



Aqilla Works With Essex Probation to Prepare for Government Change



CASE STUDY

In May 2013, Justice Secretary Chris Grayling announced his plan to reduce reoffending. From 2015, all offenders who enter prison, even if just for a few days, must serve 12 months under supervision in the community. The new approach will see a change in the existing Probation Service and a far greater role for private and voluntary sector organisations which are to be paid by results. Essex Probation's Director of Finance and Performance Debbie Came is working with cloud-based accounting solution Aqilla to prepare her systems for reform.

What this means for the finance team

Uncertain yet of how the organisation will evolve, Debbie describes some of the possible outcomes of the Ministry's initiative, "*Our organisation will split. An element will always remain public sector to handle high risk offenders but everything else will go through tender. The public sector element might hold the contracts but specialist areas might think about creating a private proposition. We might also see support functions, such as finance, merging. It is early days and what we need to do now is ensure we have economical and flexible systems in place in order to be prepared.*"

The existing organisation may need to split in advance of the go-live date for the new initiative. This would result in the finance team having to manage multiple sets of accounts for a period of time. Essex Probation's legacy system would have been costly to configure for this purpose but Aqilla's multi-tiered, cloud-based system means that another business is simply added and there are no extra hardware costs to account for.

Moving away from the legacy system

Before choosing Aqilla (six months prior to the Ministry's announcement of change), Debbie's team had been subscribing to a shared accounting system maintained by the Local Authority. Knowing that some sort of change was afoot, Debbie made the decision to cut ties and find a new package which would give her more control and reduce maintenance costs.

Discussing her reasons for making the break she said, "*We couldn't update our old system in real time because everything had to be done through a third party. The reporting was constrained because we couldn't manipulate the information ourselves. We were also bound to quite rigid costs so, with reorganisation of this scale on the cards, we had to gain more control and find a more flexible and cost effective arrangement.*"

Aqilla's modern cloud accounting solution

Aqilla offers a low, monthly fee per user and the number of users can be altered up or down at any time. The system is modular which allows Debbie to implement it in stages; firstly dual-running with the legacy system before going live with the main financial processes. Phase II will incorporate Purchase Ordering so that local offices can carry out this process remotely. Should the team need to incorporate more private sector-type accounting then other aspects of Aqilla can be added. Aqilla's proposition means that, however the organisation evolves, the system (and costs) can scale accordingly and quickly.



Meeting Public Sector Accounting Requirements

Challenges

Describing the challenges in implementing Aqilla Debbie said, *“As a public sector organisation we have a set of accounts which look very different to that of a private business. We have very detailed budget reports which I suppose are peculiar to the way we operate. Our needs in terms of cost analysis are probably greater than most. Aqilla is helping us to address those needs which are common across public sector organisations.”*

Referring to the challenge of closing Year End with a new system she added, *“It was just as easy with Aqilla, if not more so, than it had been with our old system which was developed specifically for public sector accounting. Now I can run Trial Balances and analyse the detail at the drop of a hat.”*

Aqilla’s Managing Director Hugh Scantlebury said, *“We know there are lots of public sector organisations struggling to cope with expensive and inflexible systems at a time when budgets are tight and performance measures are increasing. We want to help them find more efficient and economical solutions and to demonstrate that they are able to keep costs down and improve processes at the same time. Essex Probation’s approach is proof that it’s possible.”*

Making Life Easier

Going on to describe the impact on her team of introducing a new system Debbie said, *“Most of my team have never used any other system, and they have all found the switch to Aqilla quite easy.”*

With reference to Aqilla’s level of service she added, *“Aqilla performs well against our expectations. As with every new system there are a few niggles – nothing which stops us operating – but the team at Aqilla has always been able to find simple solutions and the response time is excellent. There is always someone at the end of the phone and we haven’t come across a problem which can’t be fixed.”*

Essex Probation has implemented Aqilla across two sites and has nine expert users and a further 11 staff who access the system from their local offices across the County. The system works with payroll and bank interfaces and will eventually be rolled out to more users in different locations. Summing up Debbie said, *“The main thing is that we are in complete control of our system now and the bonus is that it costs less. We can adopt more users when and if we need to and the system is built in a way which allows us to adapt quickly to the needs of the organisation.”*

More about Aqilla

Aqilla is a modern, cloud accounting solution designed specifically to suit the demands of mid-sized businesses. Aqilla takes a smart and uncomplicated, document-centric approach to accounting. Although Aqilla is straightforward to use and to deploy, the analysis options are almost limitless. The software comes with; Sales, Purchase and General Ledgers, Cash Matching, Sales and Purchase Invoicing, Timesheets, Expense Processing, Project Costing and Budgeting. Cloud-based Aqilla is available from as little as £50 per user per month.

