→ Texting gets the Vote in South Oxfordshire Elections

South Oxfordshire District Council decided to trial text messaging as a method of communication by using text to deliver election results to residents. The opt-in scheme was popular and deemed successful, which paved the way for the further use of text within the organisation.

South Oxfordshire District Council

South Oxfordshire District Council is based just outside Wallingford in Oxfordshire. The district was formed in 1974 from an amalgamation of boroughs, including the municipal boroughs of Henley-on-Thames and Wallingford and Thames Urban District.

Improving communications with residents

The council wanted to make it easier for people to get in touch with them, to report things like fly tipping and vandalism. They also wanted to implement an outbound communication method which would enable quick and simple notifications to be sent to local residents about issues which might affect them, such as planning alerts or rubbish collection information.

They concluded that text messaging would be the best method of communication for this purpose; SMS is cost effective, discreet and instant, plus it also meets regulatory compliance initiatives. People will happily send a text, but they might not bother to take the time to telephone the Council to report issues, so texting was identified as the way forward.

Simon Turner, ICT Manager at South Oxfordshire District Council, took ownership of the challenge. He needed to find an SMS solution and then a project within the Council which would be suitable to run as a fixed trial.

It was decided that the imminent local elections could provide an ideal way of testing an SMS implementation. The proposal, which was aimed at engaging voters to reverse the often apathetic interest in the subject, was to deliver election results by text, directly to the mobile phones of voters who chose to subscribe to the service via the Council's website.

A ProcessFlows SMS solution

ProcessFlows' SMS solution, Text Message Server (TMS) was installed at the Council's offices.

TMS is a fully-featured inbound and outbound communications solution.

Text messages can be created, sent and received from within any email client and third party software such as CRM, ERP and Web, with enterprise reports and developers tools kits.

Simon Turner comments: "*TMS was quick to install, easy to deploy and works seamlessly with our email system. Adding SMS means we can offer a wider range of communication choices to our residents.*"

The project was publicised by a poster campaign and on the Council's website. The process was easy – to register, users simply text the word ELECTIONS, followed by a space and the number of the ward they would like results for to a dedicated number (the ID numbers of wards were listed on the website). Subscribers were able to sign up to receive results for as many wards as they wanted, but needed to send separate texts for each ward, or they could elect to receive the results for all wards by texting an alternative number.

> **"We wanted to make it as easy and as quick as possible for people to get the election results and our text message service has proved popular."**
>
> David Buckle
> Chief Executive of South Oxfordshire District Council

SMS passed the test

124 people registered for the service and 500 text messages were sent.

Simon comments that given the very short lead time, they were very encouraged with the take-up and the trial was voted a success.

"*We want to engage the next generation.*" said Simon Turner. "*The possibilities are quite exciting. Text messaging will be rolled-out into other departments so it eventually becomes a standard method of communication, up there with telephone and email.*"

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