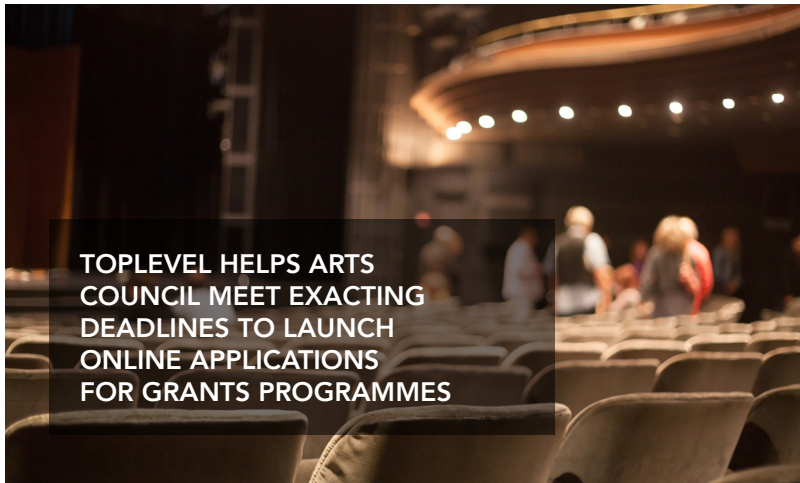


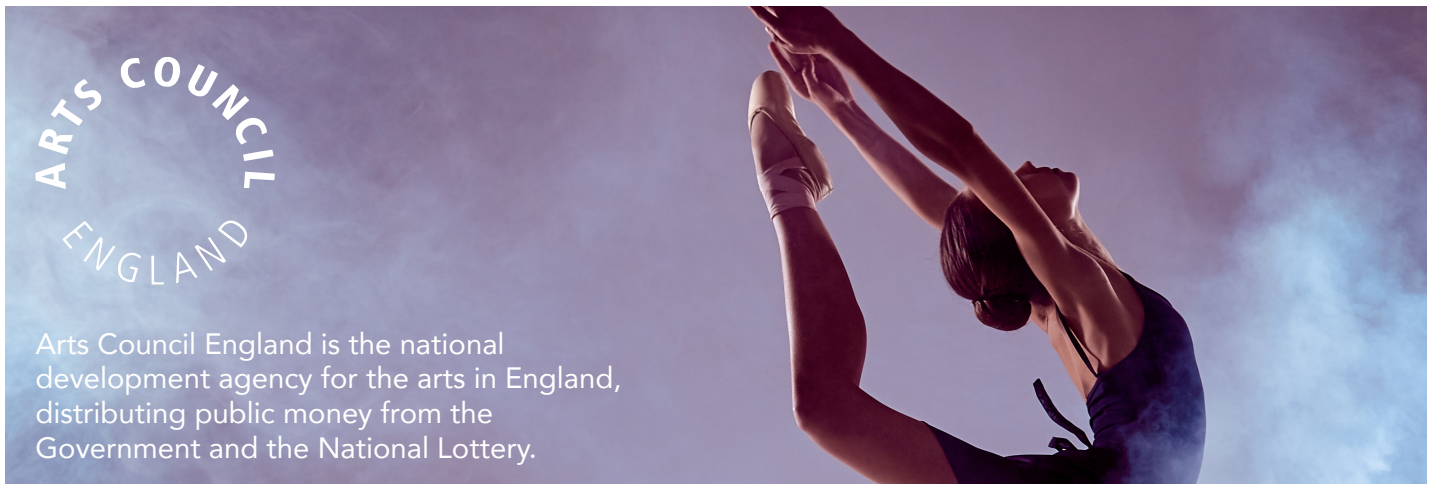
## CASE STUDY

### ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

# ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND GOES ONLINE WITH TOPLEVEL



In March 2010, Toplevel's flexible solution enabled Arts Council England (ACE) to move online a rolling application programme that must be available year round with minimal disruption to applicants. In November 2010, ACE was able to use the Toplevel solution to implement a completely new programme in just four weeks, ensuring an online application process was ready for the high-profile public launch of the new scheme.



ACE supports a range of artistic activities including theatre, music, literature, dance, photography, digital art, carnivals and crafts.

ACE provides three core strands of funding: support for organisations under the new National Portfolio funding programme; funding of projects through the Grants for the arts (GFTA) programme; and strategic funding in areas such as development.

### THE REQUIREMENT

Grants for the arts is an open-application funding programme, which funds arts activities that engage people in England, or that help artists and arts organisations carry out their work. Using Toplevel's solution, ACE has implemented two online services that allow organisations applying for either GFTA or National Portfolio funding to submit their applications online. The GFTA portal was the first to go live, in March 2010, prompted in part by ACE's need to respond to e-government agenda and requirements that ACE cut its administration costs, but also by the desire to improve the experience for applicants.

