

ALPHALAW-*ClaimIT* HELPS WORCESTERSHIRE CLEAR ITS DEBTS



It may seem obvious, but an IT system should work for you. Worcestershire County Council knew it had a problem when staff found themselves working around their existing debt recovery system. It hardly helped that it was crashing up to six times a day, and so the Council decided it was time for a fresh start with a system that assisted the debt collection process, not hindered it.



Seeking greater simplification and efficiency

More than 550,000 people live in Worcestershire. The Council has achieved the top four-star

rating in the last two assessments carried out by the Audit Commission, was previously rated as 'excellent' under the old system, and also received top marks for 'value for money'. It has a budget of £271 million, of which £195 million comes from council tax, £71 million from central government and £5 million from reserves. Collecting debts quickly and efficiently is vital for local

authorities, for whom money can be tight and the call on their services great.

The catalyst for change came from a Council-wide move to run all software through Windows XP. Worcestershire's existing debt collection software ran on Windows NT

and was incompatible with XP, while the provider had no plans to upgrade it. In any case, the system was a decade old by this point and caused a host of problems: as well as the frequent

crashes, many debts would fall off the flowpath, while a lack of flexibility meant staff could not manage debts individually to allow for different circumstances.

Debbie Tredinnick, Debt Recovery Officer at Worcestershire County Council, had further concerns: *"Our old system was too generic; it did not help some support staff understand court and debt-related issues, while the reports generated were not debt specific. That was assuming they could be generated in the first place – the report builder facility was extremely tough to understand and use, while many reports were not available at all, and those that were had little value. This is particularly important in a public sector context, where a council needs to disseminate information."*

The court documentation was supplied by a separate company, which further complicated the situation.

As often happens, however, from these issues came a clear picture of what was needed from a new system – not least that it had to be a dedicated debt recovery package, rather than a generic case management system with a debt add-on. It had to be flexible enough to allow staff to handle debts manually and take into account individual circumstances. Debbie continues: “Reports had to be both available at the click of a mouse and easy to understand, highlighting issues such as monies recovered between specific periods, court fees spent and recovered, and so on. The supplier had to take responsibility for the whole package. We also really wanted a strong support team.”

Finding the right partner

The Council began its search for a new provider with a simple internet search. AlphaLaw’s website impressed, as did the Company’s representatives when brought in to pitch against other suppliers. “It was a very approachable and friendly presentation,” recounts Debbie. “No question from us was too easy or, dare I say it, too stupid!”

“At a follow-up meeting, AlphaLaw arranged for our staff to visit an existing customer on site to see ClaimIT in operation and talk openly to the users. This was invaluable in helping us decide to contract with AlphaLaw.” Even more to the point, ClaimIT simply offered the range of functions that a

busy Council debt collection team requires, whether letter production, auto-action operation or reporting, both by email and online – which is particularly important when several departments have an interest in the team’s output.

Debbie was very happy with the implementation: “As soon as we went live with ClaimIT, it was plain sailing. To be fair, ClaimIT is so easy to use – taking the user step-by-step through the recovery process from a letter before action to enforcement of a judgment.”

The team also benefited from a day-long training session to familiarise themselves with the software.

Delivering results

Employing a system that is actually user-friendly “makes my job a whole lot easier”, says Debbie. “The number of reports we are now able to produce is a huge benefit to us and other client directorates. The speed with which staff can create a new debt on ClaimIT has improved efficiency and costs considerably.”

Users of ClaimIT have reported that the formalised nature of the documentation it produces – making it clear to recipients that the recovery process is a serious one – mean that 70% or more of debts are recovered during the initial stages without resorting to court proceedings.

Debbie is pleased that debts can no longer disappear from view.

“ClaimIT monitors debt payments, whether they are in full or instalments, until the action is fully completed, meaning that no debt, however big or small, slips off the radar. ClaimIT also has the capacity to handle any number of debts – there are no limitations, which is important when you have an operation of our size.”

Strong working ties

Debbie adds that the debt team has developed a strong working relationship with AlphaLaw. “We have absolutely no problem getting through to the helpdesk, and the staff there are professional and friendly – they never make me feel stupid even if the problem is one I created myself. Importantly, if they are unable to answer a query there and then, they always come back to me as quickly as possible. I should stress that point – it really is always. And they are more than open to our suggestions as to possible improvements, and will act on them if appropriate.”

Debbie concludes: “AlphaLaw have delivered improvements as promised and we now have in place a great framework for future use.”

