Find out how SMS is helping Durham County Council streamline their processes and effectively communicate with their constituency.

Durham County Council is the local authority of County Durham. Originally a two-tier council, it became a unitary authority on April 1, 2009 when the seven districts of the county were abolished. It is one of the largest local authorities in England. County Durham currently has 63 electoral divisions, with two councillors representing each division.

SMS saves the day in an emergency situation

As early adopters of SMS, Durham CC spotted the potential of deploying text messaging as a key communications channel back in the early 2000s. At the time they were looking for new and convenient way in which members of the public could contact the Social Care Direct Team.

A few of key requirements were located. Firstly, any communications system would need to be easy and intuitive to use for both the senders and recipients of messages. Secondly, the system should have the capacity and flexibility to meet the demands of future needs and scale accordingly. It also needed to represent compelling value for money as any solution was to be added to the existing communications mix as opposed to replacing current channels.

Having located these two areas of interest, Durham CC turned to one of their technology providers, ProcessFlows, who had developed a well-established relationship with ProcessFlows as providers of RightFax.

Versatile, reliable and cost effective

Following initial exploratory discussions, SMS quickly presented itself as a solution that would be able to accommodate Durham CC's requirements, offering a way to not only help their Social Care Direct team, but departments across the whole council through numerous internal and externally facing deployments.

Social Care Direct

The Council's Social Care Direct team use email distribution groups to distribute inbound messages between their team accordingly. The Social Team have virtual mobile numbers associated to their accounts; inbound messages are distributed between the group members and any replies come from the mobile number associated. This allows team members to access and send messages from a platform that is familiar to them and convenient for their workflow. The ability to send out from a team number also provides consistency for the recipient, facilitating the ability to engage in a fluid dialogue with the team over time.

Benefit Fraud and Customer Service teams

The council also benefits from the use of short codes, using it as a fast and effortless way to for members of the community to contact key services or make important reports where time is of the essence. The Benefit Fraud team and Customer Services team among the departments that deploys this feature to great effect. For example, the ability to register a suspected fraud can be as easy as texting the word FRAUD to 66086 (not the actual short code used).

Library Department

Automated SMS has been deployed within the Library department to reduce work load for staff whilst simultaneously improving results and providing library users with a great user experience. The department has used the 123-txt relay to interface with their Halcyon Library System. This has created the ability to set up automated messages to be sent out to library users to inform them of book renewals and overdue dates, as well as other key information. By deploying an Alpha ID, the department is also able to brand their messages whilst ensuring the messaging is one way, when desired. Not only has this helped free up valuable time for staff, the nature of messages delivered direct to users phones has helped to improve the timely engagement of library goers when either renewing or returning books.

Direct Services

The Durham CC Direct Services team have integrated 123-txt with their emergency breakdown appointments system whereby operatives receive information on new jobs (i.e. the lift engineer will be sent breakdown details to attend site). This internal use case has now also been extended to provide confirmation messages and reminders to staff enrolled on training courses.

CRM Team

Durham CC's CRM team have recently been working with ProcessFlows to utilise the RESTful API to integrate 123-txt into their current Firmstep CRM system. This will facilitate easy access to Durham CC's SMS capabilities to all the relevant staff with access via their CRM portal. This makes sending out to individuals and groups stored within the CRM effortless. 123-txt's powerful API's also help to future proof the system, giving Durham CC the confidence that whatever systems they deploy moving forward, 123-txt will have the capacity to interface with them.

Campaigns

The Council also use the marketing features to run specific campaigns at targeted audiences. An example of this would be a past campaign executed by Durham CC reminding local taxi drivers to renew their Hackney Cab licence. The Council bulk send messages to multiple recipients, a process that is straightforward, direct and highly cost effective, with SMS continuing to have the best engagement rates of any currently deployed communications channel, eliminating the need for letter reminders and its associated costs.

Text Message Server to 123-txt migration

Since taking the decision to adopt SMS communications in some of the use cases outlined above, Durham CC have used ProcessFlows' Text Message Server (TMS). However, the Council recently took the decision to migrate from the on premise TMS solution to ProcessFlows' cloud SMS platform, 123-txt.

In addition to the normal benefits that come with transitioning to a cloud-based solution, 123-txt is presenting Durham CC with a number of advantages that will allow them to further develop their deployment of SMS.

One example afforded by 123-txt is the instant access to the platform from any internet enabled device. This allows users to utilise the full range of SMS services wherever they are – something that is especially important in the context of business continuity and disaster recovery.

Another is the recently improved 123-Survey module on 123-txt which allows users to create responsive surveys to gather vital information from recipients in an engaging and insightful manner…

The expansion of use cases beyond an initial scope is typical of SMS deployments due to the versatility of the platform. We therefore very much look forward to completing Durham CC's migration and continue to develop the use of this powerful communications tool with them.