

# FDH helps Devon County Council turn a wish-list into reality

**Devon County Council looked at more than 40 IT solutions providers before appointing Fretwell-Downing Hospitality as its strategic partner, to develop a flexible piece of software that could cope with the complexities of the authority's catering services.**

The Direct Service Organisation not only works for Devon County Council, but also operates contracts on behalf of other authorities in the region, making it a £17million turnover business, employing 2400 people.

**Finance manager Nigel Child** explains: *"We had a 13-year-old system which had been developed in-house and was based on a mainframe. However, this was being decommissioned and we needed to find a new system that would accommodate our future needs.*

*"We organised focus groups involving restaurant contract managers and kitchen staff as well as the head office team, to define what it was we wanted from a system. One of the main points to come out of this was that we were looking for greater flexibility. We wanted to be able to manipulate the information to give us the reports we would find useful. Next on the list was improved communication. The existing system told us what was happening in our business, but it didn't enable us to send information direct to our customers. Also, we wanted to use less paper in line with e-government proposals - we must have felled a tree every month for the amount that came across our desks."*

Rather than produce a detailed specification for potential suppliers, the team presented its wish-list to the IT companies who expressed an interest in working on the project. *"We knew what we were looking for as an end result, but we wanted the IT experts to show us how it could best be achieved. From the initial 41 interested parties, we whittled it down to a shortlist of three. We were looking for a company that was prepared to work with us, using our knowledge of school meals, combined with its knowledge of the technology.*



fretwell-downing  
hospitality

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*“Fretwell-Downing Hospitality already had 50% of what we were looking for in its **Saffron** system. They were willing to create the rest in partnership, sharing the risk and the development cost.”*

Although one of the aims was to reduce paperwork, with 420 sites, raw data still has to be collected by the local teams, then collated and entered onto the system at head office. Nigel again: *“The investment in systems and training would have been too great to create a fully automated process, but we have successfully taken into account the practicalities of the operation of our units and then maximised the benefits of the IT available.”*

The **Saffron** system went live on 1st April, 2003. *“We ran it in parallel with the old system for a while, to iron out any minor problems, but the transition has been very smooth. Our biggest benefit has been tighter management control, resulting in savings against food, labour and sundry costs. The average primary school area manager, for example, has 120 units under their control, over a wide geographic area. **Saffron** enables them to keep their finger on the pulse.”*

Area managers have adapted well to the system. *“Our team has good IT skills. Some are happy to use **Saffron** as it stands, others want to push the boundaries a little bit further, but the system is flexible, so they can create their own style of reporting. For example, they can isolate a group of units and manipulate the data to find out how they are performing as a standalone business.”*

Other benefits have been the speed of turning around invoices from suppliers, which allows Devon County Council to optimise the discounts it receives for prompt payment. There has also been a significant time saving because Saffron has an integrated menu costing package. *“Before this, we had a fairly antiquated system, which meant updating ingredient prices twice. **Saffron** contains the value of the stock as well as the price of the ingredients, so it is a one step operation.”*

**Saffron** is now up and running across the whole of the DSO's business, from school meals and dining centres through to hospitality at the local judges' residence. The feedback from head office and area managers has been excellent, with a strong feeling that the wish-list has indeed been met.

