

New Forest District Council adapts to sector change with Unit4's Local Government ERP Platform

Geographically New Forest District Council (NFDC) is one of the largest District Councils in the UK with 80,000 homes and over 200,000 people in its catchment area. Employing 1,400 staff the Council still maintains its own housing stock of about 5,000 properties and operates five Health and Leisure centers. The region also incorporates a national park authority.

In common with local councils across the UK, it continues to face the challenge of an entirely new landscape where public services must be delivered despite huge cuts in funding. Adding to the complexity are its diverse and heavily regulated operations spread across multiple sites.

In order to adapt it needed fast, accurate reporting and greater efficiency; key to this was a joined-up approach to finance, procurement, human resources (HR), payroll and project costing.

Back in 2000 this would have been impossible because the Council used multiple, generally unconnected systems to manage operations. This was expensive to maintain and difficult to change; what's more, Councillors, Executives and budget-holders could not be sure of the accuracy of the reported data. All-in-all the situation compromised the Council's ability to adapt to the dynamic environment in which it was required to operate.

Struggling to understand finances

"Back then there were multiple problems that meant the Council was not as efficient as it could be," said Ken Connolly, Head of ICT Services at NFDC. "Often processes were completely over-engineered which lead to the extra cost of dedicating resources to maintain and change unnecessarily elongated business processes or operate manual systems."

Data held in the HR, payroll and general ledger systems didn't tally, and there was a limited capacity to collate and manage absence related data. Project-based teams often struggled to understand finances. Officers with budget responsibility resorted to spreadsheets to record and manipulate financial data.

"In significant areas of the Council a lack of joined up financial systems from a variety of suppliers meant we were impeded in our aspiration for timely and accurate financial information," said Ken Connolly, Head of ICT Services at NFDC. "With this lack of simple visibility it was almost impossible for council leaders to adapt to the challenges we would be facing."

The organization began to look for an enterprise technology platform capable of providing a single version of truth across its operations. NFDC's key objectives were increased speed and accuracy of reporting, agility in coping with change, systems integration and rationalization. After a thorough tender process NFDC's financial systems project team selected the Unit4's Local Government ERP Platform.

"We chose the system based on its flexibility and depth. Unit4 also presented with sincerity and product knowledge," continued Connolly. "We could see that we would be able to make changes to the system, when we needed to, without having to contract expensive external consultants."

"NFDC initially implemented Unit4 Business World Financials, Projects and Purchase Order Processing, HR, Recruitment, Payroll and Training administration. Most recently we have added Accounts Receivable (Income Manager) to the portfolio. Throughout the implementation the Unit4 team provided advice and guidance to NFDC's internal team on the use of the Unit4



software. This meant that the knowledge to configure and maintain the platform was passed to NFDC so it had the skills to manage and configure the system on an on-going basis once 'go live' was achieved."

A single version of the truth

"The UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010 introduced a raft of funding cuts including an annual fall in budgets of 7.2 percent. Without the flexibility and tight integration of Unit4's Local Government ERP Platform, and the visibility and control it provided, we would have really struggled to maintain services with reduced budgets." said Connolly.

NFDC now has in place a fully integrated technology Platform that provides visibility of the whole organization at one glance with which decisions can be made based on using a single version of truth. It is able to meet requests for high quality management information from department heads and managers which is used to reduce costs and drive up efficiencies e.g. in managing down sickness absences year-on year.

"From the day the Platform was switched on the most memorable difference in the way we operated was that we had the tools to clearly understand our business and budget situation and then adapt rapidly," continued Connolly. "This has underpinned the Council's ability to

align its strategy to the unprecedented sector change with minimum disruption."

"The management of people is subject to continual changes in legislation," said Connolly. "In that respect the rationalization of legacy systems and integration of HR, payroll and the general ledger underpins considerable organizational flexibility. We can make changes once, rather than multiple times with little or no disruption to the business. It has also driven considerable labour and ICT cost savings and improved the speed and integrity of our Payroll."

There are improvements across the organization, Unit4's Project Costing and Billing is enabling the authority's Building Management department to make savings. Automation, including electronic procurement, has also provided a cost saving and the creation of a 'local' marketplace for Hampshire-based public sector organizations has helped to lower the cost of purchase and led to cost-saving collaborative contracts.

"By rationalizing our systems on to a single integrated Platform," said Connolly, "we have achieved our main objectives to meet efficiency challenges, increase the speed and accuracy of reporting and improve the Council's ability to cope with change. With the support of Unit4 and hard work of our internal teams the project has been a great success."

About Unit4

Unit4 is a leading provider of enterprise applications empowering people in service organizations. With annual revenue north of 500M Euro and more than 4000 employees world-wide, Unit4 delivers ERP, industry-focused and best-in-class applications. Thousands of organizations from sectors including professional services, education, public services, not-for-profit, real estate, wholesale, and financial services benefit from Unit4 solutions. Unit4 is in business for people.

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