

Going mobile

A business case for mobile working in local authorities



The potential benefits gained from mobile working are worth up to £336 million per year*. This paper will demonstrate the business case for going mobile.

(*Source: Project Nomad)

Local authorities face an unenviable situation; sources of income have dropped dramatically at a time when more people than ever need costly council services.

"At this time of repossessions and redundancies, even more people need the vital support that only councils can provide. They are helping to keep people in their homes, offering support to the unemployed and helping small businesses stay afloat."

CLlr Margaret Eaton,
Chairman Local Government Association

Whereas previously savings of 3% per year were required, the expectation for the coming years will prove to be far harsher. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has predicted that we would experience 'the biggest sustained tightening since the Second World War' and the Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, has announced a total of £1.166 billion reductions in grants to local government.

Coupled with this is the probability of reduced income from investment projects, planning applications, council tax and the like, which have been a by-product of the recession.

The only way to move forward will be to make radical savings.

Something has got to give.

The savings dilemma

When looking to generate significant savings, local authorities must examine every process in the organisation to identify where cuts can be made. But in doing so, there is a need to protect frontline services – those that customers rely on the most.

According to Project Nomad – a national project which examined the value of mobile working in government – the potential benefits to be gained from mobile working were worth up to £336 million per year.

This paper will demonstrate the business case for going mobile. It will show that a local authority can save money whilst maintaining and even improving on frontline services by adopting a mobile working strategy.

Standard actions to improve efficiency are important and, if implemented successfully, will deliver the same level of service at lower cost.

Audit Commission, "Surviving the Crunch", March 2010

The current situation

Every day, thousands of local authority staff work outside of the office, seeing clients in their homes or visiting other sites as part of their job.

This is the front line of council work, where officers meet the people they serve, face to face and can report back on their needs and requirements. And yet, many of these staff are still only equipped with the bare basics to do their job; such as a notebook and a mobile phone.

By giving people the ability to input information and work on or off-line in the field – by means of a mobile working device configured to their needs, such as a PDA or a tablet PC – they could achieve so much more.

A mobile working solution that communicates automatically with a back office system at HQ will mean that staff do not need to make pointless journeys back to their desks in order to input information gathered in the field, maintenance workers can receive details of their next job straight to their mobile device, so they do not need to return to a depot, and administration staff back at the office do not need to be employed to simply re-key in data recorded on paper.

This creates savings in fuel costs, carbon emissions and of course valuable time of the staff involved so they can then apply their skills more productively.

With the right information to hand mobile workers can interact more efficiently with the people they serve. The facility to complete forms immediately means council workers can minimise the delay for people waiting for vital benefits, repairs or decisions. And by filing in the forms just once – onsite – there are fewer opportunities for those administrative errors that can creep in when someone is keying in data at a later stage, working from their notes.

This means happier workers, happier customers and significant savings associated with working more efficiently when out in the field.



WHITE PAPER: Going mobile. A business case for mobile working in local authorities.

The business case – 9 reasons to go mobile

1. Lean working

Conwy County Borough Council saved 120 working days a year in its Revenues and Benefits Department.

“The team has saved about an hour and a half per person, per day as we no longer have to manually input data. The information is now completed in the field and downloaded straight into our back office systems.”

Conwy County Borough Council,
Eryl Rowlands, Head of Revenues and Benefits

Mobile working encourages lean working because it eliminates the duplication of tasks. An officer has all the tools available to complete the job, eliminating waste and ensuring that no one in the back office needs to pick up and finish the work at a later date. A benefits officer, for example, will be able to check details of a claim while visiting the claimant, so they can make decisions without having to return to the office to seek out more information.

This can lead to significant savings as demonstrated by Swindon Commercial Services (SCS), a division of Swindon Borough Council.

SCS, which delivers property and highways maintenance, demonstrated an 18.4% improvement in the completion of housing repair jobs across a team of 200 staff. This was the equivalent of 5 employees work or £144,000 per year.

Using these figures as a base, if a council had a total mobile workforce of 1,800, it would have the possibility of making £1.3 million efficiency savings per annum.

If mobile workers are able to work across departments, doing the job of more than one team while in the field, these savings can be further multiplied.

94% of respondents to NDL’s Mobile Working Report, published in 2010, cited increased efficiency as the major benefit of mobile working.

2. The green savings

Mobile working also embraces the green agenda by cutting out unnecessary journeys. It is even possible to monitor field worker locations and schedules in real time. This accurate information stream is invaluable for allocating work, reacting to changing circumstances and making best use of resources.

