



St. Helens Council: making savings for citizens

Developing new COBOL applications delivers significant cost savings

At a Glance: St. Helens Council

More than 80,000 households, along with businesses, schools and visitors, depend on a wide range of services delivered by St Helens Council. They include care services for the elderly, vulnerable adults and disabled people, children’s centres and early year’s services, looked after children, school support and improvement, support for children with special educational needs, fostering and adoption services, youth services, public health, waste and recycling, street cleansing, housing and homelessness support, planning permission, economic development and regeneration, environmental health, trading standards, benefits administration, maintenance of highways, footpaths, parks and open spaces, libraries, recreation, culture and arts and many more.

Solution

- > Micro Focus Enterprise Developer
- > Micro Focus Enterprise Server

Challenge

The council previously used Micro Focus Mainframe Express (MFE) to modernize key mainframe-based financial applications, yielding an annual saving of £300,000. More recently the MFE applications have been successfully upgraded to the Micro Focus Enterprise Developer/Server solution as a launchpad for future modernization.

Elsewhere in the IT estate, an Oracle Financials solution was being used to manage procurement needs and stock control needs. The hardware platform was nearing end of life and the application itself needed upgrading. Ste Sharples, ICT business manager for St Helens Council, explains the urgency of the problem: “Using unsupported hardware and software could breach Public Services Network (PSN) code of connection, but the upgrade costs meant that we could not simply go ahead with this without reviewing the alternatives. After much research we decided to develop a procurement application in-house. Our other two core financial applications (Financial Ledger and Accounts Payable) use a Micro Focus platform, and we wanted an integrated core financials offering, so we decided to look at additional solutions from Micro Focus.”

Highlights

- > Realized substantial cost savings
- > New COBOL IDE delivers cross-team collaboration and improved productivity
- > A single, integrated suite of financial applications
- > Integration with .NET to provide modern user experience
- > Development of brand new COBOL applications

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Ste Sharples,
 ICT business manager, St. Helens Council

St. Helens Council has a long history of software development. Sharples: "We have found in-house development a great way to ensure we streamline and customize an application to exactly what we need. We build it from our own business requirements and have honed our in-house development skills to the point where we in the main only purchase package applications for legislative or statutory reasons."

Developing the application in-house gave St. Helens Council full control over quality management and allowed it to create custom interfaces with other core in-house financial applications.

In-house development in action

The two current applications continue to process online and batch transactions. As the new procurement application mainly provides online functionality, its user interface is very important. St. Helens Council used Microsoft's Visual Studio IDE to develop the solution and deploy it to a .NET platform. Its 20-strong development team is skilled in Java, COBOL, .NET and Domino, so Micro Focus technology provided the right level of integration and collaboration support for the entire development team.

"We have been on a long journey with Micro Focus, from modernizing our key applications, using Enterprise Developer and Enterprise Server, onto developing our own procurement solution and modernizing the user interface. Our relationship has strengthened over the years and the support we have received has been instrumental to the success of our projects."

Ste Sharples,
ICT business manager, St. Helens
Council

Sharples continues: "Micro Focus Enterprise Developer will work well for us in developing our new procurement application and enable us to modernize the user interface of our general ledger and accounts-payable applications. We can then offer a suite of integrated, core financial solutions, with a common look and feel."

Cost savings are substantial, as Sharples says: "Running the new, in-house application alongside our current systems will help us realize substantial cost savings compared to upgrading the existing environment, which is very welcome in these times of economic austerity."

New development skills and capabilities

Enterprise Developer technology was easy for St Helens developers with COBOL experience to pick up. The developers were excited to see how development can be aligned to Active Directory, which is simple for the developers to understand and weave into their security policy design.

Business Process Efficiency

Taking advantage of the new infrastructure, St. Helens Council also took the opportunity to develop a new Adult Community Learning payment portal to replace an existing system, as Sharples explains: "This system has simplified the process and modernized the way the previous solution worked as well as saved us the annual maintenance."

Once the financial applications have been integrated into a suite, residing on the same Micro Focus platform and sharing a common look and feel, the council is interested in exploring the possibility of sharing the capability with other local authorities around the country, potentially using the Public Services Network to provide a platform for councils to securely share cloud-based services on a cost-effective hosting basis.

St. Helens Councillor Anthony Johnson has had close involvement in the project: "When I asked members of the IT team to look at innovative ways of saving money and ways to potentially generate income, I could not have asked for a better response. The first project that was demonstrated to me was the new procurement program. I was certainly overwhelmed by the quality of what was demonstrated to me. Not only did we have a solution which would lead to significant long term cost savings over the previous software but it was also far superior to the previous product. With a new easy to use interface and simple user operation it was widely welcomed by all staff required to use it. As a first step into new innovation my staff had made a massive leap and looking at other products which are being developed their position can only go from strength to strength. As the products become available to other users they too will see the benefits that can be achieved and the savings that can be made."

Sharples concludes: "We have been on a long journey with Micro Focus, from modernizing our key applications, using Enterprise Developer and Enterprise Server, onto developing our own procurement solution and modernizing the user interface. Our relationship has strengthened over the years and the support we have received has been instrumental to the success of our projects."

About Micro Focus

Micro Focus, a member of the FTSE 250, provides innovative software that allows companies to dramatically improve the business value of their enterprise applications. Micro Focus Enterprise Application Modernization, Testing and Management software enables customers' business applications to respond rapidly to market changes and embrace modern architectures with reduced cost and risk.

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