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WANDLE HOUSING ASSOCIATION
MAKES PROCUREMENT AS EFFICIENT AS THE
REST OF ITS ACCOUNTING APPROACH

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CASESTUDY

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Through the use of iPOS from Four, staff productivity in relation to requisitioning, ordering and budget management has been radically improved for this busy London housing association.

Wandle Housing Association owns and manages over 5,600 properties in 11 London boroughs including Bromley, Croydon, Lewisham and Wandsworth. It is responsible for the provision of a number of bed spaces for supported housing needs, as well as the management of over 400 privately leased properties. Wandle has a track record of nearly four decades of proven experience in housing provision, its management and IT teams are based in three South London sites.

Like all such organisations, Wandle takes pride in its careful budget management, crucial for a cost-conscious culture. However, its performance was being hampered by an older and increasingly inflexible purchasing system.

"We manage a large number of transactions," says Wandle's IT Manager, Gordon Taylor. But whilst the association ran its accounting process very efficiently, with built-in error handling and consistency measures, the availability of details on the organisation's actual spending position could sometimes lag behind.

This was mainly because the team was not always able to log data on purchases that had yet to be invoiced, perhaps, for example, for items such as staff training. This could sometimes lead to the raising of purchase orders after an invoice arrived, a situation which is never ideal. Taylor believed that if he could better integrate purchasing with the existing back-end

accounting platform, it would be much easier for staff to track expenditure as it was incurred, and, at the same time, help senior staff to better manage their budgets.

"The way our finance system works is that if someone raises an invoice or an order then you are looking at something like 150,000 different items that they can choose from," says Taylor. "We like to break things down into detail in order to be able to order most efficiently from our suppliers. People go out on-site, manage contracts across multiple properties for things like security, lighting, gardening etc. and also handle issues with tenants like rent refunds and compensation claims." However, Taylor believed that the old system did not make it easy enough to be able to select items at a suitable level of granularity for the system to be easily and effectively used.

Making efficient operations even more so

Wandle made the decision to find a technology solution that was able to work with its own organisational procedures and procedures without introducing significant disruption to the back-end accounting platform, which is SunSystems-based. There was also a very tight timeframe for the go-live date - April, the beginning of the financial year. Bearing all of this in mind, the association decided to go with the iPOS suite provided by integrators, Four, and this is a decision that seems to have already benefited the organisation.

Performance, for example, has had to be second to none – and, of course, it has been, with Taylor describing the system's performance as exemplary since its commencement in April 2007. Taylor describes one of the benefits of the iPOS system as its ability to work quickly through the large database of purchase order items in order to find the desired element. However, speed was just one of the requirements. The new system was also tasked with a brief to be as user-friendly as possible, thus differentiating itself from the older, unloved system - another objective that Four has met with relish.



“One of the benefits of iPOS over the previous system is the ability to create a template for ordering key items, and for that template to be used again and again to raise invoices for the same amount on a regular basis. We had a real struggle with the old system because people had to re-key information, so there is an awful lot of time saved from a user's point of view once they are able to raise an order for the same thing, over again, whenever needed,” Taylor says.

Another attraction of the iPOS approach was the ease of integration with the association's existing accounting package. Taylor explains: “Our accounting system is reasonably complex and the older system wasn't flexible enough to take into account the way that we work here.” The implementation of integration has been necessary not just with Wandle's accounts system, but also the housing management system which handles requests such as those for repairs, maintenance, contracts and so on, all of which are raised by finance.

The introduction of iPOS is also helping management to gain more visibility of the current financial state of the business. Taylor adds: “iPOS lets you see in real time what your budgets are doing and this is something that the old system just couldn't. From a manager's point of view, I can see whether we can afford a suggested new item.

For the next financial year everything in the budgets will be placed within iPOS so we'll know exactly how much money we've got to spend – and how much we've spent already.”

