

Delivering Educational Benefits Online

Hertfordshire County Council has introduced an innovative web-based system – branded as ‘How can we help’ – which will enable citizens to apply online for all the County’s educational benefits, including free school meals, clothing vouchers and SaverCards.



The number of applications for these services each year is considerable: 20,000 forms are distributed to citizens; about 15,500 educational benefits forms are processed; 16,000 free school meals are granted; and, about 7,500 school clothing vouchers are allocated with a total value in excess of £200,000.

According to Sanjay Jethwa, eGov Systems Architect at the Council, the new online system, which has been developed in partnership with Ebase Technology, “will improve the turnaround of applications from about six weeks to less than two, and potentially eradicate the current rejection rate of 40% - caused by incorrectly completed forms.”



A paper-based environment

In the mid 1990s, councillors in Hertfordshire came up with the idea – which is still regarded as innovative by many other councils today – to consolidate all the educational benefits for which their citizens could apply into one single form. Until this time, some eight different forms needed to be completed to apply for each benefit. The resultant composite form – a ten-page booklet which could be obtained from schools and Citizens Advice Bureaux - was launched in 1997. The service was known as ‘How can we help’.

In 1999, Hertfordshire CC outsourced management of the entire service to their Customer Services Centre run by Capita. About 20,000 forms were being submitted each year, with 12,000

renewals of free school meals. However some 40% of all applications were being rejected because of incorrect completion of the form.

According to Sanjay Jethwa: “In 2004 the Customer Services Centre Manager raised the number of rejections as a problem. He also felt that the overall inefficiency and potential tardiness of the system was affecting our ability to deliver benefits to our citizens. It seemed logical to develop an electronic version of the form and encapsulate as much upfront data validation as possible to improve the quality and accuracy of the data collected.

“I had already led a group which had surveyed the availability of electronic forms systems and after considerable evaluation, we had selected Ebase as the standard solution not only for the



Council, but also for all of our ten district councils with whom we are in partnership as HertsLink. We felt that a key strength of Ebase was its ability to integrate with many other systems and thus provide the opportunity to implement complete workflow and business process applications. This would avoid the situation of introducing a standalone electronic form which simply replaced a standalone paper form.

“In Ebase, we knew we had the technology to put the educational benefits form online – our challenge was to define the business processes and rules which would need to be applied to make the form work efficiently and easily for the citizens.”

Building the Form

Working closely with consultants at Ebase Technology, Sanjay Jethwa and his team started defining the requirements for the online form, and the ‘rules’ which would underpin it.

The concept was not simply to replace the existing paper-based form with an electronic version, but to build an intelligent system which would guide citizens through the process of applying for benefits. It would ensure that they were offered information only on education benefits for which they were eligible according to the welfare benefit they were claiming and it would notify them immediately, via system validation, whether they had been successful in their application.

Sanjay Jethwa: “Ensuring that the policies, business processes and the rules concerning individual benefits were clearly defined took some time but this was fundamental to the success of the overall project.”

[continued on back page](#)

Assessing the Benefits

Citizens are encouraged to ring the Customer Services Centre, where they will be informed of the ways in which they may apply, promoting the online system. They then have the option of filling in the form together with a member of a dedicated team from the Customer Services Centre on the phone or completing it themselves online.

Sanjay Jethwa: "Once we have thoroughly tested the form in this manner, and are totally confident that it is both easy to complete and covers all the requisite options, we will have an official launch which will publicise widely the availability of the service online.

"Feedback to date, however, has been very positive. The Customer Services Centre staff are finding it much easier to complete than the paper-based version and the various spreadsheets which they used previously. The rules which underlie the system are making dramatic cuts to the number of errors, and I can envisage that we will be able to reach a 'zero error' situation in the not too distant future.

"In addition, we expect the Customer Services Centre staff will be much less involved in routine, time-consuming processing work and be able to focus on carrying out spot-checks and helping citizens with individual or more complex queries.

"From a financial point of view, the electronic form will enable us to make significant savings in printing, postage, paper and archiving costs."



The next stage of the project will be to integrate 'How can we help' with the main Oracle-based child-care system, and to pursue the possibility of linking into the Department of Work & Pensions systems.

This will provide another useful step in delivering online validation and thus an even faster turnaround of responses to

The electronic version of 'How can we help' went live in May, following an evaluation and trial period by staff within the Customer Services Centre. At the present time, the system has only been 'soft-launched'.

applications, as well as removing, according to Sanjay Jethwa "another whole layer of paper-chasing."

He concluded: "Ebase has proved to be a very flexible and adaptable product. We have successfully built a complex and powerful business application, involving many complicated rules and processes, yet it appears very simple and straightforward to those who use it.

"I am not aware of any other Council having a consolidated educational benefits form, let alone an online system. Hertfordshire County Council is really at the forefront in the use of this type of technology to deliver fast, efficient, error-free services to our citizens."

Building the Form continued from front page

The electronic 'How can we help' system has been designed to allow citizens, with up to ten children, to apply for eight educational benefits (free school meals, school clothing grant, assisted transport, SaverCard, student TrainCard, help with music fees, 16-19 learner support fund and help with cycle training fees).

It uses intelligent navigation and validation to ensure that all applications are processed accurately. Features such as retrieving addresses via a postcode lookup and only presenting lists of schools relevant to a child's age group are designed to make completion of the online application as fast and easy as possible.

An 'administrative' back-end to the system, also built using Ebase, provides powerful search and retrieval capabilities, different viewing options as well as batch letter printing facilities.

Once the completed form has been submitted, a 'Proof of Benefit' document is printed which instructs the applicant as to how to evidence the benefit they are receiving by presenting it to the school or the Benefits Agency to confirm eligibility in order to receive the education benefits.