

Case Study

Education Benefits at Leeds City Council

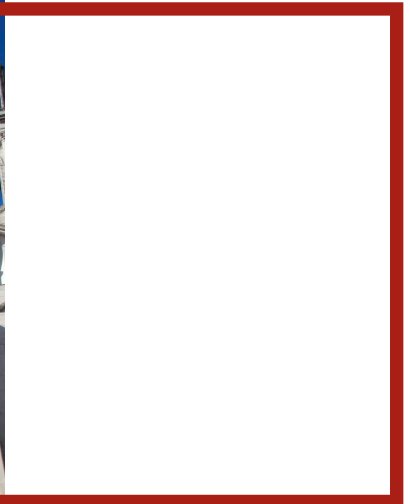


Introduction

Leeds City Council has been at the forefront of efficient education benefit administration since 1993. Using their in-house application they began saving administrative time by assessing Education Benefits at the same time as Housing Benefit. In 2004 Leeds moved to the Capita Revenues and Benefits system and by using the integrated Education Benefits module they realised further improvements.

Background

Leeds City Council is the second largest metropolitan authority in England. With an annual budget of over one billion pounds, the city is home to 715,000 people. Some 70,000 receive housing and council tax benefit with 22,000 pupils (10,000 households) receiving free school meals and annual school clothing awards ranging between £20 to £30 depending on age.



The challenges

Before installing Capita Revenues and Benefits in February 2004, Leeds City Council ran an in-house system. Part of the IBM-based application included software for education benefits - statutory free school meals and school clothing scheme. The latter being a local benefit scheme, administered by Leeds and some other local authorities.

Such a change meant continuing to support the education benefits task. The in-house software used was of limited functionality and it was essential to improve this. However a market review of new revenues and benefits packages initially produced some disappointment.

Andy Cameron, Benefits Manager Policy and Development, says "We wanted to migrate to a modern-day operating platform which allowed for continual development and upgrading."

"It was apparent from the initial procurement exercise, that whilst there were housing and council tax benefit packages available, there were no comprehensive education benefit applications that worked in conjunction with each other," said Cameron.

An integrated Education Benefits tool was essential for Leeds as Cameron further explains;

"The only additional piece of information that needs to be collected in addition to the information required for a Housing and Council Tax Benefits assessment is the school that pupils attend. Assessing education benefit alongside housing benefit typically saves processing time as there is no need to re-key data. With 22,000 pupils receiving education benefits and the majority linked to a Housing Benefit claim, there is a significant time saving."

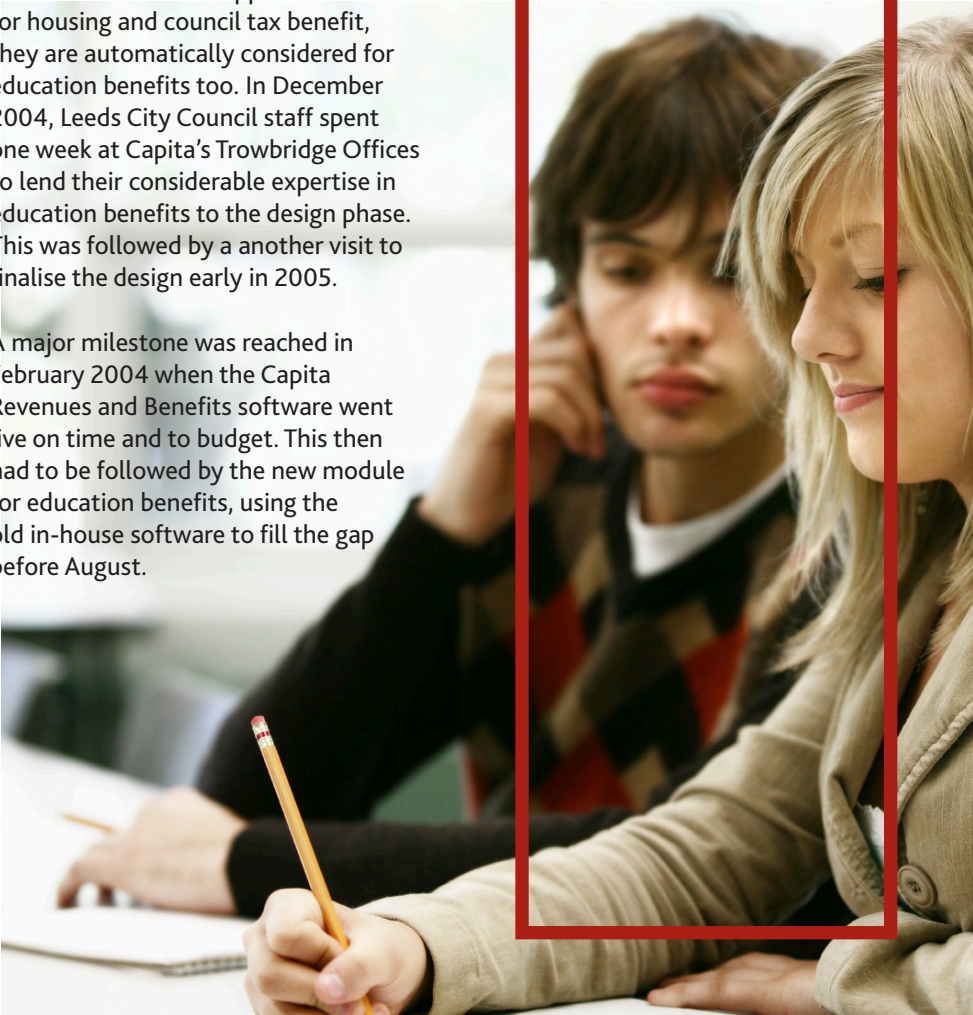
Leeds City Council asked several software suppliers, including Capita, to propose a bespoke solution. Any new software not only had to be future-proof but also integrated with housing and council tax benefits. Following a rigorous competitive tender conducted under EC rules, Capita was chosen.

