

Case Study: Local Authority Daily & Annual Billing

Data Processing, Print & Post

MPS Marketing Services has been supplying a **large County Borough Council** with data driven print services since January 2009.

This County Borough Council had an in-house print unit and small, poorly resourced mail-room with limited enclosing kit and without any intelligence/camera or barcode reading ability.

On a daily basis, the authority's benefit & revenue collection staff, collected large & heavy boxes of their daily printed council tax bills, sundry letters and complex multi-page benefit letters from the print unit, then carried them back to the offices for hand-enclosing of these multi-page bills and letters.

Enormously time consuming and taking authority staff away from core activities, MPS recognised the inadequacies of their existing processes. After meeting with key stakeholders and with information gained, MPS put a cost-benefit analysis report & proposal forward that would make significant savings and improve staff efficiencies to a point of saving four full time equivalent (FTE) positions within their financial department. Though unfortunate, at a time when local government had budget funding slashed to almost unprecedented levels, these savings were welcomed.

The services we provide have developed over the years though in summary, shown below are the key services and projects we delivered.

- **Annual Billing:** this is the primary requirement for the revenue and services department to bill for all council tax and revenue generation for the authority. This is a complex requirement which includes matching of highly sensitive and confidential personal data for council tax payer and benefit claimants, prior to intelligent enclosing and fulfilment.
- **Daily billing and posted communications.** The authority was running an internal print unit, though not responsible for annual billing, but for all other posted communications for the revenues and finance side of the authority. This was inefficient, costly and requiring investment in both machinery and software improvements. Budgetary cuts meant that they were looking to lose four FTE (full time equivalent) posts from their print room. All internal print room functions since January 2017 have now been migrated to an outsourced service developed by MPS.
- **The authority** is now migrating all other departmental print, post and emailed transmission of business-critical documents to MPS production in a phased service delivery and for all other parts of the whole authority print & post needs, including payroll, pension and Homes/housing stock.

How we introduced the services and the business advantages they could receive.

MPS was already an experienced provider of complex annual billing print & post services to local authorities across the UK. MPS has expertise in the financial, banking and local government sectors.

The transactional print and e-Delivery services that MPS provides has allowed the authority to reduce four FTE staff from the print room and three FTE staff from the Revenue & Benefits department. Not only has this help meet ever stricter budgetary requirements but has also delivered efficiencies within the authority.

Data Matching (Revenue & benefit systems)

MPS were already delivering a matched council tax bill and benefit letter & mail service as part of the outsourced annual billing end-of-year requirement. However, in-house, the print unit could not achieve this.

- ✓ This meant that the print unit would print overnight, separate data files from the council tax and benefit systems. Revenue and benefits staff would walk to the external print room, approximately 40 metres away, often in the rain, with big boxes of personalised council tax bills and separate benefit notifications. Staff would then hand-match relevant bills to letters, so that they could be posted within the same envelope. Staff effectively became 'hand-stuffers' of over 100,000 packs of bills and letters each year. This was hugely inefficient.
- ✓ the integrity of the matched service we were delivering was attributable to our data skills and programming and our understanding of what was required and our AIMS system which is further explained below.

Automated Insertion Management System (AIMS) as part of the enclosing process.

This technology, the **addition** of a simple but unique camera-read 2D barcode to every single page & sheet we enclose, meant that every document we processed was fully traceable and auditable.

MPS worked closely with the authority to ensure that we could add this 2D barcode onto every mail-piece and that it all conforms to legal & legislative compliance. The barcode allows our machines, by utilising camera reading technology, to track every document that is enclosed on our enclosing lines. This in turn allows us to monitor mailing dates and processes in real-time, the reporting of which is available as hard copy reports, electronic copy and by website.

Businesses today, especially local authority, face a multitude of regulatory issues and customer demands to guarantee the integrity and performance of sensitive business & confidential communications. Failure to meet those diverse standards could result in substantial financial and reputational loss and jeopardise hard-won customer relationships.

