CASE STUDY: **The Family Information Service**

We've helped make the nursery application approval process for the Family Information Service child's play

The Family Information Service at a large UK Council is using text messaging to speed up their free nursery place application approval process. Applicants find out within 48 hours of sending a text if their child is eligible. Previously, they had to fill in a form and wait 2 weeks for it to be processed before they could be notified about any decision.

Help with child care costs

Under the Government's early years programme, Councils are able to provide up to 15 free hours of nursery education a week, for 38 weeks of the year, for all three and four year old children.

The Family Information Service (FIS) is the first port of call for parents wanting to find out about any entitlement they may have to free nursery education (and other subsidised schemes, such as free school meals).

Applying for a free nursery place

Parents applying for free nursery places are required to complete and return a form.

In common with all paperwork, it takes time to process the form as it has to be manually dealt with and passed between case officers and staff throughout the decision making process. It took two weeks before parents found out if they were eligible.

The Council was also aware that completing forms is a real barrier for those with literacy problems and that these members of the community were the most likely to be entitled to free nursery places.

The application process meant that those most in need were isolated. A simpler, more accessible and familiar way of triggering the application process would make sure that that the most disadvantaged children in the community did not miss out.

The Council regularly uses social media to spread the word about the free child services available, so using text messaging for the nursery project seemed an obvious next step.

77.6 billion text messages were sent in the UK in the first half of 2012 (source, Ofcom). Text encompasses all educational and cultural diversities; it's easy to use, private, quick and affordable.

They already had the technology

As part of a Business Communications project to improve customer service, adopt more efficient and remote working practices and make savings throughout thier 100 operational sites, the Council invested in a ProcessFlows text messaging solution to enhance communications.

They have a dedicated text messaging server at network HQ and a number of outbound text users, such as Housing, who send text rent reminders to tenants and Leisure, who use text to confirm hall bookings throughout the county.

The Council said; "*We already had the technology, so when FIS flagged up their requirement for bi-directional text messaging capability to make their nursery application process more accessible, it was a relatively straight-forward project for the network team. We added another account (department user) to the text messaging server (TMS) and enabled two-way texting so people could text us.*"

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How text was set up for FIS

The text application is integrated with Outlook to enable FIS to send and receive text messages directly within their familiar email environment.

A dedicated short code number was purchased from ProcessFlows. This short code number can be used by any number of users/departments connected to the network, but in order to differentiate them – for the purpose of routing inbound messages received by TMS to the correct department and for establishing usage stats – a unique keyword needs to be allocated to each account.

Anyone requiring information about eligibility for free nursery places from Family Information Services simply has to text the published keyword to the advised short code number to activate a new enquiry.

Texts are received by FIS in a dedicated inbox. TMS generates an automatic response asking the applicant to text back the specific information required to establish entitlement.

That information is then sent directly to a case officer for action. Within 48 hours, FIS will inform the applicant by text if their child has a free nursery place.

Providing internal text services

News on the success of the FIS project has spread throughout the Council and other departments are asking the network team to set them up with bi-directional text communications. Expanding the use of text allows the Council to fully leverage their TMS investment.

Each new user will have their own account within TMS, so department usage can clearly be identified for monthly billing purposes. This way, each department contributes towards the cost from their individual budgets, rather than it coming from the Council's centralised IT budget.

Benefits for both

Residents now know very quickly if their application has been successful and FIS has been able to reduce the time staff spend dealing with manually completed forms, which has freed them up to concentrate on more important tasks.

The project has enabled FIS to collate a text number contact list of parents, which can be used to inform parents if the school is closed for any unforeseen reason or about events etc; further improving communications.

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