

Spirit Data Capture

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BLACKBURN CLEANS UP, WITH THE HELP OF SPIRIT

When collecting important data – especially in the field – it's often the little things that become very important, such as a rugged device with a readable screen and a good battery life. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council recently needed to upgrade its handheld devices so that it could capture environmental cleanliness data. It sought advice from Spirit Data Capture, which recommended a model that could meet all of its exacting criteria – the M3 from M3 Mobile.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council is a Unitary Authority based in Lancashire. The council is responsible for a mixture of urban and rural areas – with a total of 60,000 residences and 140,000 residents. The borough comprises two main towns - Blackburn and Darwen.

The Authority works in close partnership with Keep Britain Tidy, an environmental charity that spearheads England's nationwide anti-litter campaign. An important part of Keep Britain Tidy's work is NI 195 – an initiative developed to provide a National Indicator for Cleanliness. This aims to improve the levels of street and environmental cleanliness in England.

To be able to monitor cleanliness levels effectively, the Borough Council needed an accurate and reliable method of capturing data. The handheld devices that it had previously been using only had a limited capability and couldn't cope with the demands of NI 195 as well as District Local Environmental Quality data changes.

Louise Kidney, an ICT Systems Technician with the council, explains: "The units' screens were large, but the visibility of the screens in sunlight was non-existent and their battery life was getting worse. There was no in-built GPS, so the devices couldn't consistently send connection requests any more. This prompted us to start looking at other options.

"The most important requirement was a battery life of more than six hours, as our surveys often last for about eight hours. Screen visibility was also very important, as the operators need to be able to read it in both full sunlight and low cloud cover. The unit needed to be both light, with a good ergonomic design, and very rugged. The devices are used in all weathers – and it can be very wet in Lancashire!

"Some of the other criteria we were looking for included in-built GPS and USB connectivity. The devices needed to be within our budget. If the costs weren't too prohibitive, we also wanted 3G capabilities (to future proof the devices for mobile working across the Borough) and an in-built camera."

Keep Britain Tidy works closely with Spirit Data Capture Limited, an independent consultancy specialising in mobile computing and data capture solutions. The organisation suggested that the Borough Council should contact Spirit for help and advice on the possible options.

Louise continues: “We asked Spirit to show us a range of rugged mobile solutions so that we could get a good sense of what was available. Spirit’s sales representative was brilliant and brought three options, all of which were quite different, with varying costs. This enabled us to make an assessment for ourselves based on our requirements. In the end, we spent £1,500 less than we had anticipated!”

One of the three models chosen by Spirit was the M3 from M3 Mobile – a light, very rugged and slim Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The M3 has very fast processing speeds and is GPS-enabled. It comes with a range of options, including an 802.11b/g (WLAN) radio, GSM/GPRS; Bluetooth radio; and a colour camera. It has a large, easily visible colour TFT-LCD touch screen display and a long lasting, removable and rechargeable lithium polymer battery.

The Authority trialled the M3 for a few weeks and was very happy with its performance. Louise reports: “We really like the M3. It has good screen visibility, and the surveyors are able to control brightness and contrast. The GPS locks on quickly and the camera enables the operators to help other service

areas while they are surveying, by reporting problems and emailing pictorial evidence. We also like its 3G capability – and it's both comfortable and easy to use. It's very intuitive because it mimics the desktop Windows operating system.”

The M3s are used for surveying transects three times a year for the NI 195 programme. The results of the surveys are submitted to the government on an annual basis. Each transect is a 50 metre stretch of road or grass and a total of 300 transects across five wards are surveyed each time. This activity usually takes two to three weeks to complete, with two people carrying out the survey.

Keep Britain Tidy's specialist software was loaded onto the new devices, enabling the Borough Council to collect all of the data needed for submission to the National Indicator programme. The surveyors complete a form on the M3 for each transect. On the form, they indicate the location of the transect, its GPS coordinates, and grade it for litter, detritus, fly posting and graffiti.

Louise continues: “The surveyors have been giving really positive feedback about the M3s and are very happy with them. They can see the screens properly, so they don't accidentally miss the entry data. The tapping interface for text is easy to use and very responsive, so they now enter data that they didn't before. This makes it easier for me to process the data and get something useful from it. Overall, the ease of use and responsiveness of the M3 has reduced the amount of time it takes to survey a transect.”

She concludes: “Spirit have been very helpful and the products arrived a week earlier than expected, well packaged and secured. Their after-sales support is excellent as well. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council prides itself on quality of service. It’s good to find this in our suppliers as well, so we would definitely consider using Spirit again.”

ENDS (970 words)

Notes for Editors: Spirit Data Capture is based in Preston Brook, Cheshire. The company is an independent mobile computing and data capture house, with an in-depth knowledge of the latest wireless and mobile computing technologies which boost productivity and profitability.

Spirit’s capabilities include software application development, mobile computing technology (e.g. rugged mobile computers), wireless network implementations, maintenance and other services. Its extensive client base includes a diverse array of organisations in the utilities, field service, transport and logistics, healthcare, government and manufacturing sectors.

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