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CASE STUDY

Wicklow County Council

Council body achieves better space management, tighter controls and greater internal efficiencies through outsourced file management system

Wicklow County Council provides a range of housing, transport, sanitary and amenity services to County Wicklow and its 126,000 population. Based in Wicklow Town, the Council has 265 employees in its main office and an annual budget of €340 million. In recent years, the Council has faced a significant file storage and management problem – a problem brought to a head by a major internal reorganisation programme which saw a number of sites consolidate within its main council offices in Wicklow Town. This put a growing pressure on office space and additional strain on the Council’s filing system. In July 2006, following a public tender process, the Council awarded a contract to Filestores for the provision of onsite file storage and management services. The new system has freed up more space within the Council’s offices, improved security and made it far easier for Council staff to access stored records.

Situation

Wicklow County Council operated a somewhat haphazard and inefficient file storage system within its 5,000 square metre head office in Wicklow Town. It had a store room in an annex close to its main administration building, part of which was given over to the storage of documents such as planning files, financial reports and contracts, with each Council department having its own dedicated area for storing files. A key weakness of the system was that there was no single method for storing files or any controls applied. As a result, there was widespread indiscipline about filing arrangements.

“We used to have problems with items left in corridors – creating a potential fire hazard – and dumped in the store itself. Staff were clearing files from their offices and depositing them on any free shelving they could see,” recalls Eddie Murphy, executive technician, Housing & Corporate Estate at Wicklow County Council.





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“This also led to problems with file retrieval because most people weren’t adhering to the proper filing system. Staff might have to go through a hundred or two hundred files before they found what they wanted. It was hugely inefficient.”

Inefficiency is one thing but an inability to fulfill legal obligations is another entirely. The Council found it was having difficulties to comply with new legislation such as The Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts, which required public bodies to be able to produce documents on request.

Something had to be done; the situation was fast becoming a “nightmare” according to Murphy.

To further complicate matters, the Council was undergoing significant organisational change as part of the ‘Better Local Government’ national programme introduced in 2000. Individual departments were coming together in single locations where previously they would have had staff based throughout the building, and new staff were transferring into the building from outlying Council offices and sites in the town.

Before the moves actually happened, the Council conducted a detailed audit of its entire building to find out exactly how much space was available and how much was needed. One thing the audit uncovered was the large number of files that were stored in individual offices because of the problems associated with using the central filing system. “We found we could free up a lot of space by removing those files into storage,” said Murphy.

The imminent reorganisation gave the Council the perfect opportunity – and the impetus – to tackle its worsening file-storage problem. It decided to take action.

Solution

While the Council recognised its file management system needed a radical overhaul it also knew it didn’t have the resources or expertise internally to tackle the problem. This meant going outside for help. It scoured the market for a company that could provide such a service and found one in Filestores.

Part of the DMG Group, a document management and business process outsourcing specialist, Filestores already had an impressive track record in the area, being the provider of such services to Dublin City Council plus a number of large banks in Dublin.





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“We visited a number of customer sites in the city and we also went up to Filestores’ own facility at Park West in Dublin to see how it operated. It all seemed very efficient and exactly what we were looking for,” says Murphy.

Rather than ship all of its files to Dublin, however, the Council was keen to retain current or near-current files onsite in Wicklow. It felt it would have greater control of and access to them if they were stored locally. But there was another reason as well, says Murphy.

“We had the storage building already in place, so we felt it would cut down on the expense if we stored files locally rather than up in Dublin. There would also be fewer trips required by Filestores vans to our offices. These would be limited to the times when requested files were being delivered, maybe a couple of times a week,” he says.

In July 2006, following a public tender process, Wicklow County Council signed a one-year contract with Filestores for the provision of file storage and management services. The contract was renewed in 2007 for a further two-year period.

The contract was a new departure, not only for the Council itself but also for Filestores. Although the company occasionally provided storage services onsite at client premises, on this occasion Wicklow County Council was also looking to have a Filestores person working full time at the Council’s offices, managing the file-storage facility.

The file manager’s role would be twofold. First, to collect any documentation to be stored, catalogue it and file it within the store room and second, to retrieve any file at the request of a Council employee, sign it out to them and sign it back in once they had finished with it. This would ensure a full audit trail and visibility of documentation – either it could be found in the store room or it was in the hands of an identifiable employee.

To ensure a smooth transition from the old system to the new, Filestores undertook a detailed communications programme with Council staff to explain the proposed changes and how the new system would work.

