

Lambeth Council's Legal Department is Delivering 21st Century Legal Services Using LexisNexis Visualfiles® as Backbone for Operations

Introduction

The London Borough of Lambeth (Lambeth Council) is one of 14 local authorities that make up Inner London. It is one of the most densely populated inner London boroughs, with a diverse population of around 300,000.

The Legal Services department plays a pivotal role in supporting many of the Council's key services and projects. It has proactively participated in initiatives including the £200 million 'Building Schools for the Future' programme and Service Innovation as part of the 'New Ways of Working' project. The department also provides legal support to the Council's regeneration schemes such as the Myatts Field PFI, which is the largest urban housing estate regeneration project in the UK.

In the current climate, as well as delivering large-scale improvement projects, every Council must ensure it is delivering 'value for money' by creating more effective, efficient and economic ways of working. The Legal Services department has contributed significantly to Lambeth Council's promise of delivering value for money to its residents.

Today, the 60 staff strong Legal Services department at Lambeth Council offers services in the areas of social services, employment, planning, procurement, housing, litigation, land charges and contract management. It is widely recognised in the public sector for its innovative use of technology to deliver the highest levels of service to its clients.

The Challenge

The Legal Services department at Lambeth Council is continually striving to expand and improve its customer offering whilst making it a better place to work for staff. To this end, the department has embarked on some very forward thinking initiatives.

The department had outsourced its legal services to external law firms for a number of years. However, with the public sector drive to demonstrate quantifiable efficiency savings, most notably as a result of the Gershon Efficiency Review report; alongside the Council's efforts to gain better control on the quality and effectiveness of its services, Lambeth decided to provide all legal services via an in-house team. In doing so, it recognised that the department's case load would increase exponentially. Without the luxury of additional resources, the department too was cognisant that it would need to do more with the same level of resources as before.

Simultaneously, the department was also keen on implementing a 'new' way of working so that staff had the ability to work from anyplace, anytime, anywhere. The success of this approach hinged on staff having the right tools and access to reliable and up to date information at all times.

The Solution

The Legal Services department was using SolCase, LexisNexis' earlier version of its case management system, for almost five years essentially as a time recording system.

In its efforts to modernise and support these innovative projects, the department upgraded to LexisNexis Visualfiles in 2008. The decision was led by the department's past experience of LexisNexis' collaborative style of working and

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the solution's widespread recognition in the public sector as a superior case management tool for high volume case work.

Interestingly, today the Legal Services department is using LexisNexis Visualfiles as its secure content management and time recording system. Its use of this solution is illustrative of the scope and functionality that LexisNexis Visualfiles offers to organisations.

Gerard Kamath, Business Manager of Legal Services at Lambeth Council, says, "We are leveraging technology to embark on an ever evolving path of excellence. LexisNexis Visualfiles is the backbone of our operations. It underpins our infrastructure, processes and communication with our fee earners, clients, courts, suppliers and external firms. It is 'the' key tool that is helping us to achieve our business goals and in our effort to excel at being a 21st Century professional legal organisation."

Business Benefits Realised

As the Legal Services department's content management system, LexisNexis Visualfiles is the single point of reference for every aspect of its operations – right from case related matters to performance management of staff and department through to risk and compliance.

The high level of automation of the repetitive administrative processes delivered by business process reviews and implementation procedures within LexisNexis Visualfiles has enabled the department to provide in-house legal services for employment, child care, planning, housing, litigation and contract management. With approximately 5000 live cases currently in LexisNexis Visualfiles, almost 70 per cent of the administrative process work today is done by this system. This has also considerably reduced the Council's spend on employing legal firms.

LexisNexis Visualfiles provides over 1000 pre-populated document templates, court forms, precedents and a link to the LexisNexis online library. The user defined database screens efficiently capture and record every intricate detail of the business and its cases. They also help produce performance indicators for every case, which are incorporated within the system, making it easy to track history and progress. Time recording for legal practitioners and administrative staff is embedded and client satisfaction surveys too are part of the workflow.

