

## Case Study

### The Project

Refurbishment of Civic Centre Offices and implementation of a Customer Contact and Call Centre

### The Authority

Ashford Borough Council

### Key Practice Areas

Space Utilisation

Partnership working

Improving customer service

Architect: Ashford Borough Council In House team  
Contractor: H Goodsall & Son (Customer Contact Centre)  
Interior Motives (Civic Offices)  
Date of Construction: July to November 2002 (CCC)  
July 2003 to June 2004 (Offices)



### The Challenge

The town of Ashford was earmarked by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as a sustainable communities growth area. As more people would be moving into the Borough and be using the Council's facilities it was clear that the current layout of the building would no longer prove effective. The outdated interior of the Civic Centre building had three floors accommodating six reception areas specific to Directorates and Services resulting in members of the public roaming around the Council offices, wasting their own valuable time and often getting lost, thereby compromising the security of staff and the building. Once forwarded onto another department only 56% were sent to the right place. Visits to other organisations demonstrated that front line service delivery to visitors could be much improved through the provision of a Customer Contact Centre.

The offices were 20 years old and little had been spent on maintaining them. The general appearance of the offices was shabby, furniture that back then would have been up to date now looked archaic. The building contained all the original carpets, wall partitions and ceiling tiles, which were all sorely in need of replacing partly due to a number of alterations over the years. The IT infrastructure was also inadequate. A Health and Safety Inspection at the time highlighted a need for better designed work spaces. Some areas were cramped whereas others were not used efficiently thereby giving a net average floor space that, although lower than the national average, was not in the lower quartile. To reduce the average space allocation to the lower quartile level 224.3 m<sup>2</sup> would need to be freed up\*. Providing one main reception area would also help free up space by removing the six service specific reception areas. Ashford Borough Council's running costs were above the average for district councils nationally. If the authority could achieve the lower quartile value for running costs in its main building, it would make total annual savings amounting to £134,577. Savings could be made in water and sewerage, buildings insurance, repairs and maintenance. The role of Senior Managers was a particularly difficult one in that they had to take forward the review and help deliver the key outputs as well as manage the expectations of staff.

### The Key Steps

The amount of space available within the building was more than Ashford Borough Council required. During a reorganisation of the Council's Services and Directorates, the design team looked at the general space requirements for different jobs and decided in broad terms how much space would be allocated to the Directorates and then specifically they looked at what wings they would occupy, and how much space each team required. Even more could

\* Source – Comparative data report from the Audit Commission in June 2000

be created if the area given to storage was reduced. This identified surplus space within the building that could be leased out to a third party. The County Council Social Services Department expressed a wish to use any spare space seeing real advantages in working with us to deliver joined up services. The income from rental over the following ten years would be sufficient to fund the project. And in addition, we have amortised the costs of the work over 25 years releasing a very welcome £100,000 per annum into the revenue budget. Ashford Borough Council paid for the basic structure of the leased-out office space but the furniture and partitions etc was paid for by Kent County Council.

Management Team set up a group of staff to investigate the delivery of a Customer Contact Centre where the vast majority of visitor enquiries would be dealt with. The majority of service units saw the provision of a Customer Contact Centre as very beneficial. Staff were consulted prior to the £1.5m refurbishment taking place and each service unit was given the opportunity to work with the design team to create their own space within reason, as some departments required more storage areas than others. A detailed and strict refurbishment programme for the Civic Centre offices was designed to ensure that work ran smoothly and to schedule.

A survey was carried out in Jan/Feb 2001 revealing that 68% of staff would be interested in working at home and there has been some take up on this. Many members of staff have the facility to work at home although they are primarily based at the Civic Centre. Hot desking was also tried out in some services initially but it became apparent early on that it did not suit the working patterns of the staff. Many would be in the office at the same times requiring desk space and having their own space gave staff a feeling of permanence.

### The Outcome

The Civic Centre offices are now fully refurbished making an attractive modern open plan working environment. Staff noticed a significant improvement in the climate control and the lighting of the building. Where a need was identified, new furniture and equipment have been provided for members of staff. The six modern meeting rooms give staff a convenient area to conduct internal and external meetings. There are also a number of “break out” areas within the office space for one to ones and informal meetings. The open plan offices have enhanced the quality of inter-service relations and relations with Heads of Service and Directors. Even the Chief Executive sits in the open plan office!

The award-winning Customer Contact Centre and Integrated Call Centre has been such a success with staff and visitors that Customer Service Open Days are being held every three months taking delegates on a tour of the Contact and Call Centres giving them the opportunity to quiz its friendly and experienced project team. The Customer Contact Centre was officially opened on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2003 and made an immense difference. The multi-skilled staff aim to answer 80% queries at first point of contact, saving people the trouble of having to find their way through the building. Where queries are more complex, back office staff from the relevant section will take over. One feature, in particular, is the potential to enable teleworking for call centre staff which has given the council greater flexibility to extend opening hours.

In addition, 15% of the overall floor area was released for the authority to accommodate Kent County Council's local social services wing (140 persons), bringing to the project the financial benefits of leasing part of the building. The shared use of the Customer Contact Centre and cross-working of the front line staff demonstrates the commitment of both partners to maximise the benefits achieved from the sharing of property.

### The Learning Points

- Since the project was completed, a more structured and formal approach to options appraisal has been adopted.
- Ensuring that management and Members are consulted well in advance and have the opportunity to input ideas into the project.
- The importance of having a clearer laid out programme for all work necessary to achieve the objectives as some elements of the work can be extremely complex.
- It is necessary to invest time into ensuring that moves within the building (temporary and permanent) are properly planned and all members of staff are ready for the move. A close relationship with the IT department is essential at this stage.
- Service Units need to be committed at an early stage rather than waiting until the works start.
- Because proper procedures were put in place at the start, the project was completed in time.
- Building in sufficient time to the programme to accommodate the inevitable “moving of the goal posts” by Service Units during the consultation period.

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