

CASE STUDY:

IT Shared Services at Chiltern and South Bucks District Councils

To address the continuing challenge of reducing the cost of back office activities to protect front line services, Chiltern District Council has set up a shared services initiative with neighbouring South Bucks District Council. The councils worked with managed cloud provider Fordway to design and implement a new IT infrastructure to support the initiative, using a shared platform to streamline service provision across the two councils while enabling each to maintain its own identity.

The organisations

Chiltern District Council is one of four local government districts in Buckinghamshire. It includes the towns of Amersham and Chesham, and 72 per cent of the area it covers lies within the Chiltern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The council regularly ranks within the top 20 in the Halifax Quality of Life survey.

South Bucks is relatively small at 141 square kilometres and lies within the Metropolitan Green Belt area, with 87% of the land designated as green belt. There are many small towns and villages, with the largest being Beaconsfield, Burnham and Gerrards Cross.

The business need

In early 2012, to meet the need to reduce costs while protecting front line services and keeping council tax as low as possible, Chiltern District Council agreed to work with South Bucks District Council to implement a shared services initiative. The first step was to put in place a joint senior management team, followed by a transformational plan which focused on delivering key services while reducing duplication and improving resilience.

"Getting the IT right was key to implementing shared services successfully, and as soon as the

joint CEO was appointed we began planning how to bring the two councils' IT services together," explained Simonette 'Sim' Dixon, Head of Business Support at Chiltern.

"We needed a single infrastructure so that we could streamline services while enabling each council to maintain its own identity. We also wanted remote access to support flexible working and to use best practice to optimise efficiency and deliver best value for our council tax payers. We implemented the changes in phases to minimise the impact on services and staff."

Each service within the councils carried out a review to ascertain if better value would be provided by shared provision. Meanwhile Sim had to plan how to bring everything together while handling constantly changing requirements. The situation was complicated by the fact that South Bucks had outsourced its IT, whilst Chiltern's IT was handled in-house. In early 2015 the South Bucks Cabinet recognised that a single IT team was required and authorised negotiating early termination of the contract.

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A new purchasing framework for rapid deployment

Sim now needed to move quickly to put a new shared IT infrastructure in place. However, a traditional procurement approach would have added a year to the timeframe – time which she didn't have. The solution she chose was a procurement framework developed by Ian Gill, Senior Category Manager for IT procurement at Dorset County Council, which was suggested by her existing IT provider, managed cloud and IT infrastructure provider Fordway.

Ian had developed the framework when Dorset went to market for an IT infrastructure refresh and VDI – exactly what Sim was looking for. After completing the procurement exercise Dorset had awarded the contract to Fordway. One of the conditions placed on Dorset was that any other local authority could use its framework provided that they pay a percentage of their spend through it to Dorset.

Ian's colleagues were very pleased with the work Fordway had done, and after a site visit to confirm the quality of the solution Sim drew down on the framework and awarded the contract to Fordway.

Creating a shared domain

The first issue Sim and Fordway had to tackle was email. Once the joint management team was appointed, each senior manager had to have two network accounts and two mailboxes, one for Chiltern DC and one for South Bucks DC. This meant they received a lot of duplicate email and had two separate calendars, creating confusion and leading to

people being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fordway created a solution which gave each manager a single view of all their emails and their calendar while enabling each council to maintain its own digital identity.

"This wasn't a straightforward as it sounds – while Microsoft may say that Exchange is a multi-domain solution, in practice it isn't," Sim explained. "It may sound like a small thing but for our members this was massive. It gave us huge improvements in efficiency and timesaving, and it was also very important for brand awareness, saying in effect that 'we are changing'."

The next phase was a complete refresh of hardware, including server virtualisation, new shared storage and a thin client architecture to support remote access and flexible working – something both councils were keen to implement. It will give each member of staff a single desktop with a view of all the shared resources, which they can access from any location. This is currently in the final stages of implementation.

Moving to shared services also enabled the councils to have disaster recovery (DR) failover. Previously each council had used tape back-up, and in the event of a disaster would have had to take the tapes to a recovery centre. Now all IT systems are hosted at one site and copied to a second site in real time. "It's unusual for a medium sized organisation such as ours, with around 450 staff, to be able to afford DR failover – another big advantage of shared services," explained Sim.



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The project is now nearing completion. All service servers in place and the next step will be to implement the new structure for the councils' planning services, which should be completed by November 2017.

The benefits

The move to shared services has provided the two councils with massive efficiency and cost savings. Systems from parking to estate management have been combined, and the running cost of IT for the two authorities is the same as Chiltern alone paid previously. Individual services across the board have been made more efficient – for example, there is now a single website and content management system across both councils, and a single phone system. The smoothness of the transition has not gone unnoticed by senior management.

"A couple of weeks ago the chief executive said to me: 'I know we don't say thank you enough, but it's phenomenal what you've done and we've not lost a day's work during this'," concludes Sim. "It's sometimes been a bit less than perfect but everyone here has been able to carry on with their day job despite massive organisational and IT changes. This has been due to two things – a good solution and the IT team that Fordway provided. Throughout the process they've stayed calm and just got on with the job. They've also been really good at skills transfer, so I know my team will be able to handle everything on their own when the project is completed"

"Fordway have provided us with enterprise level IT at an accessible cost, and we now have a quality solution which will last us for at least the next 5 years"

Sim Dixon, Head of Business Support, Chiltern