

Text Message services rolled out to schools and business units by **Telford & Wrekin Council**

A West Midlands local authority illustrates how an investment made centrally by the Council can improve effectiveness across key areas of operation.

Stakeholder is one of those words that would have to be invented if it did not already exist. Without any notions of ownership or relationship or control, it is a catch-all term which describes the whole 'community' within and around an organisation. For a local authority, that stakeholder community is diverse; from its elected members and staff, through Council tax payers to service contractors selected for their ability to deliver value for money. And when the authority has responsibility for education, that network extends out to the teachers and the pupils and their parents.

Communicating with these stakeholders effectively is a challenge for any authority. The vehicles available must reflect the diversity of the tasks. A forward-looking Council will gather round it a complete spectrum of communications, each chosen to give good value.

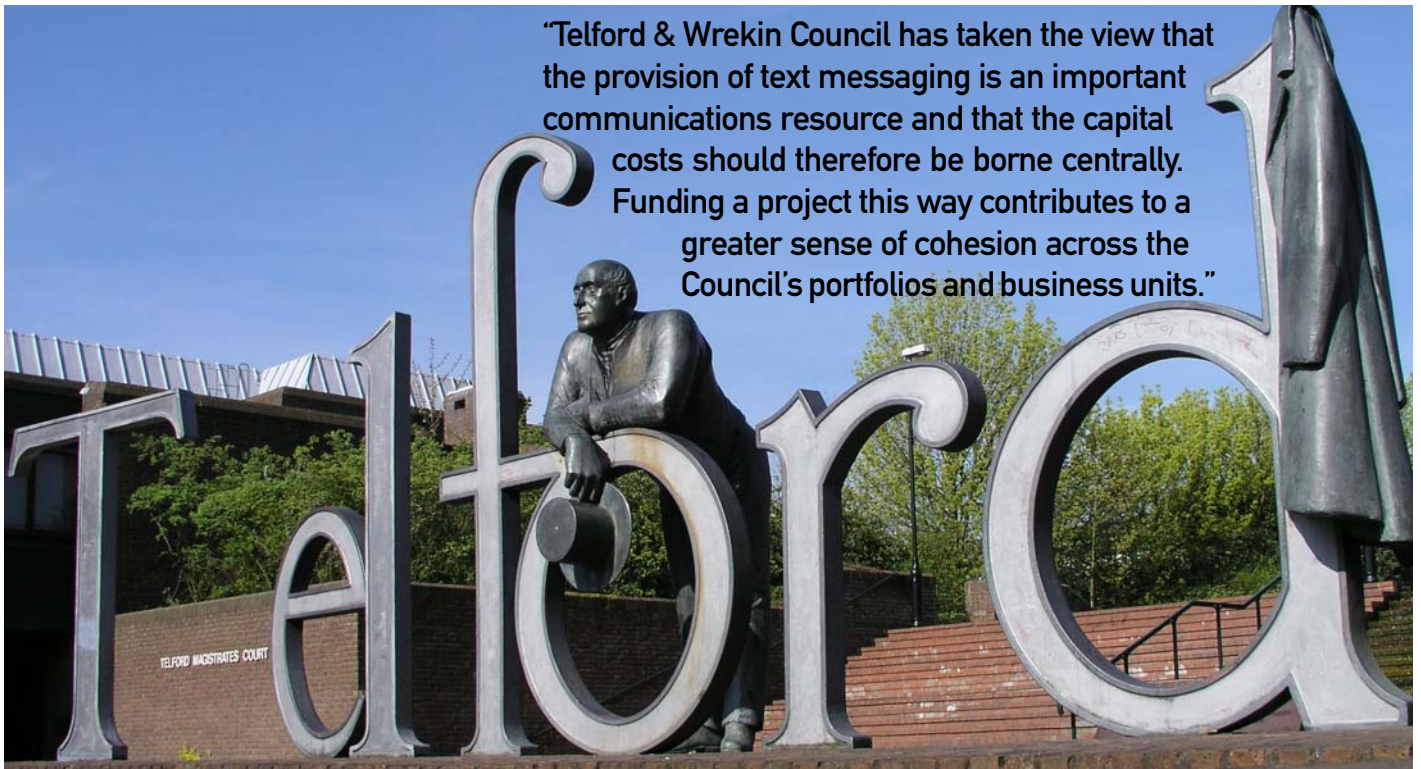
There is no single communications medium that fits all applications, whether post, email, fax or public pages on the internet. No proven technology can be ignored, however, so long as it is cost-effective and safe and does not compromise the authority's integrity. And that is how text messaging came to be adopted at Telford & Wrekin Council in Shropshire. Business units across the Council had made a case for employing Short Message Service (SMS) technology to communicate several different types of information across the stakeholder community.

