

# Customer EXPERIENCE

## ABOUT ASHFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

Ashford Borough Council in Kent employs 600 staff and has an annual budget of over £50 million. Ashford is a key London commuter town and Ashford International train station is also on the Eurostar route from London to mainland Europe.

## CUSTOMER NEEDS

- Improved social inclusion and shorter waiting times for key council services including council housing
- Ability for the council contact center to deal efficiently with mobile SMS communications
- Offer alternative communications channels to the public that are in line with consumer trends

*“The Mitel Multimedia Contact Center enables our contact center staff to receive applications for council housing by text messages from a mobile phone that costs the public very little. ‘Texting’ is second nature to a large portion of the population and we are offering them the chance to access our public services in the way that suits them best.”*

– Rob Neil, Head of ICT Services, Ashford Borough Council



## Ashford Borough Council uses SMS to Extend Social Inclusion with Mitel

### Fostering Social Inclusion Through Technology

Ashford Borough Council is a progressive organization that has embraced the latest communication technology in order to enhance customer service. The council is living up to its objectives, set out in its five-year corporate charter, wherein the council states that it should communicate both effectively and openly with the public, ensuring that services are made accessible to all. In 2003, Ashford Borough Council deployed a Mitel® Customer Interaction Solution supported by the Mitel 3300 IP Communications Platform (ICP) to improve customer satisfaction rates by dealing with enquiries more quickly, easily and effectively. The Mitel Customer Interaction Solution enabled Ashford Borough Council to improve customer service overall through better call management. It is now exceeding the e-government target of dealing with over 80 percent of enquiries at the first point of contact.

The Mitel IP Solution also gives the Council the flexibility to extend opening hours by enabling staff to work from home and have the same functionality that they do in the office. This ensures that emails, web chat and Short Message Service (SMS) messages can still be dealt with even when the office is shut. It also benefits the employees by helping them to achieve a work-life balance.

In 2005 the council decided to improve access to services for the public by addressing changing consumer behavior in terms of preferred channels of communication, with a particular focus on mobile phone text messaging.

### Reducing Queues for Social Housing

The first council service to be given SMS access is the social housing division at Ashford Borough Council. This service provides housing to the public through a list system published once a month. On the day the list is published, applicants are required to contact the council to register interest in a particular property.



it's about **YOU**

### SOLUTION COMPONENTS

- Mitel 3300 IP Communications Platform (ICP)
- Mitel Customer Interaction Solution
  - Mitel Contact Center Management
  - Mitel Interactive Contact Center
  - Mitel Multimedia Contact Center
  - Mitel Contact Center Intelligent Queue
- Mitel IP Phones

### RESULTS

- Improved customer service levels through the integration of mobile communications in the contact center
- Increased flexibility for the people of Ashford, enabling them to call or text after-hours, at times when they may be more likely to be reviewing what housing has become available
- Innovative new ways of dealing with citizens, from payments to information requests as well as new ways to enable citizens to report on environmental issues such as street light outages
- The promise of reduced waiting times during the registration period for choice-based lettings

However many applicants do not have access to a phone line or email during working hours either due to the nature of their jobs or personal circumstances. When applicants are forced to wait before calling or emailing to register their interest, they are often too late and find themselves at the back of the queue. Inevitably they are not offered the same choice as those that were able to call or email earlier in the day. Ashford Borough Council decided that it needed a system that would foster better social inclusion for council housing, and enabling SMS applications would achieve the desired results.

The Council now offers people registered on the Housing Waiting List two new ways to register their housing choices. Moreover, choices can be registered throughout the day and night by sending the Council an SMS text message from a mobile phone or by using the automated telephone service.

These new services provide increased flexibility to the people of Ashford, enabling them to call or text after-hours, at times when they may be more likely to be reviewing what housing has become available.

To offer the SMS service, Ashford has integrated an SMS gateway with the Mitel Customer Interaction Solution. This enables text messages to be routed directly to contact center agents. In order to access public services by SMS, an individual can send Ashford Borough Council a text message, which is then converted to email and answered by a call center agent in real time. The agent then sends back an email, which is again converted into a text message and sent to the customer's mobile phone.

Rob Neil, Head of ICT Services at Ashford Borough Council said, "The Mitel Multimedia Contact Center enables our contact center staff to receive applications for Council housing by text messages from a mobile phone that costs the public very little. 'Texting' is second nature to a large portion of the population and we are offering them the chance to access our public services in the way that suits them best."

Ashford Council is phasing-in SMS communications for various other council services. Using the Mitel Multimedia Contact Center the public will soon be able use text messages to report street lighting faults, report abandoned vehicles, book council facilities and courses, and request details on Council services. Citizens will also be able to register their details with the Council to enable payments to be taken out of their bank account using SMS, so that parking fines can be paid using SMS, in addition to other Council-related payments.

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