

Norwich City Council provides “Breathing Space” for those struggling with financial difficulties using RPA



NORWICH
City Council

Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, it's been estimated that debt and arrears of over £6.1 billion have been accumulated by 4.6 million UK residents. As a result, approximately half a million individuals have fallen into rent arrears and are subsequently struggling with housing insecurity - and a further 17% of adults are currently worried about paying for essentials.¹

In order to support citizens with heightening financial concern within its own constituency, Norwich City Council sought to implement the government directed scheme, “Breathing Space” as efficiently and effectively as possible. Through the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) – and the innovative recycling of existing automations – here's how the council was able to implement an end-to-end digital solution that provides its residents with congruent financial support.

The Challenge

Households across the UK continue to navigate the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, with a quarter of workers furloughed at some point between March 2020 and June 2021² and unemployment rates hitting highs of 5.2% between October and December 2020.³

With monetary concerns a growing and national issue, Breathing Space offers debtors a 60 day pause on recovery enforcement. This includes the exemption of interest, recovery action and communications, allowing residents to seek advice and pursue a suitable repayment solution before escalation.

In order to respect and navigate the sensitive nature of financial issues, the council aspired to implement a digital system that could be integrated with existing back-office systems. It wanted to ensure that, once residents accessed the Breathing Space scheme, they would only be required to alert the council on a single occasion – all other systems and records would be updated

Key Benefits

- Enabled residents to seek debt advice in a dignified manner
- Reduced negative financial impacts on residents
- Allowed departments to remain unified in data & information
- Reduce mental health impacts caused by financial burdens



Once Breathing Space went live, we knew that whether we did have 1,000 or 10,000 applications, the system would be able to cope with it. We haven't had any issues with it, everything's been processed with a 100% success rate.



Stuart Filmer
Lead Developer





automatically, with no further contact to be made by any department during those following 60 days.

The Solution

As Norwich had previously found ample success with its original [Tell Us Once](#) solution, the council has been able to reuse large sections of this project and has taken a modular approach in creating a further 25 internal processes – such as parking permit printing and allotment notices. This has resulted in administrative savings and high-quality data throughout a range of its departments. This model was quickly applied to Breathing Space, requiring only a few minor tweaks within [NDL Automate](#).

In just one working day, the project team was able to create and test its RPA Breathing Space process. With great success, the automation was implemented immediately, with the new process as follows:

1. Debtors can request 60 days of Breathing Space independently online
2. RPA bots use this information to complete logic-based tasking which checks for open accounts related to the individual within 6 relevant departments
3. Bots then start a workflow for those departments, so any debts are frozen quickly



We really want to promote self-service. One of the massive, fundamental building blocks of that is the ability to communicate between systems.



Paul Gooch
Contract Support & Applications Manager



The Benefits

The Tell Us Once project was originally implemented to ensure the council would only require notification of a resident's death on a single occasion, and every department would be updated. This was to improve not only resident experience - in eliminating the risk of continued notifications and communications sent by unknowing departments - but also to improve the council's own data quality and accuracy.

In doing this, it achieved a time saving of approximately **425 days**, processing **204,000 transactions across 17 departments** – of which would previously take a member of staff 3 minutes each to check manually. These same benefits could also be found when applied to the Breathing Space scheme, with the automation already **saving 27 hours**, processing 91 notification emails – equating to **546 transactions**.

What's Next?

Norwich Council continues to drive value with its consistent use of NDL's low-code automation technology, implementing efficient and effective automation processes wherever applicable using a single corporate licence. With over 25 automated processes and counting, the council's use of RPA continues to drive its digital transformation efforts.

Looking for more outstanding public sector use cases? You can find plenty of RPA case studies over on our [Success Stories](#) page.

References:

- 1 - <https://www.stepchange.org/policy-and-research/debt-research/post-covid-personal-debt.aspx>
- 2 - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/anoverviewofworkerswhowerefurloughedintheuk/october2021>
- 3 - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx/lms>

