

## Wandsworth Council uses innovative technology to increase Direct Debit registrations

### Implemented new automated system

Wandsworth Council has been the first council to use innovative voice recognition technology to sign up council tax Direct Debit registrations, a move which has increased the council's Direct Debit take up by more than 40% compared to the same period last year, and earned them first place in their division of the Bacs Direct Debit Challenge League.

Responsible for the billing and collection of council tax for over 132,000 properties, Wandsworth Council handles 450 items of correspondence surrounding the payment of council tax on a daily basis. In order to further enhance collection targets and promote ease of payment, in April 2009 the council introduced the Automated Direct Debit Service (ADDs) using the voice of a virtual agent to answer the council's existing three Direct Debit hotlines.

The technology fields customer enquiries using speech recognition combined with the phone keypad, so council tax and bank account information is keyed in rather than spoken thus ensuring data security.

On phoning the hotline customers are asked a series of questions enabling them to set up a Direct Debit and select a preferred payment date. Once all the relevant information has been collected the customer details and bank sort code are validated on the council system. A confirmation letter is then issued to the customer, and a detailed file sent to the customer's bank advising of the new Direct Debit instruction.

### Best practice is evident

During the call, if a problem occurs with any of the details registered the customer is put through to a Council Tax Officer. These fallback calls are handled internally via a whisper transfer (the member of staff is given the account number and reason for the transfer) before the customer is connected.

The speech recognition system fully utilises the current back-end infrastructure and processes by updating accounts 'real time', using a new piece of software called Integrator. This new and innovative solution ensures the system is fully self sufficient from start to finish, alleviating the need for human intervention and reducing human error.

### Direct Debit offers greater control

Suzanne Lancaster, Council Tax Manager, from Wandsworth Council said: "We naturally promote Direct Debit as a payment method. This is not only because it is the most efficient option for the local authority, both in terms of cost and administration, but also because of the resident benefits in helping to ensure timely payment of council tax allowing them to budget more effectively."

"The aim of our introduction of 'Kate', our automated voice recognition system, was to capitalise on our existing Direct Debit hotline number, and provide an extended 24 x 7 user friendly service that meets customer needs and ensures calls are not abandoned."

"We needed a cost effective solution that could be implemented quickly, with minimum disruption and would enable the council to make cost savings and reduce our reliance on temporary staff."

"Customer feedback so far has been very positive, with results showing the system to be user friendly, with no one rating the system less than four out of five. We are delighted that as the first users of the innovative technology, our commitment to continuous improvement has been recognised by Bacs, and allowed us to win our division in the Direct Debit Challenge League."