“Our goal is to handle 70 calls a month in the near future, rather than the 8-10 calls a week currently. BlackBerry will help make this possible.”

Pauline Fogg, the Safer Families Project Manager, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council
Safer Families Gateshead uses BlackBerry to help victims of domestic violence

BlackBerry-based solution speeds up and simplifies the filing of victim reports

It's 11 PM when the caseworker picks up the phone in the Safer Families office. The caller is distraught. Tearfully she tells the caseworker that police have just taken her boyfriend to the police station. It's the second time this month that he's beaten her in front of the children.

Thirty minutes later the caseworker is discreetly jotting down notes as the victim confides over a cup of tea in the kitchen. Back in her car, the caseworker pulls out a wireless device, starts the browser and begins filing in the victim’s report.

10 minutes later she's done. When she hits the send button her report is sent to the Safer Families Project database, where they will be used in the morning by her colleagues from the Men’s Service prior to visiting the perpetrator at the police station.

The Challenge

The Safer Families Project of the Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council in the UK wanted to make this scenario a reality. The Project, which provides a range of services for victims, children and perpetrators, is a key part of the Council’s multi-agency domestic violence strategy.

Victim interviews are the cornerstone of risk assessment, one of the Project’s core missions. Determining how dangerous a perpetrator is and how likely he is to re-offend is done by compiling data drawn from police reports and interviews with the victim and perpetrator.

The Project’s rapid response teams were frustrated at having to return to their office to enter their victim reports in the Safer Families database. The caseworkers often conduct their interviews on the scene late at night when their office was closed. They took their notes by hand.

This meant that neither their colleagues at the Men’s Service had access to victim reports first thing in the morning, before heading to the police station to interview the perpetrator, nor did the victim’s representatives during the bail hearings.

Gallagher went to see Pauline Fogg, the Safer Families Project Manager, with a BlackBerry device in hand. Gallagher was convinced that BlackBerry could eliminate many of the frustrations felt by the caseworkers. “Having used BlackBerry myself and having talked to our developers, it seemed an natural fit. Seeing what it could do for me, I thought it would be perfect for the caseworkers.”

Initially, Fogg wasn’t so sure. “I'm not a fan of technology for technology's sake,” she says. But Gallagher wasn't ready to take no for an answer. She started the BlackBerry browser, filled out an interview report form and submitted it. “I had mocked up a sample form that asked the same questions as the paper form they use,” explains Gallagher. Within seconds she received a reply from one of her colleagues with a question about the report. At that moment, Fogg saw how useful a BlackBerry-based solution could be.

The Safer Families Project had considered equipping caseworkers with laptops. But laptops just weren't suitable with such sensitive work requirements. Interviewing a victim requires the caseworker's undivided attention. “Having to wait for the laptop to boot up and typing while the victim talked was too impersonal, more like an interrogation. The BlackBerry was just what the caseworkers needed: lightweight, secure, discreet and reliable,” says Gallagher. In addition, the caseworkers, who are all women, go out on calls at night, sometimes to rough neighbourhoods. “The laptop presented personal safety issues that the BlackBerry device did not,” adds Fogg.

CASE STUDY GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
The deployment

As part of the UK’s e-gov initiative, the Council had first turned to BlackBerry to provide remote access to email for staff and councillors. The Council’s ICT department began with an option appraisal pitting BlackBerry against a PDA-based solution. “It was clear during the appraisal process that BlackBerry met 99% of our requirements. Push email was the killer app,” says Joe Docherty, ICT Programme Manager. Gateshead then conducted a trial that included staff and councillors. “It lasted just four weeks and then we decided to introduce the devices,” comments Docherty. “The users loved them. The devices were so easy to use, and having mobile access to email and calendar was an answer to many people’s prayers.”

Gateshead deployed over 200 BlackBerry 7230™ and BlackBerry 7290™ handhelds and several BlackBerry 7100v™ handsets to give users access to email and calendar as well as the intranet and online services.

“In ICT we knew that email and calendar access were just the start. We could see that BlackBerry was the perfect mobile platform for many of our most valuable online services,” explains Docherty. Due to the Mobile Data Service (MDS) capabilities of the BlackBerry Enterprise Server™ Gateshead began migrating many of these services to a web-based interface so that they would be accessible from a BlackBerry device as well as from a PC.

The BlackBerry solution developed for the Safer Families Project consists of web forms that, in the first phase, let caseworkers fill in reports and e-mail them immediately to fellow caseworkers. Eventually these reports will be sent directly and securely to the Project’s Microsoft SQL database over the air. The forms are comprised of tick boxes and a few text fields, which are easy to complete using the BlackBerry device keyboard. Once the report is filed, the caseworker knows that a backup copy of their notes is safely stored in the system, just in case they lose their notebook.

“The BlackBerry was just what the caseworkers needed: lightweight, secure, discreet and reliable.”

Julie Gallagher, ICT Programme Manager,
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

The future

Today the adoption of a BlackBerry-based solution by the Safer Families Project is one of Gateshead’s most innovative initiatives. Eventually the solution will cover not only interview reports, but also case records and referrals management. It will also be interconnected with other agencies, such as the police and other criminal justice organisations.

“Speeding up the filing of incident reports and making sure the information is acted upon swiftly will help encourage victims to have more confidence in our service,” explains Fogg. “Our goal is to handle 70 calls a month in the near future, rather than the 8-10 calls a week currently. BlackBerry will help make this possible,” she concludes.
“In ICT we knew that e-mail and calendar access were just the start. We could see that BlackBerry was the perfect mobile platform for many of our most valuable online services”

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“Having used BlackBerry myself and having talked to our developers, it seemed a natural fit. Seeing what it could do for me, I thought it would be perfect for the caseworkers.”

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About BlackBerry
BlackBerry is an end-to-end solution developed by Research In Motion® Limited. Founded in 1984, Research In Motion is a world leader in the wireless communications market.

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