Provided that a coherent system could be deployed to handle text messaging across the spectrum of applications being envisaged, the

technology could clearly play a valuable role when the objective was to move small 'parcels' of information quickly to a known audience. After comparing the SMS solutions available on the marketplace against the array of tasks for which the technology was intended, Telford & Wrekin opted for the Avanquest Text Message Server system in September 2007.

Clare Gough, Project Manager, in the Business Efficiency Team, noted that libraries are a natural application for text messaging. "It means that readers can be informed when a book on request becomes available, for example. It saves the cost and delay of generating and then posting out a letter, reminders for overdue books are another obvious use."

The Theatre, which forms part of the multi-purpose Oakengates Centre known as 'The Place' has adopted SMS for direct marketing. Does that suggest that the Council is indulging in 'spam' texting to promote its services?



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Gough was quick to refute that suggestion. “Everyone receiving a message has already signed up to the service. All of the applications for SMS are still the responsibility of the central development team and a detailed set of operating procedures is being established before any are formally passed over to the user service areas.

“We recognise that data protection is paramount. The Council’s Information Governance unit maintains a watching brief over all activities involving personal or sensitive information to ensure strict compliance.”

SMS system in schools

The second Portfolio where SMS has been introduced is Children and Young People. As a unitary authority, Telford & Wrekin Council retains a supervisory role over the state schools in its area.

While schools now manage their own budgets and have a measure of operational independence from their local authority, the Council is ultimately responsible for the provision of school buildings and other capital resources.

All thirteen of the secondary schools operated by the Council, along with the Family Information Service, are implementing the SMS system. Given the way that schools are now funded, and the fact that most new

projects of this type have to be paid for out of their limited resources, the development team must surely be commended for a first class job ‘selling’ the service so successfully.

Clare Gough explained, however, that the SMS facility was being provided in a way that did not encroach upon the schools’ own budget. “Telford & Wrekin Council has taken the view that the provision of text messaging is an important communications resource and that the capital costs should therefore be borne centrally. Funding a project this way contributes to a greater sense of cohesion across the Council’s portfolios and business units.

“The result is that schools implement the system without any capital cost to them, though they do pay the messaging charges for the service when they use it.”

Reducing unauthorised absences

One of the more obvious uses of the Avanquest Text Message Server system is in helping to reduce unauthorised absences across the secondary sector by providing a ‘rapid response’ method of alerting parents and guardians that children have not reported into school.

This application has two advantages over the traditional method of chasing up suspected truants. Once it is clear who are the non-attenders, a single message, but automatically personalised for each child, can be

pilots performing successfully

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sent out from the SMS Server. Apart from saving the time of a member of staff telephoning those responsible for the missing children, a significant reduction in telephone charges is possible.

The same SMS server technology is being used in schools to distribute other kinds of message; such as when bad weather is forcing the closure of a school. According to Mrs Gough, their Avanquest system lends itself to a broad range of applications in schools: sending out information about truancy and other problems is only part of the picture. "The staff can use a pre-formatted message, as in the case of truancy alerts or create their own message when the need arises.

"They can send out reminders about parents' evenings, for example, or messages to individual parents about success that their children have achieved in class.

"Staff who have used the system found the messaging interface was no more complex than for sending an email."

Acceptance of scheme

A pre-requisite of the schools application, of course, is that the parents and guardians are prepared to provide a mobile phone number to the school. While this has not been a problem with the schools where the technology is now operational, it is recognised that there will be a few who do not wish to take part in the scheme. "High levels of acceptance are achieved by the schools communicating well with all those involved to advise them of the

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roll-out date and securing their support for something that will benefit both themselves and the children. A strong case can be made for the system increasing their children's safety."

Expressions of interest

That reference to 'buy-in' is important to the development team at Telford & Wrekin. With the two pilot portfolios fully 'on message' with the Avanquest Text Message Server Server, text messaging will be extended across the other activities of the Council.

As Clare Gough noted, "We will be marketing the concept internally to increase the take-up in relevant areas. We have already had expressions of interest from other business units."

Telford & Wrekin Council is typical of local authorities across the UK. As a unitary Council it has additional responsibilities which many other authorities do not carry – such as education – but the wider principle is established. It has a requirement to communicate with all of its stakeholders on a variety of issues: many of those stakeholders have multiple involvements as parents and Council taxpayers and library users, for example.

Text messaging is just one of the tools that the Council has at its disposal to communicate cost-effectively. If the technology is well-matched to the task, and obstacles to its acceptance are removed - such as installing it without charge across schools and business units - the likelihood of a successful implementation increases by an order of magnitude §.

