

Business matters
Lichfield District Council and Partners

Government Connect Benefits Realisation Fund case study

Headlines

Business matters:

- **Government Connect Secure Extranet (GCSX) is a core enabler of Business Matters, a place-based, multi-agency approach to gathering and sharing information about businesses, and a major advance in applying customer insight to the business sector.**
- **GCSX connectivity provides the means to share sensitive and restricted level data with partners.**
- **By supporting Business Matters, GCSX helps businesses create jobs and build local prosperity by reducing the administrative burden on them** – “Businesses should not have to give unnecessary information, nor give the same piece of information twice” Hampton Review of Inspection and Regulation, HM Treasury.

Proven benefits:

- **One service avoids wasting 13 per cent of officer visits to premises through availability of better data.**
- **60 per cent increase in data accuracy.**

Overview

Working with government costs businesses and the UK economy £20 billion per year.

Businesses have to deal with a bewildering variety of government bodies including central government departments, over 360 local authorities and over 100 other authorities. They are regulated, licensed and supported in their activities by these bodies and their encounters with government can be costly, burdensome and frustrating.

The Business Matters project provides an agreed set of standards and protocols enabling GCSX users to undertake essential transactions:

- on a “tell us once” basis
- securely, accurately and consistently
- automatically sharing updates and changes.

“Business Matters is supporting our joint Local Enterprise Partnership submission by providing the means for partners to share a single, reliable, secure source of business data and intelligence across the LEP area.”

**Rita Wilson, Strategic Director
Organisational Development, Lichfield
District Council**

Background

The Business Matters project grew out of the Government funded ‘Working with Business’ National Project in 2005. The objective has always been to make things easier for businesses by streamlining service delivery through improving the use of information.

Now that all local authorities in England and Wales have secure network connectivity between one another, central government and various other organisations like the police and the National Health Service (NHS), via the Government Connect Secure Extranet (GCSX), this objective can be realised at local and ultimately at national level.

Project summary

Business Matters has a simple but powerful vision – to share essential data about businesses between different services, in real time, updating each others’ databases as changes are tracked.

By applying data standards to the way that we capture and hold core data about businesses, we can share that data in ways that will improve efficiency both for business and the public sector. It is about bringing together one true source of data around businesses within a locality, which can then be shared effectively and efficiently across the public sector.

Sharing data and keeping that data accurate and up to date in real time will bring major benefits to many service areas. By using GCSX, Business Matters is able to move from the theoretical model of data sharing to actual deployment in a secure environment.

Thanks to Business Matters there are now agreed standards and schemas defined in a Business Description Schema, available in full at www.workingwithbusiness.org.uk.

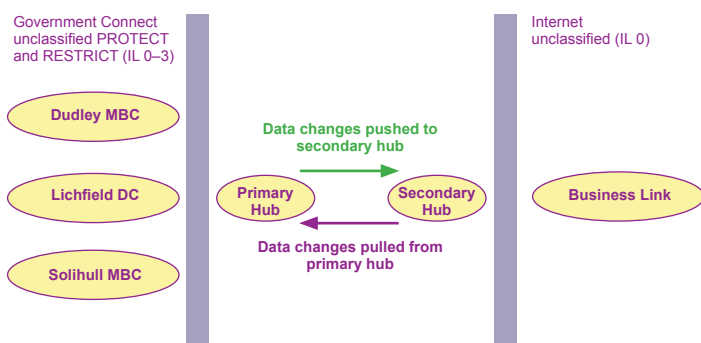
How GCSX facilitated this project

GCSX provides the infrastructure for government and business information exchanges to be conducted on a secure, coordinated, duplication-free basis.

Examples of sensitive data that can now be shared securely using GCSX include information about criminal convictions of individuals, environmental health investigations and planning enforcement action.

Local authorities are connected to GCSX. Business Link West Midlands, a key partner in the project, on the other hand is not part of the government secure community and is outside GCSX and the Government Secure Intranet GSi. This factor helped the project identify challenges related to mixed mode working, ie sharing information across the security boundary.

For local authorities and Business Links to be able to communicate and the GSi to maintain its integrity there need to be two hubs between the two different environments. The hub closest to the GSi is the “primary” hub and the hub closest to the internet is the “secondary” hub.



