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Swindon Borough Council experience a 98% efficiency increase of its Free School Meals application process with RPA

“NDL’s Robotic Process Automation Proof of Concept (PoC) exceeded the council’s expectations and helped garner full organisational buy-in, before quickly progressing to live automation, making processing Free School Meals applications easier than ever before.”

Sarah Talbot
Emerging Technologies Lead

Effective management
of increased applications

Reduction in data error

Increased safeguarding
of sensitive information



With the advent of COVID-19, many families across the country were unexpectedly forced into the benefits system leading to a large increase in demand for the Free School Meals, a vital service for the health and wellbeing of children. At Swindon Borough Council, this resulted in a year-on-year growth of 2000% in the applications for school meals.

How does a service scale to meet a 2000% increase in demand?

In recent years, Swindon Borough Council have invested in an Emerging Technologies Team. Led by Sarah Talbot, their remit is to examine new technologies and their applicability to service development across the authority. Working on an evidential basis through a trial, measure, review and refine model, the team have already chalked up some notable success and at the beginning of 2020, built a Robotic Process Automation (RPA) proof of concept to evaluate it's potential.

The objective was to see if it was possible to minimise repetitive manual administration of Free School Meals by fully integrating existing back office systems, instantly processing data between the council's existing systems and those at the Department of Education (Department of Education portal, Jadu and CapitaOne), including introducing the ability to operate on a 24/7 model thereby providing citizens access to information as and when needed.

This automated service provides a parent or carer the ability to complete an easy online form request on behalf of a child. Once submitted the RPA checks the application against individual data held across relevant Council and DoE systems. If data needs to be resubmitted at a later date, for example when an application for Universal Credits is still being processed by the Department for Work and Pensions, the system will automatically schedule a re-check, ensuring no applications fail.

Fortunately, the pilot was up, running and proved to be successful prior to the UK going into lockdown. So, as the demand then grew the efficiencies gained using RPA meant that the service could be scaled and meals applications could continue to be processed quickly and efficiently for the families in Swindon.

What does the evidence show?

By embracing automation technology, the council were able to prove the benefits of RPA and show how it can have a huge positive impact on service delivery. Not only were there the administrative efficiencies, the emerging Covid-19 situation demonstrated the ability to scale services at short notice. This proved to be a critical capability in such a deeply socially valuable area, at a very difficult time.

The application turnaround time for parents and carers has been reduced by 66% compared to the previous model. This led to quicker council decisions regarding additional nutritional support for children and will have ensured that their everyday needs were and continue to be met, even as the Free School Meals scheme was extended using vouchers over the summer.

The council have calculated a 98% increase in efficiency when processing data using RPA, resulting in less time spent on slower administrative processing and more time for the very best support to citizens. In addition, the authority have seen:

- Effective management of an influx of new and consistently high volume of applications
- Reduction in data error, previously vulnerable to manual data duplication across multiple databases
- Increased safeguarding of sensitive information with the inclusion of the digital processing model

"We're incredibly proud of what we have been able to achieve so far on behalf of residents in our region, instilling new ways of thinking and pushing forward with innovation to deliver the best service possible."

Sarah Talbot
Emerging Technologies Lead

Applying lessons learnt beyond Free School Meals.

Now proven, this project is the first of several digital transformation projects using NDL's RPA technology and services to be undertaken by Swindon Borough Council. Building on the success of the Free School Meals RPA project, the council has already implemented RPA for the Children's Social Care team, integrating children social care processes between CareDirector and CapitaOne. There are numerous other projects being identified, developed and tested by the council with the aim of using RPA to help improve service quality.

Want to know more?

Why not contact a member of the NDL team who can share with you a wide range of applications created across our community of Local Authority, Health and Social Housing organisations? There are hundreds of live examples across a multitude of business processes, all built using NDL's Digital Transformation and Robotic Process Automation technologies and methodologies. For more information email info@ndl.co.uk or visit www.ndl.co.uk.

"The surge in demand for Free School Meals is certainly not unique to the region, with other councils across the country experiencing similar issues. By quickly mobilising RPA, we have developed an automated model for efficiently processing applications, with the ambition to continually bring benefits to our citizens such as helping schools to access funding. For any council experiencing the same influx of Free School Meals applications, I recommend looking at a similar approach"

Sarah Talbot
Emerging Technologies Lead, Swindon Borough Council

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