



YMCA gets IT boost and advice to help it support more young people in Southend

Southend YMCA has ambitious plans for widening the range of youth services it provides, and needs IT to match its strategy. So when Chief Executive Syrie Cox started looking at upgrading the YMCA's IT systems to cope with future growth and provide greater flexibility, she asked Business Link for advice.

The Challenge

"Many people are not aware of the huge range of integrated youth support services that a modern YMCA provides," explains Syrie. "Southend YMCA is a registered charity affiliated to the national YMCA organisation, but we operate independently and run a range of programmes, plus an extensive residential operation, that require high quality infrastructure."

Syrie joined Southend YMCA as Chief Executive almost two years ago, having previously worked in a range of senior roles in mental health services.

The YMCA provides support to vulnerable youths and young adults, some of whom have social

and emotional difficulties. It often plugs the gap between other agencies, helping young people make the transition into adult and work life. "To achieve this," explains Syrie, "we offer young people nationally accredited education, work-based training and recreational services, as well as the supported accommodation that we're traditionally associated with."



Southend YMCA has been growing, and also has big plans for a new 'myplace' grant funded youth centre to be built in collaboration with Southend Borough Council. Syrie recognised that all this growth would cause demands on the centre's IT systems to mushroom. So she asked Business Link for advice on the best way forward, to put in place an IT infrastructure capable of supporting the complexity and confidentiality of the YMCA's work.

The Solution

David Marsh, Business Link Specialist Adviser in IT and E-commerce, takes up the story: "Syrie and her team knew what they wanted from their IT systems and how they needed additional capability to support, for

example, off-site secure network access and additional users. I was able to help them turn their business IT needs into an IT specification." He also found that the YMCA would be eligible for a TakeITon grant, which would cover a proportion of the new system's costs.

"David visited us at the hostel very quickly after we first requested a meeting," says Syrie. "We sat down and reviewed our IT requirements. David was a great sounding board and helped us focus on our IT needs."

Once the proposals came back from prospective suppliers, David was once again able to assist with 'translating' the highly technical specifications into a

business language that Syrie and her team could relate to the work of the YMCA.

"I was also able to help with completing the paperwork for the TakeITon grant applications," continues David. "The conditions for eligibility are strict and the organisation applying must state clearly and specifically how it would benefit from the IT investment they planned to make."

Syrie says that Business Link and the team at its Regional Information & Intelligence Centre signposted her to other schemes that were of huge assistance. "For example," she explains, "we were directed towards various Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) schemes. This resulted in us having a student join us for a summer placement, and we are planning future such initiatives to help improve our team's IT skills."

The Impact

The TakeITon grant application was successful and Southend YMCA received £4,000 towards the total costs of its major IT overhaul. In addition, the new system is now in place and working well.

"We have a new IT system in place which puts us in a strong position to manage our anticipated growth," says Syrie. "Business Link's expert guidance has been invaluable in helping us through the IT procurement process."

Business Link has been fantastic at sign-posting us to the kind of services and partners we need to take our operations to the next level
Syrie Cox, Southend YMCA

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