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power to you



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Southend-on-Sea Borough Council is responsible for providing services including housing, roads and social care for a population of around 160,000 in the Essex town. The Council has a total annual budget of around £500 million, and employs more than 5,000 people.

Since being established as a unitary authority in 1998, the Council has substantially improved its IT and communications infrastructure. One area where it decided to invest was in mobile working. By replacing its existing PBX the Council aimed to reduce costs, increase staff productivity and improve its responsiveness, as well as achieve greater flexibility.

The Council put together a request for quotations and used this to shortlist suppliers. After visiting reference sites, Southend selected Vodafone.

“From the companies that pitched for the business, we chose Vodafone due to its proposed Unified Communications solution, which was far superior to the other companies’ – yet still within our budget,” says Laurence Cops, Group Manager ICT at Southend-on-Sea Borough Council.

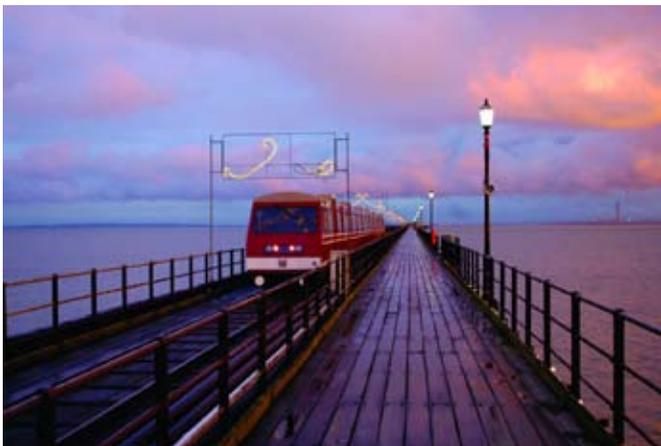
Flexible working

Vodafone provided a converged solution based around hardware from Avaya, which delivers unified communications including fixed and mobile calls and data, as well as Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) capabilities for Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls.

Avaya’s one-X® Communicator provides ‘presence’ features, so that the Council’s staff can easily see when their colleagues are online and available to be contacted. This is complemented by Microsoft Office Communications Server (MS OCS) which provides instant messaging, video conferencing and sharing of desktops and documents.

“Staff can see if someone’s busy so they don’t call unnecessarily, and with ‘click to call’ if they receive an email from someone they can just click on it to dial, rather than going to the internal phone directory,” says Laurence. “These features all save time, thus improving productivity.

“The Vodafone solution has enabled us to provide mobile working capabilities for our staff. They are very keen on flexible working, and currently 60% of our people are hot desking,” says Laurence. “We have also built the capabilities into our contact centre, so that agents can work from home, increasing efficiency, reducing travel time and improving customer responsiveness.”



Staff working remotely can connect to the back office systems via Citrix to access their files, as well as using 3G datacards or mobile devices for internet connectivity. The converged solution allows them to redirect their incoming phone calls to any location, and their outgoing calls are routed through the Council's switch. "This means there are no call costs for someone working remotely or from their home, which saves money and simplifies expenses claims," says Laurence.

The Council aims to have 30% of its staff working remotely at any given time, which has enabled them to add new capabilities and complete more transactions in the field, helping them to better serve the area's residents. "For example, we have street scene officers that are able to work more efficiently, as mobile working means that there's less paperwork," explains Laurence.

"Our revenue and benefits team hold workshops in libraries, using a laptop with a 3G card connecting back into the system. This means that people can update their records locally rather than having to travel into the centre of Southend."

Green benefits

The Council takes green initiatives seriously, and flexible working has been a significant help in enabling it to work towards its 'Carbon Management Plan' targets to reduce its emissions.

The Council was a finalist in the category for sustainable, green IT or carbon-efficient services at the e-Government National Awards. Mobile working was a major factor in the Council's ICT strategy being recognised as "highly commended."

"People no longer have to drive into work as they can work from home or any location, substantially reducing travel and emissions, as well as improving productivity due to time savings," says Laurence. "We encourage staff to use video conferencing, so they don't need to come into the office to attend meetings."

The converged network has also led to efficiencies within the Council's infrastructure, as Laurence comments: "The IP telephony solution, has allowed us to reduce our number of servers, so cutting our electricity consumption."

The Vodafone solution has enabled the Council to move from a traditional work arrangement where each person has their own desk, to a more flexible mix of home-based working and shared hot desks, reducing the amount of office space required.

"The ratio has gone down from 10 desks for 10 people, to 7 desks for 10 people, enabling us to close three offices," says Laurence. This has saved the Council money in rent as well as enabling it to sell one building, and has reduced the cost and carbon emissions of running its offices.

Cost savings

"We estimate that the Vodafone solution has delivered £500,000 to £1 million a year cost savings which are mainly due to the benefits of hot desking and home working— that's before we take into account savings on call charges due to SIP trunking," says Laurence.

"SIP savings should reduce call charges overall by 50%, which is at least another £100,000 per year, particularly as our outgoing calls are increasingly to mobiles – SIP trunking will cut these costs by a factor of six."

The Council's previous telecoms switch was expensive to maintain, costing more than £100,000 each year. The new solution can be managed by the Council's own staff using a web browser interface, instead of requiring expensive third-party contractors, as Laurence comments: "With the Vodafone solution, we can do all the moves and changes ourselves, and we're now only spending about half what we were on maintenance."

VoIP means that the Council now has just one network, rather than separate networks for voice and data. This is simpler to manage and saves money when it refurbishes buildings.

Future plans

With its Unified Communications solution in place, Southend can now deliver telephony services to other nearby councils, which will provide a valuable source of revenue in a time of spending restrictions in local government.

"Five councils in Essex are interested in us providing telephony for them, and by aggregating spending and maintenance, we can achieve substantial cost savings," says Laurence. "Other councils may not have the capital to invest in new technology but they do need to improve their telecoms, and sharing our service can help."

The Council is also planning to implement Vodafone One. A Unified Communications solution which will provide further capabilities, including enabling staff to log in and out of any fixed or mobile phone with a PIN code, with just one number for both fixed and mobile calls and a single voicemail account.

Significant benefits

- Lower carbon emissions due to reduced business travel and decrease in power consumption with fewer servers required
- Overall cost savings of £500,000 to £1 million per year
- Call costs halved due to SIP trunking
- Improved staff productivity due to flexible working and features such as presence and 'click to call'

