term."



SUCCESS

After a rigorous selection process, the merger team chose Toplevel's OfficeForms. "Toplevel allows us to develop new forms quickly and easily, create secure forms that allow citizens to share sensitive information with confidence, and implement both simple forms that email content to the relevant council staff and complex forms that are tightly integrated with our back-office applications," Rob Wood points out. "OfficeForms is based on a sound architecture that we're confident will scale well to handle growing volumes of online transactions by citizens, and Toplevel itself has a very good industry reputation."

Toplevel worked closely with the merger team to negotiate a commercial deal that allowed them to justify the cost of buying licences for a new solution rather than sticking with an existing product.

"That's just one of the ways in which Toplevel has impressed us with its can-do attitude and flexibility," Rob Wood says.

OfficeForms was installed in the second week of January, and Central Bedfordshire Council confidently expects to be able to replicate all the forms supported by the three merging councils' previous systems by Vesting Day on 1st April.

"We're going to be able to go from installation through development to going live in under three months with around 200 forms, with the majority of the development handled by just one person," says Rob Wood.



INTEGRATION BENEFITS

He expects the merged council to eventually use Toplevel to support a total of 350 forms. The lion's share of the forms implemented so far simply capture data online for manual processing in the back-office. However, the authority plans to use Toplevel to provide closer integration with back-office systems, in order to deliver cost savings and improved service to citizens.

"While integration was possible with the previous product we used, it wasn't as flexible as Office-Forms," Rob Wood says. "As we move on from the merger into transforming services and installing a CRM system, the old product would have been something we would have been fighting against. By contrast, Office Forms works with us, and will allow us to deliver more benefits more quickly over the next two years, on a more reliable and stable platform."

Toplevel will support a total of **350 forms**

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