Shared services in libraries

Shared services are being used by many local authorities to make savings and tackle the budget cuts. But what are the practicalities from an IT perspective of joining forces with other councils? We look at one example where libraries are sharing services to achieve savings.

Delivering a new technology-led shared service can be a challenge. You know your own IT infrastructure, its strengths and weaknesses, and those of the team who maintain it. Now, you will have to get to know possible new systems or those of your new partner or partners. Systems, software and new colleagues will have to communicate effectively. Differences may have to be put aside in order to achieve a common goal.

But these can all be overcome with careful planning and the benefits of a successful shared service far outweigh any challenges.

At a time when funding to local government is being cut by 28.4% before 2014, a shared service can save literally millions of pounds, protecting both jobs and front line services.

From an IT perspective, a shared service can also mean the opportunity to start with a clean slate. In order to gain the greatest efficiencies from the shared service, you will need reliable, robust hardware and software, some of which you may already have at your disposal, some of which your partnership may purchase, taking advantage of the fact costs can be spread across two or three partners.

Reported savings: based on a cost comparison exercise, the approximate savings have been £50,000 per annum.

The development of the cloud and ever more options for hosting mean the ability to share services is more accessible than ever.

This is the chance to work on a project that will shape the way you and your colleagues work and the way your council's customers access and interface with their local services. And coming later to the game, you can benefit from the experience of others who have gone before you to avoid the common pitfalls, to flag up your requirements and to ensure you meet expectations and deadlines with minimum disruption and down time.

"Wider adoption of shared services across local government offers one of the most compelling ways to transform the services delivered by authorities across the country."
Susan Anderson, CBI Director of Public Services

Here we will look at how Talnet has implemented shared services in their libraries. We will examine how they have made the move and what they have learned along the way.

A problem shared is a problem halved. Joining forces isn't just about saving money, it can also be about reinvesting in an even stronger IT infrastructure.

Case study: libraries management

Hywel James, Principal Librarian Gwynedd, TalNet North Wales Consortium of Libraries incorporating Anglesey, Conwy, Gwynedd, Coleg Menai and Coleg Llandrillo

"Our shared service stems from the last time North Wales reorganised. Prior to 1996, Anglesey and Conwy were one county and we had invested in a new library system. It was quite a substantial investment for a rural county and we felt it would be foolish to break up the arrangement just because the county boundaries had changed. So we took the decision fairly early on that the library management system (LMS) would be used by us all.

"We operate a common card policy, so customers from within the consortium can use their card in any library in the area.

"Although the server is located in Gwynedd, we also deal with two other IT departments. The spirit of co-operation is in our nature, as it tends to be in libraries in general.

"More recently we extended the use of our LMS to two local further education colleges, mainly on the online side. Over the last 15 years we have shown that shared services not only work in three counties, but across other services as well.

"The biggest challenge has been bringing the colleges on board and upgrading the web access to improve the range of options we could offer to users. Working out how to share the costs and sorting out the IT problems with five different users has been a challenge too.

"When joining with the colleges we had to consider how developed their IT departments were, how well staffed they were and how much they understood about library systems. A good understanding is needed on what connections are in place, how

they are routed and what firewalls exist too.

"We decided to consolidate our data and maintain one database for the three local authorities, but the colleges wanted to keep their databases separate because of concerns regarding the security of students' data. So we have three databases, one for each college and one for the councils.

"Managing servers has been a little burdensome recently, so we are now considering moving to a hosted server as this will give us greater security and peace of mind.

"Certainly, we were looking for value for money with our shared service and it was clear if we shared we would get a better quality system at much cheaper rates as a group than if we had gone it alone. By sharing, we have got a system that offers more to our customers. We could never have afforded it otherwise."

Libraries

When looking at shared services in this area, local authorities can choose a hosted library management system or they can keep their server and database on the premises. A hosted system can save money in hardware and staff time, and reduces the need for dedicated system administrators.

Shared services can adopt a multi-tenant solution so the public visits one central website and customers can see not only the books in their local library but also those in neighbouring libraries. This offers a greater choice and the possibility to reserve books or have them delivered to a convenient location for collection.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that we are talking about a technical service, people are the most important factor in its success.

Ultimately, this is a change programme and needs to be managed accordingly. Communication with your own staff and with your new colleagues is not only desirable – it is absolutely essential.

If you have planned well, any IT challenges can be overcome. Networks can be created, data can be migrated and servers updated.

You need to focus on the end goal of the huge potential savings that can be realised, and which can help protect council services and jobs. Think of the implementation of a shared service as a new start. It is an opportunity to change the way you do things for the better, to improve services, implement self-service and upgrade IT platforms or back-up services.

Extract from Capita's 'What IT departments need to know about implementing shared services in local government' white paper.