

# Luton B.C. Climb their Paper Mountain and Underpin eGovernment with Alchemy

Luton is a modern, cosmopolitan town located just north of London, with a population of circa 185,000 people, and is regarded as one of the most vibrant multi-cultural communities in England, with over 140 distinct nationalities in residence.

Clearly servicing and managing such a large and diverse population results in huge volumes of paperwork for Luton Borough Council, generated both internally and created directly via correspondence with members of the public. Over time, a huge archived paper mountain had grown containing documents and records from across the Council's business departments. Traditionally, the Council had archived this paperwork to microfilm media, an expensive and laborious process both in terms of creating the microfilm records and in maintaining the outdated microfilm equipment. Additionally, council employees did not typically have direct access to the microfilm records, so servicing a query would take a significant time whilst the microfilm record was retrieved, printed and delivered to the Council administrator.

To overcome these problems, the Council decided to deploy a modern electronic document management system based on the Alchemy product suite, and have now effectively set up their own internal scanning bureau to service the needs of the various council departments. The service handles a growing number of critical documents and records that feed into the main operations of the council, such as planning applications, crematorium records, internal memos and public correspondence. In total, approximately 80,000 documents are scanned each week into the Alchemy database. Additionally, once the system had been proven, documents dating all the way back to 1994 were also scanned and captured into the system, resulting in an environment which now manages tens of millions of documents held electronically. Original paper documents which do not need to be retained for legislative reasons are confidentially shredded and disposed of by the bureau service after the business users have quality checked the scanned images and approved the paper destruction.

These electronic documents are accessed by some fifty Council administration staff at various office locations in Luton town center and at the crematorium out of town. They are now able to search for and retrieve documents in just a few seconds – a huge improvement over the delays previously suffered when requesting microfilm records. Paper costs have reduced accordingly as well since many documents no longer need to be photocopied or printed. As time has progressed, the Alchemy system has been adopted by a majority of the Council's departments, with microfilm storage now eradicated completely from the departmental operations.

The internal scanning bureau is itself very lightly staffed, with just two full time workers that carry out the full range of Alchemy document capture functions including document preparation, scanning, indexing and database management. This replaces the original microfilming department, which employed four staff and suffered from huge backlogs of paper documents waiting to be processed.

The bureau scanning operation is designed to require minimal keystrokes when indexing the scanned documents. For example, many of the documents have pre-printed reference numbers on them. The Alchemy system then utilises its own optical character recognition (OCR) software to read these fields and use them as reference indices to the electronic documents – thus avoiding the need to manually type the entries after the document has been scanned. Separator bar-codes are also used to split up batches of documents into cases or document types so that large multi-page batches can all be scanned and indexed electronically at the same time. This automatic process during scanning eliminates errors and subsequently speeds up future searches for documents and records. The documents are also quality-improved during scanning by automatic facilities such as de-skewing, de-speckling and general image clean up.

## IMR UK 'ALCHEMY' CASE STUDY

From a technology perspective, the Alchemy environment sits comfortably within the Council's existing strategies for IT. The Alchemy repository and all the user interfaces to it reside on standard Windows 2000 PCs, linked by the local Novell network. The scanned images are written to CD media, then stored on a virtual CD tower device with nightly backup. Initially the project was deployed with two Fujitsu fi-4750 black and white scanners, but one Kodak i260 scanner has now been added to provide colour capability and to reflect the rise in daily throughput volumes.

One of the project advantages was that Alchemy was easy to roll out and gave no performance issues to the existing network infrastructure as the images are compressed. Additionally, the system requires minimum housekeeping and has been found to be totally reliable.

Quoting from the Council's own web site "We look forward with optimism to the changes facing Local Government over the next five years. The Government's modernisation agenda mirrors the thinking and preparation work of the Council. Although the challenges over the next five years will be substantial we believe that Luton and its community will gain considerable benefit from this period of change. We are particularly enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by the introduction of new business processes supported by current technologies to both improve our services to the customer and to transform the back office systems that support service delivery. We believe that as a Local Authority, we are taking a completely innovative approach to the eGovernment agenda and we are excited by its challenges and opportunities".

Clearly the Alchemy system is a key component in this statement and vision, and now successfully underpins the Council's operations in terms of long-term document and records management across the enterprise.

Business Issues	Business Solution	Business Benefits
1-2 day response time for document and record requests	All customer documents held online within Alchemy database	Documents now available electronically in seconds
4 Full-Time staff needed for microfilm requests	Eliminate microfilm archiving and retrieval	2 Full-Time staff now capture circa 80,000 documents per week
Managing over 300,000 documents per month	Documents now scanned and held electronically in cases	Rapid access to a full-set of business documentation
Paper costs for printing and photocopying microfilm records	Electronic filing with simple search and retrieval	Reduction in paper costs and time spent printing and photocopying

For more information on how Alchemy can help your business, please visit <http://www.lightsol.co.uk>

Lightspeed Business Solutions Ltd  
Unit 4A Woodley Park Estate  
Reading Road  
Woodley  
RG5 3AW

Telephone: 0118 927 2777