“With any new project, there is always an apprehension among staff as to whether the new system will actually work. So it’s very important that you get immediate buy-in from the company and its employees,” says Sandra Harte, business development





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consultant at Filestores. "So we set up a meeting with the heads of all the various departments within Wicklow County Council and we did a presentation on how the new system would work, outlined the input we would need from them and ran a Q&A session to address any concerns they had. Doing this really helped in terms of the project rollout."

Next came the task of bringing some order to the Council's filing system. It was decided to start with historical files that were held in the storage room. A representative from each department worked with the file manager to go through the contents of each file. They were barcoded to identify their contents and facilitate subsequent retrieval, and then scanned into a file management database. The files were then refiled on the shelves.

After the stored files had all been catalogued and filed, it was the turn of the files held in offices around the building. According to Harte, the obvious success of the system made employees more willing to part company with their precious files than they otherwise might have been.

"When we put the system in place and they saw how easy it was to retrieve files, their confidence really grew and they started to release the existing documents beside their desks into the storage area as well," she remarks.

As well as manage the Council's files onsite, Filestores also houses a large number of historical files at its purpose-built and secure premises at Park West off the Nangor Road in west Dublin. Of the council's approximate total of 72,000 files, 46,000 are stored onsite and 26,000 offsite in Park West. Of the locally held files, 10,000-15,000 are current files kept in individual offices within the Council headquarters. These are normally held for a year or two before being shipped out to the internal stores, at which point they become Filestores' responsibility. In addition, old files that are past their retention period are destroyed by Filestores' sister company Shred-It, which specialises in the disposal of confidential documents.

Summing up the benefits that have been seen since Filestores assumed responsibility for the Council's file management in 2006, Murphy comments, "It makes life so much easier for everyone here. The barcode-based solution Filestores has implemented bears no comparison with the old ad-hoc system we used to use."





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Benefits

- **Space savings**

The deployment of the new system by Filestores meant that hundreds of box files could be removed from desk areas and offices, freeing up substantial amounts of space which has been used to house additional staff members.

- **Time/Labour savings**

Where previously Council staff could waste hours trying to find files, they now simply request the file by emailing the Filestores representative, who delivers it to the employee's desk and removes it again when it is no longer needed. The hassle and frustration associated with the old system have been eliminated, leaving staff free to focus on other, more productive tasks. Mr. Murphy states as a result of deploying the new system this has led to a financial saving to the council as well.

- **Cost-effective solution**

While opting for an outsourced storage management system, Wicklow County Council has been able to keep costs down by using an onsite storage facility, which means it doesn't have to pay for offsite storage and transport costs between sites. Onsite storage has the added advantage of making files easily accessible to employees.

- **Full audit trail**

All files are held securely in the store room and only the Filestores representative is authorised to access it. Whenever an employee requests a file it is signed in and out by the Filestores representative, thus ensuring clear visibility of files at all times and ensuring that if a file goes missing there is a clear audit trail in place.

"The database shows who a file is was signed out to and the date and time it was signed out and back," says Murphy, who says the system should guarantee that a file can never go missing.

Complete traceability of files has become mandatory within local government in recent years as auditing activity increases on the part of funding organisations such as the Department of the Environment and the EU. "Having an audit trail has become essential.





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This is especially the case now – with money getting tight we have to account for everything we look for and we spend,” notes Murphy.

- **Peace of mind**

Keeping track of documentation is important not just for internal efficiency and customer service reasons; it is a legal requirement. The FOI and Data Protection Acts are just two of the legal instruments that place significant document management obligations on organisations. Having a high quality document management system in place – professionally managed by Filestores – gives Wicklow County Council full confidence in its ability to manage, track and audit files.

‘The barcode-based solution Filestores has implemented bears no comparison with the old ad hoc system we used to use.

Eddie Murphy, executive technician, Housing & Corporate Estate, Wicklow County Council





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Solution Overview

Organisation profile

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Industry sector

Local government

Situation

Poor filing practices had created great internal inefficiencies and left the Council exposed to legal action in cases where a file could not be found or its confidential contents were disclosed.

Solution

Experienced file management expert Filestores implemented a barcode-based tracking system that ensures complete visibility of all stored files and a security procedure around it to make sure files were fully traceable

Benefits

- Frees up office space
- Saves money by reducing external storage requirement
- Promotes a tidier, safer working environment
- Saves countless hours of employee time, boosting productivity
- Provides full audit ability and traceability of documents and records
- Delivers peace of mind – the Council knows it is compliant with FOI and other relevant legislation

