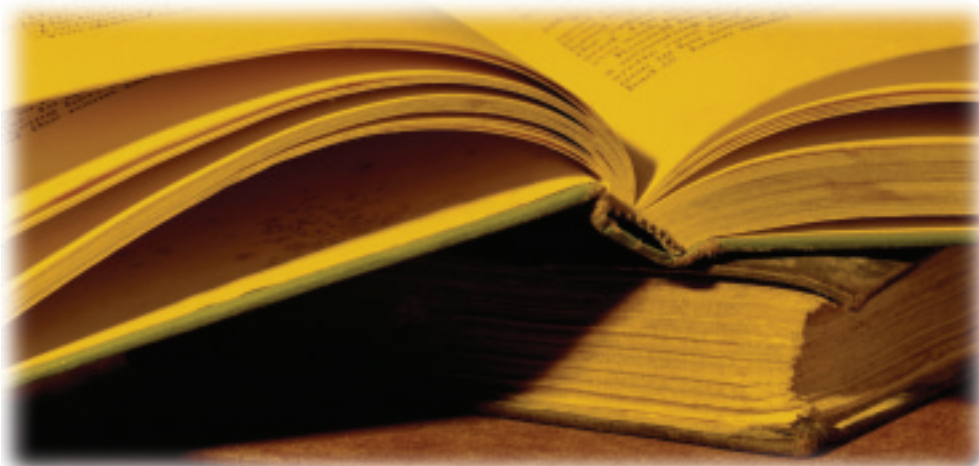


The National Archives Meets Customer Targets Set in Freedom of Information Act



The National Archives of England, Wales and the United Kingdom has one of the largest archival collections in the world spanning a thousand years of British History, from Domesday Book of 1086 to government papers recently released to the public. The collections, housed in Kew, West London, are available for viewing in person or in many cases, documents are available online.

Many of the enquiries from the general public are genealogical; over 600 staff based at the site manage requests for information and access to documents. The National Archives also acts as a clearing-house to provide information about non-public records and manuscripts relating to British history kept elsewhere in the UK and overseas. Members of the public, located anywhere in the world can submit a request by webform, fax, phone or email to The National Archives in order to obtain information from these records and documents.

The Freedom of Information Act, which came fully into effect in January 2005, gives people the right of access to information held by public bodies. Under the Act, requests for information must be responded to within twenty days. To meet this challenge, The National Archives has recently implemented Supportworks, a service management system from Hornbill Systems.

Complying with New Legislation

The type of public bodies covered by the Act ranges from central government departments to schools and parish councils. Given the nature of the services provided by The National Archives, this project would represent one of the largest implementations in the UK designed to manage requests for information from members of the public.

In order to comply with the Act, The National Archives required a system that would provide access to both its corporate records and archives (records transferred from the government departments). The organisation also faced the challenge of producing auditable evidence that queries had been answered within the period laid down by the legislation.

According to Chris Owens, Head of Access Development Service at The National Archives, "Prior to the Act, requests for information would be responded to by smaller groups of people, working within their own local or internal service times."

"Once the Act came into force, we needed an enquiry handling system that was much more visible and capable of being used by more staff across different departments to handle the calls, as well as using common processes and service delivery targets" he continued.

Business Benefits:

- Transparency of entire enquiry management process.
- Workflow process ensures all enquiries are followed through - flags automatically alert staff and management of delays for a particular enquiry
- Improved customer service through effective routing of enquires by trained frontline staff.
- Reporting helps to manage trends and allows the organisation to plan resources more effectively.
- Accountability by measuring performance against the twenty-day enquiry turnaround target.

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Chris Owens,
Head of Access Development Service
The National Archives

Accessible Across the Organisation

As well as providing much greater accessibility, it was also vital that the new system had mechanisms for tracking each enquiry and ensuring that it was answered.

As The National Archives is one of the largest public sector bodies in the UK affected by the Act, this implementation was high profile. A best practice approach was required. The National Archives studied implementations in Canada and other countries to benefit from the experience of other organisations that had been through similar projects. Taking these experiences into account, a series of workshops was held internally to identify the new processes required for a more robust and traceable enquiry handling system. In parallel, the organisation developed a specification for a software system that was then sent out as a request to tender to a number of companies. As a result of the tendering process and after evaluation, the solution from Hornbill Systems was selected.

Hornbill's approach was to provide their core Supportworks platform, which had the entire request handling capability built in. On top of this platform, Hornbill provided an application template, which ensured a better fit against business requirements; meaning less effort was required to provide a fully configured solution. In addition, the system could be up and running within a shorter timescale than would normally be expected for a project of this scope.

"With Hornbill's Supportworks we found that many of the facilities we required were already features of the product, which meant that the final solution would require minimum customisation," said Owens. "Given that we were working to fairly tight timescales and a limited budget, the Hornbill solution clearly represented the lowest risk and offered the best value for money."

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High Volumes of Enquires within Target Times

Since implementing Supportworks in January 2005, The National Archives has been able to efficiently track and fulfil requests for information from the public and to measure performance against each enquiry. All key staff are now trained to use the system and this has also initiated a review of working processes.

"Hornbill set up an automated workflow for us which takes each enquiry through a series of defined steps, recording times and dates of incidents as well as showing current status and notes relating to the enquiry at every stage," explained Owens. "The implementation of the system went very smoothly, and in just two months, we have handled around a thousand enquiries - more than most other government departments - and most have been responded to within legislation timescales."

Improved Customer Service

Asked about how the implementation of Supportworks has helped The National Archives to achieve its targets, Owens commented on the much greater transparency of enquiry management: "Everyone involved in the process of handling requests for information can see how many and what type of requests are coming in and their status."

Owens also claims that customer service has been improved from the effective routing of enquiries by trained frontline staff to the person or people most able to answer each enquiry. Staff using the system have particularly liked the 'Microsoft Outlook' look and feel of the system, providing them with instant familiarity.

"The new reporting facilities also help us to manage trends and plan resources - and of course, provide us with that all important accountability required by the Freedom of Information Act," Owens added.



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