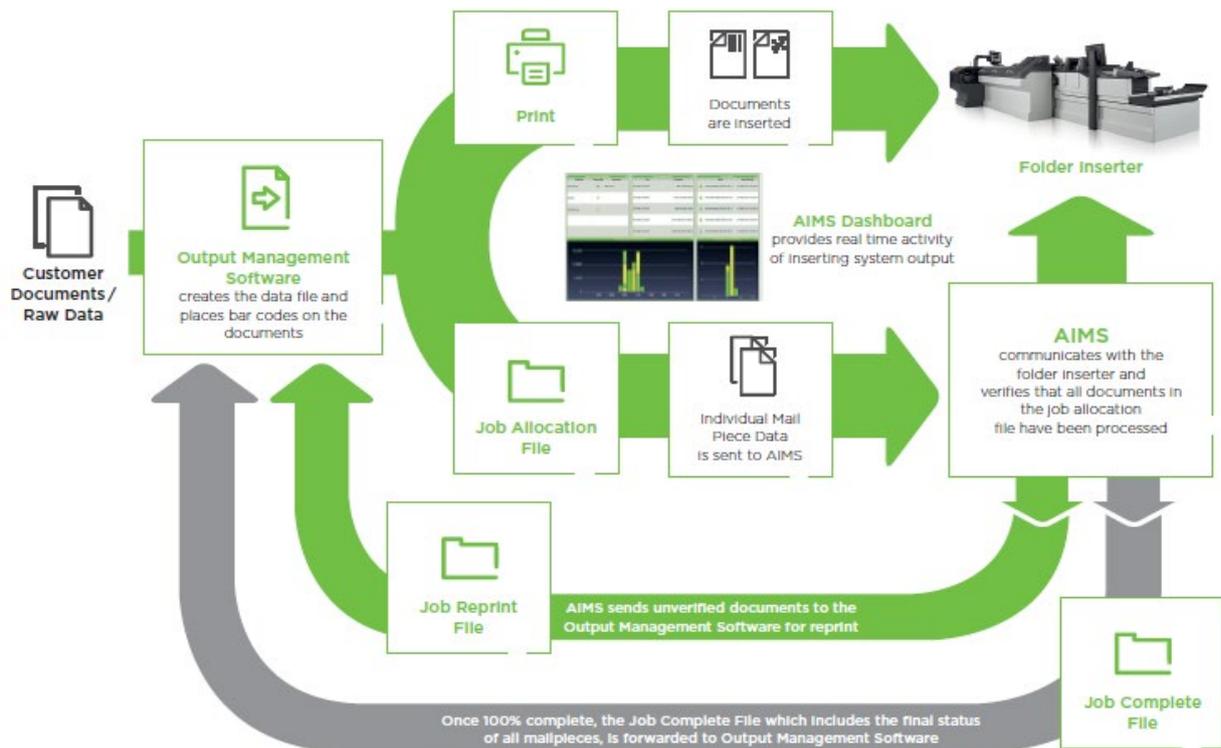
So why did we recommend and introduce the AIMS system for print & post projects?

AIMS is the market leading transactional output management system available today. Because of the confidential nature of the work we were undertaking, most especially with the print & personalisation of multi-page highly confidential benefit information were processing.

AIMS guaranteed that every document that was sent to and processed by MPS, was securely personalised and posted with full audit and traceability. This reporting is sent on to our client for reconciliation with electronic documents sent. Important also, is that this automated system will not

allow duplicated documents to be inserted into the same envelope, nor any miss-match of documents. This technology is cutting edge within this business sector and perfect for the security of our client's documents and effectively stops data breaches by miss-matching of documents.

The Closed Loop System



The Implementation Plan

MPS provided a cost-benefit analysis to this authority's Directors and stakeholders from information provided by them. We were given data counts, page counts, print costs, postage costs and staffing costs for the existing in-house functions that generated the letters and bills which needed posting.

This authority produces 1.6 Million mailed documents per annum. MPS demonstrated savings that in Phase One alone, would deliver savings of more than £360,000.

Worthy of note at this point, is that this authority was enjoying a level of automation and matching of documents from their different systems for their **annual billing** services that MPS had been providing since 2009, but they were not able to achieve this with their in-house production.

The authority knew where they wanted to 'be' and knew that the only way to achieve this was by outsourcing to MPS who already fully understood their needs and requirements.

The migration to fully outsourced services to MPS was agreed to be in three phases.

Phase 1: all council tax billing documents and benefit notifications.

Phase 2: business rate documents and all recovery documents (summons, credit and 'catch-all' letters and documents.)

Phase 3: payroll and pension documents and for introduction of e-mail of all appropriate and previously supplied hard copy letters and documents.

How we did it.

The authority provided one contact point/member of staff who was able to provide relevant information from the IT section, revenues manager and benefits manager. MPS provided a dedicated account manager, (Director), who was responsible for delivering the project, along with the MPS data Manager, Production Manager and his team.

For phase one, we asked for hard copy packs of every available document type, to include an inventory of inserts, stationery and letter types. This was provided by the authority. MPS also requested a file layout mapping document from their software company Academy (Capita) which is invaluable when setting up a project of this nature. We also asked for a strict naming convention for each individual document type, so that when uploaded to our SFTP server, our automated systems would recognise each document and we could apply programming rules written for:

- ✓ the matching of documents (where required)
- ✓ associated inserts, headers, signatures, stationery, outer envelopes

Data: we asked for test-data files for each letter/document type. This allowed us to see and check data structure, apply programming & rules for formatting and for file output. There were over 130 different letter types available within phase one alone. We requested 'raw' data and not any data that was formatted through proprietary softwares for their in-house printing.

When all 130+ document types were uploaded as test files, we then wrote programs that would automatically interrogate the SFTP folders. If data was within a 'folder', automated systems took over and processed each document type, included automatic matching, addition of logos, data counts & pack counts, text repositioning, addition of specific letter-texts and back-prints.

The automated processes also generated useful output which included:

- ✓ automated emails to key stake holders, that data was received and processed.
- ✓ Reports showing data counts and key information about pack types.
- ✓ Whilst in test, automated systems also uploaded the complete print output file as PDF for checking and scrutiny.

