

Microland helps Ealing Council go digital, saving both time and money



Challenge

Ealing Council was managing key processes with pen, paper, and legacy tools. The Council wanted to give citizens a digital way to engage with them from any device.

Solution

A citizen-facing portal and digitized processes, built on Microsoft Dynamics 365. Microsoft partner Microland helped the Council design and implement a web-first solution.

Results

Significantly improved customer experiences and reduced costs for the Council. Microland's solution dramatically reduced citizen wait times and reduced costs by 30 percent.

Across the many boroughs of London, citizens must interact regularly with their local councils to pay taxes, request assistance, and report problems. However, in the London Borough of Ealing, these processes were often still being carried out offline—with pen and paper—which was very time-consuming and manual for both the customer and the Council. If a citizen wanted to file for a tax exemption, for example, they would need to fill out a paper form, submit it to the Council, and then wait a few weeks for it to reach the right team and be processed. If more information was required, which is often the case, the team would have to reach back out to the citizen via offline channels, such as a phone call or mail, before eventually delivering the final resolution via mail. The average wait time for a request like this was about 25 days.

These processes were often slow and frustrating for citizens, and they were expensive for the Council to maintain. The Council had to juggle disparate line-of-business applications, customer care staff, scanning and post teams, and local kiosks. The offline and siloed legacy systems caused redundancies and data errors, made it challenging to detect fraud, and prevented the Council from getting a single, 360-degree view of their citizens. The Council knew there had to be a better way.

To reimagine their customer engagement processes, Ealing Council reached out to Microland, a long-standing Microsoft partner with over 25 years of experience implementing Microsoft technology. Microland has attained several gold

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competencies in the Microsoft Partner Network that include Cloud Productivity, Cloud Platform, and Collaboration and Content. The Council began working with Microland back in 2017 to deliver a suite of services and infrastructure updates, and after working closely together for four years, the Council knew that Microland would be the right partner to help them with this new digital transformation effort.

The Council had a few clear requests for Microland on this project. They wanted to make thorough changes to their internal and external processes, implementing a solution that could ensure:

- A shift in communication channels with citizens from offline methods to e-services.
- Clear, unified data to enable debt recovery and fraud detection amongst other beneficial outcomes.
- Modernized business processes including automation where possible.
- Consolidated activities and reduced operating costs.

With these goals in mind, Microland got to work designing a solution to suit the Ealing Council's environment.

Building a digital solution for the Ealing Council

From the outset of this project, Microland knew that their solution would use Microsoft Dynamics 365 Customer Service, an industry-leading solution built on the Microsoft cloud to deliver consistent, connected support across various channels. By unifying all the Council's customer data onto one platform, Microland would help the Council eliminate redundancies, fix errors, identify fraud, and gain 360-degree views of citizens' interactions with the Council. Now, when a citizen goes to apply for a tax exemption, the Council can see the citizen's other engagements with the borough, helping them better understand their history, needs, and how to serve them.

To help with the initial design and development of the solution, Microland worked with Microsoft to guide strategic architectural decisions and solve technical challenges. Once the first set of digital Council processes were complete, Microland took end-to-end responsibility for the Council's digital transformation and led the effort independently.

Over the years, Microland has built numerous Microsoft Dynamics 365 Customer Service solutions for government and private sector customers. They start with templates and re-use past solutions for new clients to accelerate the process, and once they have a starting point, their team of certified Dynamics 365 architects, developers, and consultants works closely with the client to customize the solution and suit their specific business requirements. Taking this hybrid approach enables Microland to build a solution that fits the customer quickly and without having to start from scratch each time.

Reimagining customer engagement with Microsoft technology

As Microland built the customized solution for Ealing Council, many different Microsoft products played important roles. For example, the Council's Microsoft Dynamics 365 portal was integrated with Dynamics CRM to create an online channel where citizens can raise requests, fill out applications, make payments, and report problems to the Council. The integration between the two products enables automatic case creation in Dynamics CRM whenever a citizen submits a ticket, and it enables communication between the CRM case owner and the citizen at any stage of the request—an upgrade over the previous system where the case owner would have to call the citizen and record things manually.



Microsoft Outlook was also integrated into the solution, enabling Council staff and reviewers to send out automated or manual emails from the CRM directly to citizens.

For data storage and document management, Microland used SharePoint Online integrated with Microsoft Dynamics 365, making it easy for Council staff to access and track documents in a centralized location. To secure this data, Microland used Microsoft Azure Active Directory B2C to manage customer registration and access to the portal, as well as their own custom security frameworks to help protect data confidentiality.

Finally, Microsoft Power BI was used to build custom dashboards for the Council, generating easy-to-use reports to match their business needs, and Bing Maps was used to help citizens select addresses in their request and for case owners to pinpoint the exact location of issues.

Smoother processes, lower costs, happier citizens

Since the Ealing Council has implemented their new solution from Microland, they have seen impressive results. The Council has reduced their operating costs by 30 percent by shifting from offline processes to a digital-first model. Their new solution has also delivered significant customer service benefits. Remember the 25-day wait period that citizens used to face for a tax exemption? Now, citizens can apply for things like tax exemptions online, on web or mobile, via the Council's Dynamics 365 portal. This request is then routed in real-time to the proper Council team and a case in Dynamics CRM is automatically generated. Additional information about the citizen's past engagements with the Council is pulled in for context, helping them better assist the citizen and identify fraud. Once the case is resolved, the resolution is passed back to the citizen via the portal. With these digital processes in place, the Council has slashed the average case resolution time down from 25 days to three.

In just under a year, more than 100,000 citizens have used the portal, with more using it every month. Nearly 30 percent of the Council staff, including contractors and field workers employed by the Council, are active CRM users. To encourage further usage of the portal, Microland regularly analyzes issues that citizens face while using the portal and proactively suggests updates to improve the user experience.

The Ealing Council, with Microland's help, has digitized nearly 150 business processes, making them available through this new solution, and they have plans to include more. "Microland has been a true partner throughout this journey, from design to delivery, showing great agility and flexibility in what's been a very challenging time for everyone. We have a full roadmap for further developments for the rest of 2021," notes Peter Greenham, Head of ICT at Ealing Council. "Together with Microland, we are digitally transforming the Ealing Council, while saving money, increasing efficiency, and improving the delivery time for our customers. Customers can now access many services, where the new Dynamics 365 portal gets requests routed in real time and directed to the right team."

Innovative organizations like the Ealing Council are setting the tone for government agencies around the world. Microland notes that they are seeing numerous government bodies beginning to digitize processes for interacting with their citizens, and they see this trend accelerating rapidly. Other councils within the United Kingdom are already in talks with Microland about replicating the Ealing model, and given the recent pandemic, the importance of digital services has never been higher. Innovative governments know that embracing digital solutions, like the Ealing Council's portal, can help them provide services to their citizens during times of uncertainty and isolation.