

Macfarlane technology drives service improvements at Colchester Borough Council

Submitted by: Gray Associates

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Colchester Borough Council has refurbished its Customer Service Centre, extended its range of eGovernment services, and set up a call-handling facility based on Macfarlane CallPlus technology in an initiative designed to improve service quality.

The new-look Customer Service Centre, opened in June 2004, gives citizens and businesses more choice over 'how' and 'when' they make contact with the Council. Customers can either:

- Walk into the Centre, which is conveniently sited in the heart of town, and meet with Customer Advisors to make payments, obtain information etc. (with self-service Web terminals also planned for the near future)
- Obtain information and carry out transactions via the council web site at www.colchester.gov.uk
- Call or email the Customer Service Centre and have their query handled by an Advisor

Service calls are managed in a new call-handling facility, located behind the main public area of the Customer Service Centre. The Centre currently employs 22 full-time equivalent Customer Advisors and manages a weekly average of 3,000 service-based calls, 2,200 switchboard calls, 600 face-to-face enquiries for quick information, 560 face-to-face enquiries for detailed advice, and 3,000 face-to-face payment enquiries.

CallPlus technology from Macfarlane Telesystems manages all call traffic at the Centre. It answers incoming calls, intelligently routes them through to Customer Advisors with appropriate skills, and provides the Council with detailed management information. It also provides screen-based dialling for Advisors to make outgoing calls.

With the exception of a small customer service department within the Revenues and Benefits section, all incoming calls to the Council were previously answered by specialist departments. Now, all general calls to the Council, as well as detailed enquiries relating to Benefits, Council Tax, Payments, Direct Debits, Street Services and Rapid Response are handled by experienced Customer Advisors within the Centre.

The Macfarlane technology has enabled Colchester Council to improve the quality of service delivered over the phone as well as extend opening hours from 8.30am to 5.30pm. Previously, customer service calls could only be handled between 9am and 5pm with early closure on Wednesdays.

CallPlus has also provided a number of advanced computer telephony features:

- Automated telephone greetings: for when the Council runs multiple services from a single incoming phone number
- Automated announcements: giving up-to-date information (such as "refuse collection times are changing")
- 'On-the-fly' call recording: controlled by Customer Advisors, and used when they consider it necessary to record calls

- Integration to various Council database servers: to 'screen-pop' relevant customer information onto Advisors' PC screens as calls are delivered to their desktops
- Place in queue announcements: with the added option of expected wait times
- Instant call transfer: enabling Advisors to pass callers onto any Council specialist, anywhere within the County of Essex, at the touch of a button

Customer Advisors with exceptional customer service skills and experience have been recruited for the Centre and trained to a high standard on service knowledge and solutions, as well as in Personal Safety, Equality and Diversity, Welfare Rights and Technology Skills.

In a move designed to provide maximum flexibility for the Council and improved job satisfaction for its staff, Customer Advisors have also been multi-skilled. This means they've been trained to work both in the call handling and the public-facing areas of the Centre - as well as to assist with a broad range of Council services. Hence, an Advisor can be helping a caller on a Waste or Highway enquiry one minute, then assisting a second caller on a Benefit enquiry, and then taking a parking permit payment from a third customer in the cash office. Staff can be switched easily between call handling and face-to-face duties dependent on the customer demand for each. And they can even take calls in the public and cash office areas during quiet times - as Macfarlane telephony and PC terminals are available in all areas of the Centre.

"Two key objectives of Colchester Borough Council are to deliver greater accessibility to all services and to meet and exceed its customers' expectations. The new Customer Service Centre - a flexible environment designed around our customers' needs - is a crucial step on the way to meeting these goals. At the one convenient location we can now offer a wider range of services, quicker responses to queries and more efficient cash collection than ever before. At the same time, we collect real data to help us make and manage future improvements," said Councillor Christopher Arnold, Communications and Rural Issues portfolio holder, Colchester Borough Council.

"The Macfarlane telephony system is integral to our plans for continuous service improvement. We've been very impressed with the flexibility and functionality it provides, and the way it allows us to integrate easily into other front and back office systems, and create management and agent screens that fit in with the way that we work. It's an extremely well thought-through system that's simple to learn and use" added Leonie Rathbone, Customer Service Centre Manager, Colchester Borough Council.

"Colchester Borough Council must be congratulated on the way it has created a modern and flexible Customer Service Centre that puts customer choice and satisfaction at the heart of its operation," said Paul Skinner Sales Director of Macfarlane Telesystems, who has been working with the council for over four years. "We are delighted to be working in partnership with Colchester Borough Council, which achieved an 'excellent' Comprehensive Performance Assessment rating, to help deliver its customer service vision."

About Macfarlane Telesystems

Founded in 1987, Macfarlane is a UK developer and supplier of communication solutions to service providers, enterprises and public sector organisations. Its CallPlus platform supports a range of

applications including contact centre, IVR and unified communications. The company delivers cost-effective, market-focused solutions directly and through strategic partnerships with vendors such as Northgate, Onyx, Sx3, Deloittes and Lagan.

Macfarlane has established a strong position in the public sector where it assists central and local government reach e-government targets, providing a citizen-centric approach while working within Best Value practices. Existing customers number more than 50 local councils including those within the Government's Partnership programme such as Somerset Direct Partnership, the Warwickshire On-line Partnership and more recently, the Cornish Key Partnership. CallPlus has enabled these Partnerships to link their many local councils and create single 'virtual' contact centres that serve citizens on a county-wide basis. More details can be found at www.macfar.co.uk

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