

Service First



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Organisation Name

Newcastle University

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Please give a brief summary of your award submission

The Service First programme was established in November 2022 to address significant service failings in end user IT support at Newcastle University. Following a major reorganisation, several issues led to a large backlog of service requests and a high level of stakeholder dissatisfaction. A project team was created to understand root cause failings, address performance issues, and rebuild customer confidence. Service First has delivered big against all objectives!

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Section 1: What you achieved

- What results are you getting and what has the feedback been?
- How are you measuring the benefits?
- How are you sustaining the momentum/ outcomes?

We initially focussed on a small number of key metrics (defects) to make sure the work was being worked and customers were being kept up to date:

The **overall number of tickets** fluctuates throughout the academic year but understanding and monitoring volumes is key to resourcing plans and maintaining a sensible level of work in progress ensures we don't create a further backlog.

The **number of tickets untouched for >5 days** shows that colleagues are keeping on top of their work and keeping customers up to date with progress. Without formal Service Level Standards (SLS's) this measure acts as a proxy for timeliness.

The **number of unallocated tickets** shows that queue managers are managing their queues and allocating work quickly. If no one has the ticket, the work isn't being done! When we formally introduce SLS's, the clock starts when the ticket is received so speed of allocation is important.

The **number of escalations** is a good proxy for customer satisfaction and helps us to identify issues and target support appropriately.

Between November 2022 and November 2023 we achieved a whopping 98% reduction in defects! We reported overall performance against these four key metrics to the Executive Board quarterly and highlighted progress against the detailed improvement plan.

At a team level however, we also measured (and continue to monitor):

The **number of jobs allocated** to individuals to make sure workloads are balanced.

The **number of jobs completed per day** by individuals (productivity has increased significantly!).

The amount of '**shrinkage**' through annual leave, sickness, and project work to provide context to performance data and make sure the focus of work is balanced.

The process performance for **hardware fulfilment** to make sure any delays are highlighted and resolved.

Performance dashboards are available and performance reports are now automated. The team operates daily standup meetings to discuss performance, address any issues and plan the day's work. Team leaders hold regular 1:1 performance coaching sessions with their team members, the team manager holds a weekly performance review meeting with his team and the Operations Director reviews performance daily. Dashboards are also available to key stakeholders to provide transparency and build trust.

Service First wasn't just about fixing problems but about delivering the basics brilliantly and consistently. We rebuilt confidence in NUIT, we developed and implemented solid operational foundations, we improved service quality, and we really did put Service First!

Section 2: Why you did it

- Why are you doing what you are doing and what did you hope to achieve?
- How does this initiative support the strategic direction and values of your organisation?

Escalations and complaints were high and increasing, particularly in relation to end user computing (EUC). The EUC team was new, focus had been on structure, not process and they were struggling to cope with the volume of work.

By October 2022:

The backlog was huge (~3,000 tickets). 43% hadn't been assigned to somebody to work, one in ten tickets were escalated but half of these hadn't been assigned either.

The level of complaints was a problem in itself – repeat tickets added to the confusion and with so many escalations it was hard to prioritise.

Complaints from staff and students had reached the Executive Board and included financial claims for PhD extensions because of late delivery of IT kit.

Colleagues were overwhelmed and absence through stress was high. Agency staff were recruited to help address the backlog, but onboarding added more pressure to the team. The backlog continued to grow, and the cost of service continued to rise.

Given our service was negatively impacting both research and teaching (the University's primary strategic deliverables) and general business operations, we created Service First and seconded colleagues with the right skills and experience to support the initiative. Their focus was to understand and solve problems that were impacting their internal customers' experience also their colleagues' wellbeing. They analysed thousands of tickets and spoke to all 30 queue owners to identify key issues:

Ticket selection: With 440 different categories and free text options, selecting the wrong category was common resulting in poor quality data and incorrect routing.

Input standards: Information needed was either not requested or wasn't mandatory at the outset resulting in requests for further information and delays.**

Ticket Routing: Ownership of ticket categories was unclear. Tickets were bounced between teams and moved to the 'back of the queue' each time.

Ticket Allocation: Analysts could 'self-select' tickets meaning 'difficult' tickets could sit in queues for weeks.

Operational standards: The approach to ticket management was inconsistent and there were no documented SOP's.

Management Information: Operational MI was poor, and Managers spent time creating (often inaccurate) MI to manage their teams.

Leadership Skills: As an immature team, the skills and experience to run high volume repetitive operations were lacking.

The project's objective was to reduce the number of defects by at least 90%, and we shared this target with our stakeholders at the outset and our progress against it throughout the project lifecycle.

