CIVICA

A more efficient housing benefit service at Luton Borough Council

Luton

Civica OnDemand helps Luton quickly clear a processing backlog and align assessment times with national averages.

Initial challenge: clear a backlog of 4,000 assessments

Vacancies in Luton Borough Council's housing benefit team had led to an assessment backlog of some 4,000 new claims and notifications of changed circumstances. One of the factors making it difficult to recruit new permanent staff was the approaching rollout of Universal Credit.

"We realised that even if we managed to recruit new people, we would probably have to make them redundant when Universal Credit was launched," says Clive Jones, Revenues and Benefits Manager at Luton. "We knew there had to be a better way of clearing the backlog and getting our service levels back to normal."

Jones's analysis of the situation showed it would be more cost-effective to employ contractors to clear the backlog. "Otherwise, we would have spent more money on customer services, and housing benefit assessments for vulnerable people would still have been delayed," he says.

Outcomes

▶ **Backlog of 4,000 housing benefit work items cleared within 12 weeks**

▶ **Capacity freed up to deliver broader improvements, including increased automation and customer self-service, and additional training for Luton staff**

▶ **Processing times for new housing benefit claims and changes of circumstances halved to reach national averages**

▶ **Ongoing resilience with access to a team of skilled housing benefit specialists that can quickly flex to meet changing needs**

▶ **Trust in the Civica OnDemand team to handle discretionary housing payment claims**

▶ **Winner of the IRRV 'Most Improved Team of the Year' award.**

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>
> **Clive Jones,** Revenues and Benefits Manager, Luton Borough Council

Backlog removed within **12 weeks**

Quicker **processing times**

Increased **automation**

Civica OnDemand cleared the backlog of 4,000 housing benefit items within 12 weeks, giving Luton Borough Council the capacity it needed to deliver other critical aspects of its improvement plan.

A wide-ranging service improvement plan

Jones proposed an improvement plan to clear the backlog and enhance service delivery over the longer term. Alongside employing contractors to process the 4,000 outstanding items, the plan included structural changes in service management, more automation and online self-service, and additional training to increase proficiency among the in-house team.

The council went out to tender for contract staff, and selected Civica. Jones explains why: "Civica offered the best value overall. The offer was robust and assured, and promised to clear the backlog faster than other providers we considered."

With the permission of the council's corporate procurement team, Jones procured the OnDemand service under an existing 10-year IT support contract with Civica. That meant he could start clearing the backlog even faster, as he wasn't subject to a lengthy procurement process. As soon as the Civica OnDemand team were on board, they got to work.

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Backlog cleared, further efficiencies delivered

The Civica OnDemand team cleared the backlog within the promised 12 weeks. "It was such a relief, frankly," says Jones. "Working with Civica OnDemand also gave us the capacity we needed to deliver other aspects of our improvement plan."

Luton decided to retain the OnDemand resource to prevent a new backlog building up, and help it deliver further efficiencies. At any time, between four and seven OnDemand staff support the Luton team. Jones can vary the staffing numbers in line with workload by giving as little as a week's notice.

There's no difference in the way Jones allocates work to his own team and the Civica OnDemand team. Like 80% of the Luton team, the OnDemand staff work remotely, over secure network connections, so the council didn't have to provide desks and equipment.

"The OnDemand service just runs, and we can rely on the Civica personnel to make the right decisions," says Jones. "They're so skilled and experienced, we even trust them to carry out discretionary housing payment assessments."

Service improvement garners recognition

Luton's housing benefit team processes around 110,000 items a year. Before implementing the improvement plan, it took 44 days to process a new housing benefit claim, and 18 for a change in circumstances. Now, a new claim takes 20.6 days (just over the national average of 20), and a change takes 8.9 (just under the national average of 9).

"Luton is an ethnically mixed, fairly deprived area, so cutting our processing times in half and virtually matching the national averages is an amazing achievement," says Jones. "We couldn't have done it without the support of Civica OnDemand."

Luton's success was recognised by the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV), when it won its 2017 'Most Improved Team of the Year' performance award.

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to clear a 4,000 item backlog

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