"GFTA applications were an ideal candidate for online delivery because GFTA has a well-defined process for determining eligibility and assessment of projects that lends itself to automation," explains Steve Buckley, Director of ACE's business systems team.

"As well as improving the experience for applicants, creating an online portal helped us centralise our team of regionally-based assessors into a single office in Manchester, allowing us to cut the cost of processing GFTA applications."

## WHY TOPLEVEL

ACE talked to a range of other grant-awarding organisations to gain a clear idea of what it wanted from an online application form before going out to tender and choosing Toplevel as its implementation partner.

“We were looking for a tool that could be extended to other application processes as well meeting our immediate needs for GFTA,” Buckley explains.

“However, we didn’t want to break new ground or implement an entirely bespoke solution. Toplevel had a proven solution already in use by the Heritage Lottery Fund and NESTA that specifically deals with grant application forms but is flexible enough that it can be used to implement online applications for numerous funding programmes.

The Toplevel solution allows ACE to design the wording and appearance of forms and then pass these designs, along with details of the business rules that control how users progress through the forms, to Toplevel to implement. In the case of GFTA, the business logic to be implemented in the portal consisted of a three hundred page manual describing the GFTA process.

As part of the project, Toplevel integrated the application forms with ACE’s grant processing system, Arena, allowing Arena to be automatically populated with information captured in the Toplevel portal. Toplevel also worked closely with consultants engaged by ACE to provide external validation of the usability and accessibility of the portal.

“We’ve been very pleased with the way Toplevel has related to all the internal and external stakeholders throughout the project” Buckley says.

In addition, Toplevel met ACE’s exacting deadlines for the portal to go live. “Because GFTA is a rolling programme, we needed to ensure minimum disruption to the organisations applying to us for grants when we moved from paper applications to the online portal” Buckley points out. “We had to close down applications for six weeks, and it was very important to us and the Arts sector that we reopened the programme when we said we would. Toplevel worked with us to ensure that the solution was delivered on time and that the date was met.

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STEVE BUCKLEY, ACE DIRECTOR



## BENEFITS

ACE estimates that in the first year of moving applications online using the Toplevel solution, it will receive over 8,000 applications, significantly more than the number received in previous years. Buckley attributes this growth to the way the Toplevel portal makes it simpler and easier for people to apply. “Having a pre-application questionnaire that guides people through determining if their project is eligible has improved the quality of the applications we receive,” he explains. “On top of that, if projects aren’t eligible for GFTA, the portal allows us to refer to advice on programmes from other funding bodies that may be more suitable.”

The online portal also helps ACE’s enquiries team provide better support to applicants over the telephone as they work through the application process.

“Our team can access forms to see what applicants have done so far and exactly where they’ve got stuck and need advice,” Buckley explains. “That means applicants can get their queries resolved much more quickly, because they no longer have to arrange a face-to-face appointment with one of our people to go through the paper form.”

Finally, the Toplevel portal has helped ACE meet its goal of cutting admin costs.

“We’ve been able to reduce the size of the team processing applications and shifted their focus away from pure data entry,” Buckley explains.

“As well as reducing costs due to having fewer staff overall, we’ve been able to improve the quality and consistency of the application, assessment and decision-making process.”

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STEVE BUCKLEY, ACE DIRECTOR



## MEETING TIGHT TIMESCALES

While the GFTA portal has proved highly successful in its own right, ACE's choice of Toplevel was further justified when ACE needed to develop a second online service for the National Portfolio funding programme for organisations. This new programme aims to provide a more transparent and open application process for organisations previously in receipt of regular funding, who have historically received the largest share of ACE's grants, amounting to around £350 million annually.

"By allowing us to design the forms ourselves and then pass them to Toplevel to implement, we were able to respond very quickly to the National Portfolio requirements and get the application form online to meet the tight deadline of just a couple of weeks," Buckley explains.

"While Toplevel were equally committed to meeting that tight deadline on their side, it was proof of the pudding of our choice of a long-term tool rather than simply a tool that met our needs for the GFTA programme. It's given us a lot of confidence that we can use the Toplevel solution to respond to other requirements resulting from both ACE's own development as an organisation and wider developments in the arts sector."

ACE is now looking at using Toplevel to develop grant application solutions for its other funding programmes, and at moving more of its assessment and award monitoring processes into online solutions powered by Toplevel.


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STEVE BUCKLEY, ACE DIRECTOR

## TOPLEVEL – Secure online case management

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