

A golden opportunity

Putting in new software systems can offer the chance for council waste operations to develop best practice, says **Phil Garvey**

■ **IT IS A FULL-TIME JOB FOR COUNCIL EMPLOYEES TO KEEP UP TO DATE WITH THE** continuous change in EU and UK guidelines and requirements. Nowhere is this more evident than in waste management.

Every month volumes of initiatives, rulings and political ranting cause interruption to day-to-day operations. It is no wonder that many council operations find themselves so bogged down in the political quagmire that they do not have the time or opportunity to review the regular parts of their operations and implement best practice procedures. This is often despite the high costs of supporting operational activities and processes that are inefficient or inappropriate.

In recent years, a catalyst for change has appeared from an unlikely source. Implementing new operational software is difficult across any organisation but, if done properly, it can give a council the opportunity to review procedures and compare against other similar organisations.

With the emergence of tailored products to fit niche areas, a savvy council can use the software supplier to provide independent, added-value consultancy – and

often at no cost. This is often an overlooked area when councils decide to build their own solutions using in-house resources.

As with most council services, members of the public have no idea of the scale and complexity of the operation required to provide what we regard as a ‘simple’ service. The council, on a budget of pennies per resident, must collect and dispose of waste. It also has to report to a myriad of government organisations, in minute detail, statistics such as how many cans were recycled compared with last year or what complaints were received and how many were genuine.

In this bureaucratic landscape, implementing a new software package can give a council the ability to review its processes against those operating in other councils. In much the same way as reviewing existing processes, the software implementation can also often ensure that the correct groundwork is done for the introduction of new services.

So while the implementation of a new piece of software is always difficult, it can be used as a golden opportunity to review processes and procedures.

Phil Garvey is managing director of Whitespace Waste Software

HOW SOME COUNCILS HAVE USED SOFTWARE IMPLEMENTATION TO PUT IN PLACE BEST PRACTICE

“The first part of the implementation process was to run some joint workshops. During these meetings, we had the opportunity to obtain feedback from our supplier on our mode of operation and to compare our processes with other similar customers. Despite all the forums, it is not often that a council such as ours gets the opportunity to be shown alternatives to business practices that we take for granted.”

Keith McNamara, Perth & Kinross
head of waste services

“When we implemented our new operational waste management system, there was healthy debate on several of our key business processes. One in particular was the way that we invoiced schools for their trade collections. Our supplier compared our modes of operation with their other council customers and made recommendations on how we could reduce the administration effort without affecting customer service.”

Nicki Lishman, Ryedale District Council
waste operation support officer

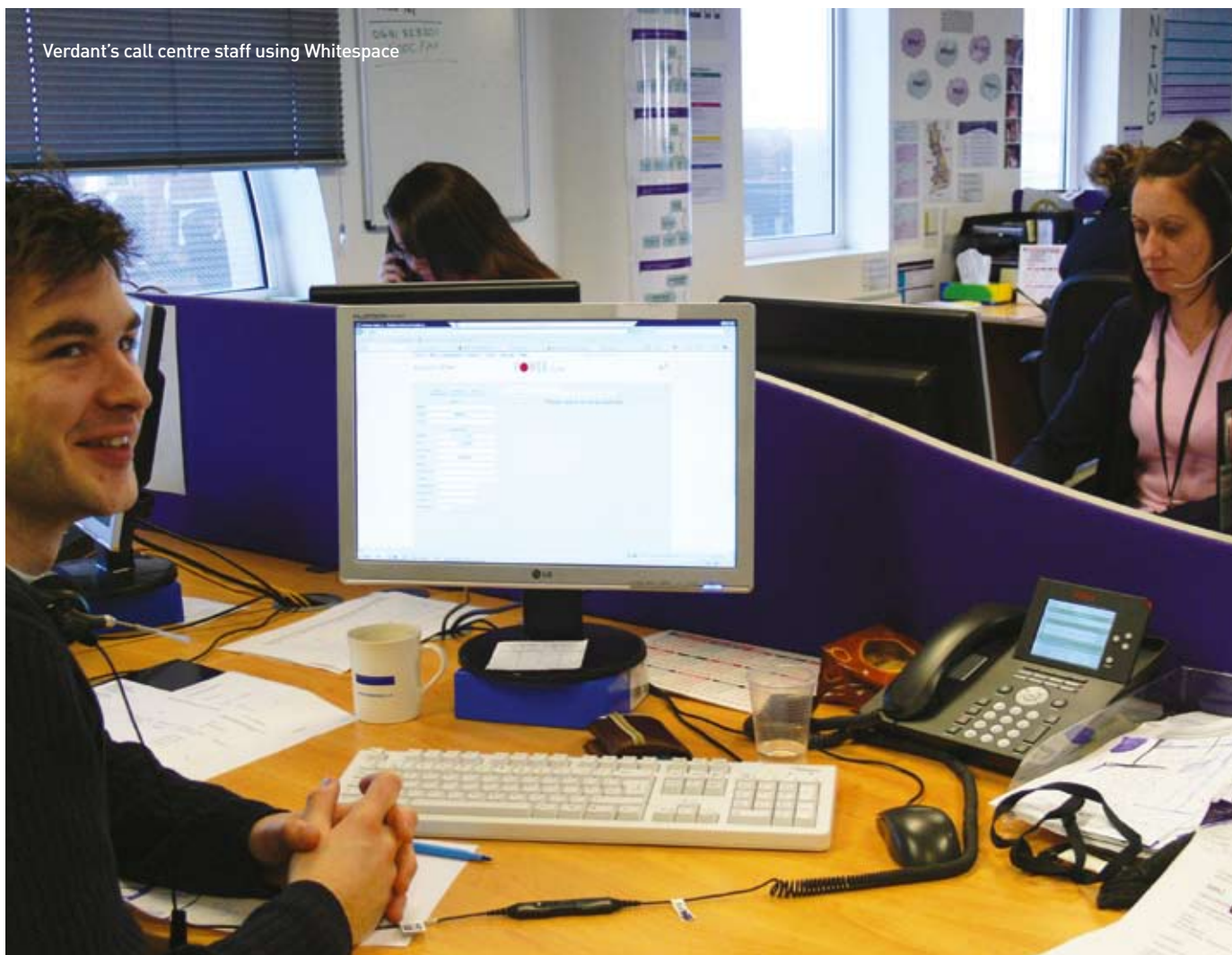
“One of the reasons we chose our solution provider was that it had a working knowledge of the practical issues we had to address. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the workflows attached to the waste management application.