The primary hub provides the assurance of the integrity of the environment by initiating all data transfers to and from the secondary hub. That is, the primary pushes updates to the secondary and pulls updates from it. As the data on the secondary hub has already been validated against a controlled schema then the risks to the GSi of attacks such as code injection or denial of service are mitigated.

Who was involved and resources

The project is led by Lichfield District Council. Key members are Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Business Link West Midlands. Staffordshire Trading Standards were also involved. The partners have helped develop the standards and have also tested the technology and infrastructure to share information automatically.

Project costs of £75,000 included external project management and technical support. The partners also contributed the time and effort of technical and business process related staff, who had already realised that addressing service process improvement is a core issue. This investment and support has enabled the project to demonstrate for all local authorities the potential of their GCSX connectivity and made future implementations simpler and less costly.

Benefits

Benefits for businesses

Businesses will enjoy a better experience when interacting with the public sector if information is given once and used many times. The standards being set by Business Matters underpin all business processes and are significant to every public sector body. Every business, large or small, that has any interaction with government or its agencies will benefit if the standards are widely adopted. They will enjoy a more efficient, more joined up, more coherent service with less frustration generated by giving the same information repeatedly.

The combination of the standards defined by Business Matters and the secure environment delivered by Government Connect will give businesses the confidence that the data held on them is being deployed securely. Privacy and confidentiality are protected whilst services are improved.

Benefits for public sector partners

Partners will share greater customer insight through a single picture of businesses in their locality. This alignment of information will facilitate better planning and delivery of business support and regulatory services. Public sector partners will be able to work in a joined-up and more efficient way both within and between organisations because Business Matters ensures that all parties are addressing the same business entity at the same location with no ambiguity.

“After the initial data matching exercise, we could all see the benefits immediately – each partner had only part of the overall picture. With data sharing in place we can move forward in new and exciting ways – we have more knowledge of a business before making initial contact, we can tailor our offering better, streamline our efforts and use our own resources more efficiently.”

Business Link West Midlands

Unauthorised sharing of sensitive data will be prevented because every business application will have its own schema which denotes the level of sensitivity of the data being carried. This protects local authorities from the unintended sharing of sensitive data with non-secure networks.

Central Government will also have better policy making information because Business Matters flags ‘trading status’ to support easy sharing of business start-ups and closedowns.

Staffordshire Trading Standards estimate they can avoid wasting 13 per cent of officer visits a year through better quality information and better co-ordination between agencies.

The efforts and outputs from the significant number of local authority data custodians will be harnessed. The address information that currently builds the Local and National Gazetteers will be consolidated into the regional database. The improved levels of accuracy will mean that this database is an extremely valuable resource in its own right.

Dudley Council had visibility of 10,000 business records at the start of the project. They can now see 16,000, giving them a much more accurate picture of their customers and showing the value of Business Matters as a policy planning tool.

Potential scope of benefits

The change will touch every business process: every computer-based interaction between local authorities and businesses, and between local authorities and other bodies such as Business Link and central government when addressing business-related issues.

Examples of processes that can be improved are many, such as:

- planning applications
- collection of business rates
- joined up inspection, eg trading standards and environmental health
- business start up and close down, change of ownership and address.

Potential for growth

A series of local and regional developments over time is the 'bottom up' approach to developing a national index of businesses that can be used by all parties in a secure way. This incremental approach is best because a "big bang" approach would introduce costs and procedural issues that would create barriers given the funding challenges facing the public sector.

Next steps

The roadmap for all West Midlands local authorities to join the programme has been constructed. Ongoing support from Business Link West Midlands has been confirmed. It is possible that they will host the regional database with all local authorities feeding to it.

The potential for local databases to grow to national level has also been identified.

Key learning for other councils

- GCSX is the key enabler for secure information sharing- the heart of effective partnership.
- The development of standards is essential to underpin joint working and whole-system process improvement.
- Partnership working also needs clarity of purpose and commitment of time in order to develop understanding and trust.
- The business benefits are also in the whole system – the accumulation of savings, efficiencies and service improvements across all the transactions and processes in the government/business relationship.

And these general points may be relevant to other projects and GCSX implementations:

- Current costs of imperfect data quality are often not well understood and need to be quantified so that improvements and savings can be measured.
- There are frequent perceptions that the legal position on data sharing is an obstacle, and a clear national confirmation of the position would help.

Further information

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