Swindon Commercial Services saved £20,000 in fuel costs by cutting out unnecessary journeys through their mobile solution. A further £30,000 per annum was saved by eliminating the use of multi-part stationery.

Yarlington Homes cut travel by 20,000 miles in the first year of their mobile implementation alone.

3. Lower office costs

In addition, the more effective your mobile workforce is in the field, the less they need to return to the office. This could translate into less office space and reduced fuel consumption.

Staff time is saved back at base too as there are less calls for information received from teams in the field. Danka Office Imaging reported a 60% drop in calls for more complex transactions from the field as technicians could access most of the information they needed from their mobile devices.

4. Less outsourcing

At a time when many council jobs are under threat due to smaller budgets, it makes sense to stop spending money on contract staff.

As a result of their corporate mobile solution, Chelmer Homes managed to increase productivity by 40% as each worker completed one more job a day than they used to. This allowed the organisation to bring £90,000 of work back in house that it used to have to contract out.

Beyond cost savings

5. Better customer service

"We want that [customer contact] experience to be one that is responsive, timely and efficient and which meets their individual needs.

Achieving this means designing and delivering services in ways that make sense to our customers rather than being convenient to our organisations and our own internal structures."

Janet Callender OBE,
Chair of Local Government Delivery Council

The ideal situation is for a council worker to be able to complete the job in one visit as often as possible.

This is much more likely if they are able to access the information they need via a mobile device. A maintenance worker will turn up with the right equipment to finish a repair job the first time as they have left home with all the details of the site and the repair they need to make.

Using this methodology some local authorities have been able to actually increase the number of visits they can complete because they are freeing up more time. One council reported a 40% increase in benefits visits and a 60% increase in revenues inspections.

6. Greater job satisfaction

Not only is it frustrating for customers to receive multiple visits from council employees – it is frustrating for the employee too.

Being able to make better decisions because all the information is to hand means field workers feel a sense of achievement from a job well done.

7. An office on the move

Workers in the field will often describe themselves as being "away from their desk". This doesn't have to be the case.

Mobile working means the user can access information from multiple back office applications via the mobile application on their device. This will allow them to work effectively and efficiently – wherever they might be.

8. Taking control with localism and Total Place

"Total Place seeks to identify and avoid overlap and duplication between organisations – delivering a step change in both service improvement and efficiency at the local level, as well as across Whitehall."

Leadership Centre for Local Government

Local government is being encouraged to be just that – more local. The problems encountered in one part of the country may not be relevant in another. It is simply no longer possible to say, "this is the way we have always done it." Councils have to look at new ways of working that are relevant to their citizens and staff.

The economic downturn means the public sector needs radical changes to deliver better value for money and better local services tailored to local requirements. Mobile working is one of the most cost effective ways in which local authorities can start to put these strategies in place. By being flexible, these solutions will adapt to changes in use so that whatever happens to the way in which services are delivered, the tools can respond.

9. Self-financing solutions

Mobile working does not have to be costly – in fact it is self-financing. Authorities need to look at the requirements of each department, assess what IT infrastructure is already in place and how well it is currently working. Solutions can then be brought in that operate in conjunction with what is working well so there is no need to adopt a 'rip out and replace' strategy, which can be expensive.

Mobile working can be self-financing and it is possible to find a solution that will fit the requirements of the business both now and in the future – however small the budget.

Summary

Improving front line services while reducing costs requires a radical rethink of how services are delivered. Audit Commission, "Surviving the Crunch", March 2010

Councils are facing unprecedented pressure to make savings. To do this while maintaining service levels will require a radical rethink of working practices. Mobile working can provide a solution to this dilemma; improving service while reducing costs.

The savings from mobile working include:

- Savings from more efficient working processes as field workers are more productive and the need to rekey in data is eliminated.
- Savings from reducing unnecessary journeys and fuel costs.
- Savings in office space as the mobile workforce can remain mobile for longer.
- Savings in outsourcing as internal teams can take on more work – meaning less needs to be picked up by contractors.

Additional benefits from mobile working include:

- Improved customer service as a job can be completed in a single visit.
- Greater job satisfaction for employees who can offer a better service to citizens.
- Employees that are truly mobile; equipped with the information they need to do a good job without returning to the office.
- A more flexible service, able to adapt to the changing needs of the local area.
- No huge investment of money or any major disruption to IT.

Mobile working will be a critical tool for authorities looking to meet the pressing need to cut costs, while preserving service levels.

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