The solution

“Capita Revenues and Benefits was the more robust of the products available on the market. It was well managed and adaptable for future legislative change,” said Cameron. “Capita agreed that they would develop an education benefit module in readiness for the annual dispatch of school clothing awards.”

Any new software had to reflect current working practices. For example, when customers submit an application form for housing and council tax benefit, they are automatically considered for education benefits too. In December 2004, Leeds City Council staff spent one week at Capita’s Trowbridge Offices to lend their considerable expertise in education benefits to the design phase. This was followed by a another visit to finalise the design early in 2005.

A major milestone was reached in February 2004 when the Capita Revenues and Benefits software went live on time and to budget. This then had to be followed by the new module for education benefits, using the old in-house software to fill the gap before August.



The solution cont.

"Capita and our staff worked jointly to develop a usable product by late July 2004, in readiness for the school clothing award dispatch in early August 2004. This was a successful implementation delivered within tight timescales. The success was down to tight planning and joint working with Capita," said Cameron.

The newly-developed education benefits module is an invaluable feature-rich yet easy-to-use tool. It provides a comprehensive solution for calculation, notification, and payment. As the education benefit is assessed at the same time as the other benefits, the administration is much more efficient. It also uses plain English rather than cryptic codes, helping staff take minutes to process a new claim. Any enquiries and changes are easily handled by front line staff in person or on the telephone.

"We are very pleased with the Capita product and it's very user friendly. The functionality has allowed us to develop flexible electronic scheduling of information to schools, reducing weekly administrative time and cost significantly in the process. Schools are very pleased with the new improved information and communication provided," said Cameron.

Under the old system, schools were sent a paper copy of the free school meals register every week. Since January 2005, the information has been extracted and electronically communicated across the council's secure gateway. Such innovations have helped cut down on administration work and improved accuracy for council and schools alike. Although school clothing awards are still sent by post, the new system has allowed for some changes. A third party mailing company now consolidates notifications by household.

Staff also find new management reports flexible in being able to report by school, age, household or other parameters. "The development more than met our immediate needs for an effective free school meal system and school clothing award scheme," said Cameron. "Capita was very responsive to meeting our needs which resulted in this success. The system takes away significant amounts of administrative time which were previously necessary."

Leeds say that administering education benefits in conjunction with Housing and Council Tax Benefits eliminated much duplication:

- There is no need for separate application forms
- There is no need to support separate systems
- There is no need to duplicate processes and management.

It's not just about efficiency as Cameron explains:

“The Education Benefits module also ensures that we pay people the right benefit promptly, it improves uptake amongst those that are entitled and it also ensures that we don't overpay if claimants circumstances change.”

The combined approach also helps deliver excellent customer services. Customers only have to apply once and provide any supporting evidence once.

Finally, we let Cameron have the last word.

'Administering Education Benefits at the same time as Housing and Council Tax Benefit just makes sense, it's the best service to the customer and the most efficient. I can't imagine doing it any other way.'

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