Section 3: How you did it

- How did you go about achieving the results you did?
- How did you structure your way of working?
- How did you go about involving stakeholders, gaining their buy in and support?
- How did the team pull together to achieve an excellent outcome?

From the outset, we engaged colleagues and stakeholders who were most invested in performance improvement. We analysed performance data and mapped customer journeys to make problems real and personal. Recognising capacity and capability challenges in our teams, we took the big decision to stop the work of one team and redirect colleagues to Service First. Resourcing the project properly with the skills and time to focus on understanding and remediating problems was critical.

We scoped the project by actively engaging and listening to the people involved to learn what they do and what issues they face. We collected reliable data and analysed 'how the work works' (or didn't in many cases) and we mapped customer journey examples to make the causes of the problem clear to see and easy to understand. This also showed the impact of service failures to both the individual and the delivery of teaching and research.

We created multiple workstreams aligned to the identified issues and set clear objectives for improvement. We assessed capacity and capability to make sure that the project plan was achievable and we logged and managed risks and issues as part of the weekly Project Sponsor's review meeting. Operationally, we constituted daily checks to make sure work was planned, actions were implemented, and performance was monitored and remediated, if necessary. We also, and importantly, recognised and praised good performance wherever possible.

Although we focussed on stabilising EUC, a highly visible front-line service where most of the tickets sat and problems lay, we made sure we created a repeatable plan and supporting processes to support performance improvement across NUIT. The project team routinely shared approaches and learnings from the individual workstreams and enjoyed seeing the numbers improve.

Key activities and achievements included:

Process:

Reviewing and realigning ticket allocation to the most appropriate team.

Implementing end to end ticket ownership and quality management processes to improve accountability and target intervention and support.

Expediting outstanding hardware purchasing and deployment and launching a new hardware catalogue, asset management processes and system and new ways of working.

Completing a full-Service Review and creating a revised and updated Service Catalogue to provide a view of all products and services, aligned to ticket categories.

Data:

Improving the system and tooling to improve transparency and reporting.

Creating and implementing Standard Operating Procedures and Service Level Standards to support effective delivery and manage user expectations.

Creating a full suite of PowerBI dashboards to enable effective performance management, at every level across all areas.

People:

Developing skills matrices and up skilling and/or cross skilling colleagues to provide a more flexible and resilient service model

Reprovisioning accommodation and repositioning colleagues across campus to enable them to work effectively where the work is.

Throughout the project we regularly updated our external stakeholders and NUIT colleagues on progress, which bought us confidence and time externally and support and valuable feedback internally.

Section 4: What you learnt

- How was learning captured, actioned and shared to benefit others?

Service First operated as an action learning exercise; we continually reviewed and refined our approach to create a workable blueprint for use across NUIT.

Key takeaways include:

Don't hide problems. There were so many complaints that denial was futile. Instead, we attended an Executive Board meeting, outlined the full scale of the problem, and explained the impact on service users and our own colleagues. We showed root causes and our plan to address and were clear about timescales to deliver.

Assume best intentions. Our people weren't trying to do a bad job, it was failings in processes and systems that were hurting them. We have great people, a range of skills and a love for the university - solid foundations. Colleagues wanted their service to work, so supported Service First.

Use the skills you have to best effect. We had delivered a Yellow Belt training programme to help support change following the reorganisation. The project team were able to build on these skills to deliver and sustain performance

improvement and colleagues enjoyed seeing their training used in practice.

Do the work with people, not for people! Our project team was based alongside the EUC team, working together to develop operational routines, skills matrices, and SOP's. They played various roles - sounding board, critical friend, coach, mentor, and got their hands dirty when needed.

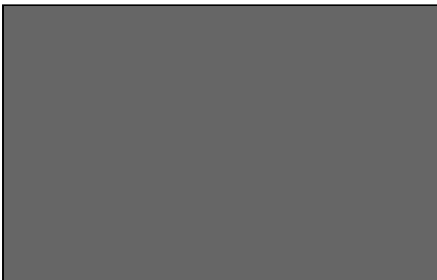
Accept there are no quick fixes. Service First was a success because of focus, routine, and consistency. Understanding and fixing the problem, establishing daily and weekly routines to monitor and address performance and doing this consistently through to project completion was key.

Show that the project matters. Exposing Service First to the Executive Board sent a message about the importance and visibility of the project. Progress was reported quarterly to the Board, the Director of NUIT and the Director of Technology Operations attended all weekly review meetings and progress was reported monthly in detail to the wider IT Senior Management Group and in summary to all IT staff.

Success is infectious! The project plan and supporting tools have now been deployed across various teams beyond the initial Service First programme – we've created an appetite for performance improvement!

'We have lots to learn across the University from the successful approach you've taken in Service First', Brian Walker, Deputy Vice Chancellor

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