

Electronic Decision-making Self Assessment at Kent County Council Social Services

At the end of February 2006, the Social Services Directorate within Kent County Council went live with what is believed to be the UK's most advanced electronic self-assessment system, which automatically provides applicants with an immediate online decision about their eligibility to receive services.



Having been the first Council in the UK to have such a system when the initial version was launched in October 2004, this latest release is significant not only for Kent, but for every other local authority in the country. Nigel Vian, Electronic Programme Services Director for Social Services at the Council: "Electronic self-assessment has been regarded as the Holy Grail of Social Services departments for the last ten years. Although it was widely believed that it was impossible to achieve, we've proved it can be done. Working with Anite and Ebase Technology who have jointly developed the system, we are now 'packaging' it and making it available to any local government body that needs a powerful, flexible online self-assessment solution."

Serving the community

Kent is one of the largest counties in the UK with a population of 1.3 million.

In 2004, keen to provide residents with greater choice and control in the way they access social services, the Strategic Director of the department mooted the idea of an electronic decision-making self assessment system. Whilst other councils had introduced online self assessment, these systems were simply means of capturing data on a PDF form which was then passed to a care manager for appraisal and a decision.

Nigel Vian: "We wanted to introduce a system with carefully weighted questions, which would provide an easy-to-use, fast and accurate assessment with immediate feedback for

users. It wasn't our intention to replace contact via the phone or face to face, but simply to see if we could provide another channel of communication for the community."

The Council turned to Anite with whom they were already working on a server upgrade programme for SWIFT. Anite was keen to see if the 'query engine' which was already incorporated into a number of their existing products could be tailored to meet Kent's specific needs for online self-assessment. The resultant



system, which was delivered in October 2004 just six months after the initial discussions, combined the technological skills and expertise of Anite with the 'intellectual rigour' of Kent's Policy Team who not only drew up the original specification but also created the logic and weightings behind the self-assessment questions.

Testing the response

This version of the decision-making self assessment system was the first of its kind in the UK. Although it was barely marketed by the Council beyond a link from its public website, some forty people (including those applying for services on behalf of someone else) used the system each month and were very satisfied with the ease of access to information and the speed with which they received a decision.

However, despite this early success, Nigel Vian's team knew that they needed to make some major changes. Melanie Hayes is the Project Officer in the Electronic Programme Services team: "This first version of the system was hard-coded, which meant that every time we wanted to make even the smallest change, we had to ask Anite to do this for us. With the electronic government programme approaching fast, we knew that we'd need to meet accessibility standards, change the look and feel of the system to be consistent with our other web-based services, as well as being able to make changes to the questions and services on offer, should we need to. We also wanted to evolve the system such that it would be able to handle all aspects of self-assessment, including complex cases."

Nigel Vian: "This desire to have the system under our own control was heightened by the interest which it had generated throughout the Social Services sector. We could see that it had the potential to be used by other organisations, but in order to supply it to them as a package, we needed to have a configurable, easily transferable system."

A New Approach

In April 2005, with the initial system having been live for six months, Anite returned to present Kent with a proposition for a more flexible, open system known as 'CSAW' (Citizen Self Assessment Website).

Melanie Hayes: "We were surprised – and somewhat concerned – to see that Anite was recommending an entirely new system, rather than an amended version of the first one. Their proposition also included software from a hitherto unknown company, Ebase Technology. The introduction of another supplier added to our anxiety."

Despite the fact that the system which Anite presented was a very 'rough cut', Nigel Vian's team became convinced that it really could provide the solution.

Following a number of meetings with Anite and Ebase Technology to demonstrate the breadth of the new solution, Kent County Council took the decision to implement it. The new system was delivered in July 2005.

Melanie Hayes: "Without the Ebase version we'd have had a real problem. It has opened up the entire system and provided us with a flexible platform on which we can build our services."

The questions for the self-assessment system have been carefully designed by the Social Services policy team at Kent to give decisions about eligibility. According to Melanie Hayes: "The ease of use and flexibility of CSAW allows us to make changes very quickly. Whilst we may not change the actual services on the self assessment form very frequently, we can quickly add, delete or modify questions or answers. We have also been able to include extensive signposting to other services. Thus, for example, if someone is ineligible for a service, we are able to point them towards alternatives or encourage them to call us for further assistance.

"The Ebase version also allows us to produce comprehensive management reports. We can see immediately how many people are using the system, which services they are applying for,

how many are eligible, and how long it is taking them to complete the forms. This level of detailed, live reporting has been impossible until now."

Forecasting demand

Michael Thomas-Sam (Acting Head of Service, Policy and Standards at Kent Social Services) is currently trying to ascertain what percentage of those people referred for adult services are likely to make use of the system. In the

course of a year some 35,000 adults are referred to Social Services, although about 25,000 of these come via healthcare professionals. Michael Thomas-Sam: "Of the remaining 10,000, we anticipate that initially about 3-5% will use the self-assessment system, but we are still refining these figures before setting a target."

Melanie Hayes added: "We are also considering creating an occupational therapy-specific self-assessment form as an adjunct to the existing CSAW system. This is an area where it is relatively easy for people to apply directly for help and where the decision about what to supply is also quite straightforward.

Looking forward

The next stage of development for the Kent self-assessment system will be to extend its functionality to be able to handle applicants with complex needs and review their own care plan. Most importantly, however, it is planned that the next version of the system will indicate the contribution to the cost of any service which will be made by the Council, how much the individual will need to contribute and whether there are other benefits they can claim. Nigel Vian: "This is an immensely challenging exercise but we know that we have the initial functionality we need to achieve this within the CSAW system, and that this will make the system very attractive to other Councils throughout the country.

"Our aim is to help citizens become more independent by enabling them to participate actively in the management of their own lives and health issues. We believe that the self-assessment system is a significant step towards achieving this."

The Anite/Ebase solution will also be integrated with other systems within Kent to provide a single source of information for a number of different departments.

Nigel Vian concluded: "Self-assessment is highlighted as an area of particular focus within the national electronic government programme. With CSAW now in place, we can tick this box very confidently.

Ebase Technology Ltd
10 St Georges Tower
Hatley St George, Sandy
Bedfordshire SG19 3SH

t: +44 (0) 1767 654 987
f: +44 (0) 1767 651 357
e: info@ebasetech.com
w: www.ebasetech.com


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