The system is being used by a wide variety of staff across the organisation, and it is proving popular. As Taylor comments: “The system is so flexible, speedy and reliable that people know that when they are going to raise an order they are going to be able to do so quite quickly.”

Taylor and his team also appreciate that, through the use of iPOS, navigation time is cut down significantly. “In the last system it was very difficult to move around the different processes in purchasing,” he says. “Now, for instance, if something is requisitioned you can send it back to the requisitioner and say, ‘I'm not going to approve this’, for whatever reason. You couldn't do that in the last system; all that could be done was a flat cancellation and an email conversation would have to follow. You had to step outside the system, basically. But now, once the requisition is raised within iPOS, you can really see what it is and how it is structured - so if there is a need, it is easy to amend and keep everything inside the system's boundaries, which is more efficient.”

Why Four?

Taylor singles out the partnership approach offered by Four as being one of the main benefits which influenced his decision to work with them. “I like the way that we can continue to adapt the product along with Four, who are very willing to work with us to integrate the product with our other systems here. That's been a very smooth process. Four have been very good in building the system to align with the way that we work. Everything is delivered on time. They stuck with the project plan and really drove it forward, which was wonderful.”

Taylor also appreciated Four's approach to training and their handling of post-installation change requests from users: “Four spent a lot of time getting this working, and they were also very good at getting buy-in for the new system.”

The tight time-frame was, of course, all important - everything needed to be up and running for the start of the financial year. “Four really did throw everything at it to get it in on time. From my point of view, Four made project management very easy, because if it took them working all weekend to complete something then that's what they did – and frequently - just to make sure the system was there.” Taylor also had praise for the company's expertise in relation to other existing technologies that were in use, particularly in relation to the integration with the back-end accounting system.

Where next?

For Wandle, the main benefit of the iPOS technology centre is the ease of use when making orders and requisitions, whether they are one-off or repeat in nature. This is aligned with a capacity to bundle up requisitions into a single, more generic order, as well as creating purchasing templates that can be used for recurring items.

Wandle can already see where additional functionality could be particularly useful. Other future extensions, for example, will include allowing outside contractors to raise their own invoices on the system. Taylor adds: "Four have also completed the integration with our document management system, working in partnership with Capita. This has been a very easy phase which will go live this month. We then intend to work with another housing association, RCT in Wales, as well as Four, in order to integrate our housing management system. They also have iPOS and can see the benefit of driving iPOS deeper into the organisation and standardising all areas of the association."

Overall, however, it's what iPOS is doing now that has impressed him the most. "From a user's point of view - and also from an IT point of view - we've had simply no problems with it at all. It's just one of those things that seems to work, and, best of all, it has already started to save us an awful lot of time."



Client profile

Wandle owns and manages over 5,600 properties in eleven London boroughs (Bromley, Croydon, Hammersmith & Fulham, Hounslow, Kingston, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Southwark, Sutton and Wandsworth) including 340 bed spaces for direct and agency managed supported housing. It also manages over 400 privately leased properties. With over 38 years' experience of housing provision, it has a thriving development programme which has made it one of the most successful developing associations in London.

Industry

Social housing

Web

www.wandle.com

Technologies

iPOS procurement from Professional Advantage



Solution Summary

Busy London housing association Wandle had been struggling with an inflexible purchasing system that also had performance challenges. An upgrade to the iPOS solution from Four has resulted in a more integrated and efficient way for staff to work, and this has also improved cash flow and budgetary visibility.

About Four

Four Business Solutions is a company specialising in the delivery of spend management and employee expense solutions for SunSystems accounting software users.

Our clients include Manpower Software, Tesco EMS, Phillip Morris, Wandle Housing, Data Logic Group, Celtel, West Mercia Housing, Civica and RCT Homes.

Our consultants offer unrivalled business application and project skills, complex integration and technology knowledge and a client focused approach – a combination that has helped us successfully deploy some of the largest and most challenging projects in the industry.

For more information, visit www.four.co.uk