In addition, the department has the capability to develop workflows to create new business processes for ongoing operational efficiency gains. For example, the department has developed a new workflow for invoice processing. The legal department receives approximately 100 fee notes every week from external firms for costs and damages, and from Barristers who represent it in court. All the fee notes are instantly scanned and images sent electronically to fee-earners for receipting and managers for approval. The electronic process then automatically forwards invoices to the accounts department for payment. Previously, every fee note had to be manually presented to the respective fee-earners in the department for approval. Given the work load and client priorities, often fee-earner approval would take several days delaying payments and generating unnecessary paperwork due to additional correspondence and follow ups pertaining to invoice clearance.

LexisNexis Visualfiles has been integrated with other stand alone LexisNexis products such as its online legal library, Lexis@Library; and its court bundling system, Document Bundling, further enabling operational efficiencies. Integrating LexisLibrary with LexisNexis Visualfiles has made case-related research, documentation and

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communication with the different parties involved in cases very easy. As the research is stored in LexisNexis Visualfiles, building up precedence files for similar case work for the future has become a very efficient operation. The integrated Document Bundling solution has automated the process of importing, collating, formatting, indexing and page numbering large volumes of relevant documents into bundles, which also reside in the central resource – LexisNexis Visualfiles.

Now all staff members at the department are able to work remotely as they have access to LexisNexis Visualfiles. This ability has not only improved the work-life balance of staff, but also significantly reduced sick leave by a staggering 70% in the department.

Finally, the Legal Services department operates a paper-light environment with all work undertaken electronically. This has led to a reduction in the use of paper and large storage spaces.

Looking Ahead

Based on the success of LexisNexis Visualfiles' current implementation, the department has successfully brought in areas of work previously outsourced to external legal firms. Childcare, adult care, planning and property work are now conducted by in-house lawyers. In addition, planning is underway to bring the Legal Services department and Democratic Services department under a single umbrella of Legal & Democratic Services. If this initiative is successful, LexisNexis Visualfiles will become the core technology platform for the whole division.

In the meantime, the Legal Services department is considering utilising the inherent developmental capabilities within LexisNexis Visualfiles to further add new functionality to its existing solution.

It is looking at developing a mapping facility that will give it visibility of trends pertaining to how and where legal services are most utilised in the Council. To illustrate, having information of the geographic area where say the most housing related legal cases occur, whether these cases tend to be linked to particular scenarios, or if such cases consistently arise in deprived areas; will enable the department to allocate the appropriate resources to those neighbourhoods. This information could then be shared with other relevant departments in the Council so that the root causes of these housing related issues can be remedied.

Another project that is being conceptualised is the development of a client-facing portal within LexisNexis Visualfiles. This will enable the department to receive new instructions electronically and allow clients to track the progress of their cases online. Envisage this scenario. Via clear guidance on the portal, a new client provides all the information pertaining to his or her case including the necessary evidence and documentation. Through the inbuilt workflow and business process, the case gets allocated to a case officer with the appropriate expertise. Therefore, on receipt of the instruction, the case officer has all the pertinent information to commence a new case, eliminating the time consuming process of gathering critical but standard information. This kind of tool will significantly speed up execution of cases, reduce administrative work and allow case workers to concentrate on the more expertise-led tasks.

Finally and perhaps the most ground-breaking is the Legal Services department's keenness to develop a process within LexisNexis Visualfiles, which will give it the ability to monitor and track its nationally benchmarked Performance Indicators. Taking the example of legal spend, with this process the department will be able to break

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down the statistic to spend by borough, local area, legal practice area, social issue, suppliers and even cost per head of population. This will facilitate transparency of operation and help the department to contribute towards its Local Authority's Gershon requisites.

Gerard Kamath concluded, "The possibilities are endless and there is still a lot left in the LexisNexis Visualfiles technology for us to exploit. We are very pleased with our progress so far. We have created a modern working environment, improved the productivity of staff and department alike, seen visible operational efficiency gains, enhanced the quality of our services and given our staff the necessary flexibility to facilitate a good work-life balance – all enabled by LexisNexis Visualfiles."

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