

Case Study

Benefiting from Quality Assurance
at Suffolk Coastal District Council



About Suffolk Coastal District Council

Suffolk Coastal District Council is based in Woodbridge and serves an area from Felixstowe northwards to Walberswick. It serves a population of 115,141 and the Benefits department has a case load of approximately 8,700 with around 4,000 new claims each year.



The background

Like all local authorities, Suffolk Coastal District Council is required to check a minimum of 4% of their benefit assessments as part of the Department of Works and Pensions Performance Standards. As with many other local authorities, they wanted to exceed this target by planning to check 10% as part of their own quality assurance. However, a major problem in reaching this target was the hindrance of their manual assessment process, which proved both slow and cumbersome and resulted in the successful checking of approximately half of the 10% target. Even with this low level checking in place it was revealing that approximately 10% of assessments were incorrect.

The existing council process involved manual chasing of paper. If checks showed that an assessment was incorrect it was necessary to manually search through the outgoing post and remove the notification letter and, if present, the associated cheque.

In 95% of cases payment is made by BACS. Once processed, it is impossible to stop these payments, and therefore, customers may have received an incorrect benefit payment. This, in turn, created situations where payments had to be recovered. In terms of time, the correction of an inappropriate notification or payment could easily consume up to one day.

The existing system also placed a heavy burden on the local authority's staff resources. The manual selection of claims to be checked was based on a series of criteria such as the claimant's income type, and so the process could be very time consuming. In addition the Training Officer was also required to key in data from checkers' forms into a spreadsheet based system before carrying out training needs analysis.

An additional problem was that staff morale in general was being adversely affected. A culture had developed that viewed the assessment procedures as being unfair. There was a feeling that claims for assessment were, in some way, being 'cherry picked'. Staff motivation was being further eroded by the knowledge that some 10% of claims were inaccurate.

Also of concern was that during subsidy audits, which placed a considerable burden on the system, it was proving difficult to demonstrate what checks had actually been carried out. This led to a lack of clarity over what actions had been undertaken to rectify errors and mistakes.

How Capita became involved

Suffolk Coastal District Council use Capita's Revenues and Benefits software. In order to increase the efficiency of their assessment processes they decided to use Capita's Quality Assurance (QA) software. This is an optional module that is fully integrated with Capita Benefits and is designed specifically to assist local authorities to perform checking as efficiently as possible.

The solution

The essence of QA is that it streamlines the checking process and selects cases for checking based on a wide range of assessment types and against specific users. Overall it provides an all round, more structured approach to the assessment process.

Once a case has been automatically selected by QA for sampling, the system automatically suppresses the issue of entitlement letters and payment until the case is marked as correct or is corrected after being initially marked as incorrect.

QA has a facility allowing targeting over a wide range of assessment types or against specific users. For example Suffolk Coastal check 100% of new starters' assessments and this helps build their confidence.

QA also facilitates training needs analysis for decision-makers and therefore, helps in the design, planning and sequencing of further training needs to address areas in need of improvement.

As Margaret Hardwick, Benefits Manager at the Council explains:

"Capita's QA really helped us take the question marks out of our training. With QA we are confident that we are targeting training for assessors in precisely the right areas".

Of particular importance is QA's comprehensive and flexible management reporting based on the detailed analysis of the outcomes of all sample checks.

Margaret was also pleased with the simplicity of the implementation process. She comments that:

"The introduction of QA is very straightforward and swift to set up and implement".



The results

Perhaps the most significant result of the introduction of QA was that it created a shift in the culture within the Benefits department at Suffolk Coastal District Council.

The introduction of Capita's QA was quickly embraced by their Benefits staff because, as no one was exempt from the assessment process, the system was seen as fair. It ended the culture where disagreements occurred about why a claim had been selected for checking. This new sense of fairness also paid off by helping to instil a desire to get things right first time. QA provided the impetus for this cultural shift and performance improvements then followed. These included:

- Exceeding the target of 10% of claims checked using the same resource as before
- Improving accuracy from 90% to 95-96%
- Minimising payment of incorrect claims
- Reducing customer complaints
- Saving 20% of decision-makers' time by cutting out the paper chase
- Saving 30% of Training Officer's time because the Training Officer is freed from administration enabling problem areas to be identified swiftly and training targeted appropriately
- Minimising customers concerns on inaccurate and unclear letters. In addition the Authority has implemented ProPrint presentation software to make their notification letters as clear as possible
- Creating a more structured checking process.

An additional benefit of the system is that new staff now feel confident using it as there is a certainty and fairness about the assessment process.

Another important benefit has been the improvements evident in the subsidy audit process. It is now easy to establish the volume of checks made and to identify cases that have been checked. The Auditors now have more confidence in checks that have been undertaken.

Future plans

In 2007, while using QA, Suffolk Coastal District Council raised its performance to place it in the top quartile. This is a very significant demonstration of the cultural change that has taken place and through the time saving benefits they now plan to build on this achievement:

- Staff are now able to spend more time dealing with referrals and can contact people directly rather than by time consuming letters
- More home visits are being scheduled
- Staff are able to focus on improvement projects to help boost overall performance levels

- There are potential savings on the Council's audit processes because they have greater confidence in the overall system.

As Margaret Hardwick, Benefits Manager at Suffolk Coastal comments:

"Bringing in QA achieved a very significant cultural change and it has made great gains in many areas for us. It has rapidly become both a morale booster and an essential tool for us and I certainly wouldn't want to be without it now".

For further details please contact your Capita Account Manager

Manvers House
Manvers Street
Trowbridge
Wiltshire
BA14 8YX
t: 08701 631800
f: 08701 631869
cssenquiries@capita.co.uk
www.capita-software.co.uk

CAPITA