“Reviewing council processes across multiple departments and mapping out workflows brings a simple visualisation of often quite complex processes. Just agreeing what the workflows are at present and how simple changes should be made often brings huge increases in operational efficiencies.”

Becci Reid, Wiltshire council operations business manager
for waste recycling and street cleansing

“We have particular issues in our area due to the diverse geography. We have used the introduction of various versions of software to be more reactive with discounting. In addition we are trying to learn from other councils by being much stricter around the areas of invoicing and credit control.”

Stuart Harwood-Clark, South Cambridgeshire District Council
environment operations manager



Verdant's call centre staff using Whitespace



PHIL GARVEY'S TOP TIPS FOR COUNCILS

- Review all existing practices
- Compare with the best from other councils
- Take the opportunity to change and improve where appropriate

HOW VERDANT IS USING SOFTWARE TO SUPPORT SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE

When Verdant introduced its new waste and recycling collection service for South Oxfordshire District Council, it put in place a Whitespace Power Suite software system to support its operations team.

This enables Verdant call centre staff to bring up a screen of information on each property, which includes details of the waste/recycling services available to that property along with collection dates and extra services offered, such as clinical waste collections. It also holds a record of previous calls made from that property about missed collections, for example.

When a member of the public contacts Verdant by phone or emails call centre manager Paul Cherriman or his team, they can bring up the information on the caller's property using a postcode or unique property reference. Armed with this information, they can usually answer the query straight away or start a new 'worksheet', which is essentially an instruction to the depot team to respond to a situation, such as a missed bin or a dead animal at the side of a road.

The worksheets that are sent to the Verdant depots use a traffic light system to help staff prioritise and keep on top of the problem, and they turn white when the issue has been resolved.

Between the team of four, Cherriman estimates that they take about 120 calls a day. This is down from the 1,400 a day

they were taking from the area's 56,000 households when the service was first introduced. Calls are now mainly about what materials can be put into which bins, stolen bins and missed collections.

Whitespace started working with Verdant about a month before the new alternate week collection of commingled recyclables and residual waste, weekly collection of food waste and opt-in green waste collection service was launched in June 2009. Since its introduction, the service has boosted South Oxfordshire's recycling and composting rate from around 38% to 70%. An integral part of this success has been the software support system that has armed Verdant's staff with the information they need to resolve people's queries.

"The system meets its requirements because it has been purpose-designed," Cherriman says. It has also made reporting simple, which has helped to produce weekly reports for the council and daily reports for Verdant.

"The other day someone called the council and wanted to use the Freedom of Information Act to know every piece of information that the council held on them. Because of this system, we were able to download and print everything for the council in about five minutes, whereas I expect it took the council a lot longer to get the rest of the information together," Cherriman says.