

# Communication is key for Hertfordshire County Council



**Ensuring an efficient telephone communications system when your organisation is a vast local authority with thousands of staff - many of whom spend much of their time out of the office with clients - can be problematic. Recently, we asked Gerry Causer, Voice Services Manager at Hertfordshire County Council to speak to *Local Government Procurement Review*, about how Telephonetics VIP's products are keeping the council's staff connected.**

At Hertfordshire County Council many of our staff work in the social care field and are not always in the office. They are frequently out visiting clients or at meetings, and it is often more convenient for them to drop into one of our other sites to work or divert calls to a mobile, so we wanted a telephone system that could accommodate this in a user-friendly way.



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The reason for choosing this product was because we needed something to aid this mobility. We are in the process of rationalising our property portfolio with the aim of providing our workers with the ability to work more flexibly. From a telephone point of view, that means making sure that they can get their calls diverted to them wherever they are, which may sound obvious but is one of those things that can be overlooked.

We've been using the equipment since the beginning of 2007. We use a product called ContactPortal, which has the optional Mobility system enabled, allowing people to work flexibly. Before this, we had a system whereby staff had to dial a ghost number followed by a 24-digit code in order for them to get their calls.

Now there is a simple four step process for staff to bring their calls to where they want to be. They dial the access number to the system, enter their identity - which is the same as their extension number, enter a PIN so that

no one else can divert their calls, press zero and put the phone down and that's it.

Crucially, the Mobility system also retains control of the calls. If I'm not at my desk I can set it so that after a set time it tries my mobile or home. If it doesn't find me then, the system still hangs on to the call and transfers it to my voicemail.

The feedback from staff has been positive because it is easy to use, and can be set up either via a computer or the telephone. We've been training staff on it, and using that as an opportunity to train them on call handling as well - the softer side of how to actually manage telephone calls as opposed to how to just press a button.

As well as many of our staff working out of the office, many are also part-time. We've cut down on the number of desks so that there will probably be around eight desks for a team of twelve, and this system allows people to receive their calls at whatever desk they happen to be sitting at that day, or at one of our other sites within the county.

It's very flexible, which means we can add extra people on as departments grow and expand. We have around 1,000 users on the system at the moment, but from April we will be moving around 1,500 people from various smaller sites to one large site in Stevenage and adding them all on to the system, so it will be more than doubling its size. All we need to do is add the users from the departments that are moving to a spreadsheet and import it into the system.

We have two of these systems in two different locations - it's set up so that if one fails the numbers automatically revert to the other system, making it highly resilient. This is extremely important to us because as a county council we have responsibility for a lot of emergency planning issues so we have to ensure that we are not just relying on one site and one system.



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► One of the sites - County Hall is where our switchboard operators are situated. If we had to evacuate there, the system gives us the option to use the 'Virtual Operator' at the other site to ask a caller who they want and then to locate the user according to where that user has told the system they will be.



ContactPortal itself is a voice-activated dialler and auto attendant, but we don't use that part of it on a day to day basis at the moment. There is also Business Continuity, which enables us to set people's calls to a pre-defined location in the event of an incident - it means that if one system goes down all of the calls are automatically re-routed to another site, ensuring that no calls are ever lost.

**If another organisation had needs similar to ours then this product would be worthy of consideration.**



At present the two systems work together - it doesn't matter which system I dial into to divert my calls, or which one of them handles the calls, because every 30 seconds they update. The plan is to include the third system in this arrangement so we will have three sites around the county, and we won't be vulnerable to weather and localised problems.

These systems have provided us with investment protection both today and into the future. If another organisation had needs similar to ours then this product would be worthy of consideration.