Data Matching Rules

MPS provided information on the process workflow of how MPS merged their data, so that there was an understanding of the processes involved. Though not exhaustive, we provided information as summarised below.

Daily Billing Process Workflow

Letter Generation

Letter generation is performed as soon as we receive data each day. Data files are parsed and PDFs are generated for all files into respective files in a Date > Letter type (CT01-24, BID, NNDRXX, HB) hierarchy.

It is at this stage that extraction files are taken from the main files and imported into their own specific folder, this includes ceased free school meals, "£0.01 and -£0.01" bills, and payer deceased.

The generation also scans housing benefits files and sends them to their own folders accordingly (Normal, Non-100, No Account Reference, Landlords and Email Landlords).

Sorting and Merging

Once all PDFs are generated, our bespoke system takes a backup of the PDFs in case of complications. Once complete it will perform analytics, counting the input number of PDFs, total number of digital pages and duplex sheets of paper.

HOUSING BENEFITS

For housing benefits, the system takes a snapshot of every single PDF, and splitting the name of the PDF for data corresponding to it. The naming structure for the PDFs is:

`(<AccRef>_<Name>_<%>).pdf`

Using this information, it will create lists of files, depending on whether they are a 100% match or not.

If they are 100%, the system creates an array of Council Tax bills which have matching account references and merges them accordingly.

This only applies to CT01-06 and CT14.

If they are not 100% the system creates an array of Council Tax bills which have matching account reference and name.

Files with no account reference have a separate output, and the only differentiation is whether they are over 12 physical sheets. (These are then inserted into C4 envelopes.)

Landlords files are all saved as separate PDFs, regardless of whether they have the same account reference. The system will parse through each of these files and ensure they are all an even amount of PDF pages, by adding a blank page to any that are odd. This ensures every letter is separate.

Free School Meals files go into their own folder, and then get added to the Benefit Only File.

Landlord files and Extraction Files are then emailed to the respective recipients.

COUNCIL TAX

The system collects all Council Tax bills left over after the Housing Benefit merge process. Once this is complete, it checks for all files of the same name and account reference and matches them accordingly. Depending on number of pages they either get sent to CT Multis or CT Singles.

This only applies to CT01-10, CT12-14, CT17, CT20 and CT24. All other files are "lone" and will always go on their own.

NNDR AND BID

These letters are collated based on account reference and first line of address at generation and are then combined into their respective packs based on number of pages.

Parallel Running

For two months after we had received all test data for phase one, and once these were all fine tuned and approved, we then moved into a one-month time-frame when we were producing live files from live data that was still currently being produced by the in-house print unit. We mirrored their in-house production and we delivered:

- ✓ The live output proofing files for checking and scrutiny.
- ✓ We delivered each night, hard copy, fully enclosed packs of document types, including the matched letter packs for them to check the matching criteria agreed at the production planning outset had been met.
- ✓ Within three weeks of exhaustive checking and testing, MPS was achieving 100% integrity with improved letter formatting, spacing, higher resolution logos & blacker text than they were able to achieve by their in-house print unit. Note here that MPS was matching highly complex and very sensitive confidential client data using automation and sophisticated programming compared with anything that was achievable in-house.

Four weeks ahead of pre-agreed timetable, MPS was ready to take on live production and for phase one of the project to commence as 'live'. The authority gave approval for MPS to go live on Phase 1.

MPS still delivers the complete output as a searchable PDF file each day, so that their call-centre can see recently produced live letters, should there be phone contact from stakeholders or for legal reasons when council tax payers claim not to have received their council tax bill or other notification.

Delivery of e-Services

As the different types of letters and documents that we personalise and post has grown and evolved, so has the need to take advantage of available digital communications.

As an example, this authority has email addresses for all staff, currently around 3,000, so for the payroll application, which includes all schools, Homes and other council employees, MPS has set-up a system where by the payslip is created from data as a PDF. Our program interrogates the data and if an email address is present, there is a rule set up to email that payslip, rather than print and posting it. (This is an oversimplification of the process) Some staff still prefer hard copy payslips, so they can opt-in to having posted copies.

The Process

MPS can identify documents and letters that need emailing by interrogating the data. There are different types of letter that are uploaded to MPS either as a print ready PDF (some pension and payroll applications) or as raw data. In PDF data, the email address is contained within the non-printable area; for raw data, the email address will be part of the data.

We access the server/provider and send directly in to this server for e-mails to look as though they have originated from the authority and not MPS. We also include bespoke wording to the e-mail, depending on the payroll file type.

Performance & Management

MPS delivers a print, personalisation and mailing service to according to strictly a defined SLA (Service Level Agreement) and contract. This includes, though is not limited to KPIs which include mailing performance relative to data receipt, the strict adherence to agreed timescales to receive, process and post letters from data received, as well as compliance to ISO 27001, the latest GDPR regulations and invoice accuracy, data counts & reporting.

MPS meets with the Head of Revenues & Benefits and Corporate & Finance Services Director monthly and when all key aspects of the service delivery are discussed, documented and approved and when any changes can be suggested/implemented.

We'll suggest that you can gain assurance of our expertise and service delivery by gaining comments and references from us once requested.