

CHOOSING AN ELECTRONIC CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

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Introduction

This is a guide for charities and other social sector organisations that are looking to choose, design and implement an electronic case management system. We have been prompted to write this from three observations:

- **Case management systems are important.** We think that to be effective organisations need to monitor their activities through routine data collection and feedback and, this requires an effective system.
- **Choosing and implementing a case management system is a challenge.** As we discuss in this guide there are many issues and pitfalls involved and charities do not tend to have much experience.
- **There is not much guidance or support available.** Our guide signposts to other articles that have been written, but generally this is something that charities are doing without much help.

We see this guide as NPC's first foray into this area and we aim to do more. We are particularly interested in your experiences so please get in touch to share your views.

How we define an electronic case management system

There's a lot of confusion about the word 'system' because people use it to mean different things. So, it is important for us to be clear that in this guide we are only talking about 'case management' or 'customer relationship management' (CRM) software systems, in which you store all the [data you collect about individual service users](#)¹. These are the most important kinds of systems for service delivery and Impact Management.² Conversely, we are not discussing fundraising or donor management systems (although many of the systems listed below can do this too)³.

What are the stages of system growth?

Broadly we think that organisations fall into three stages:

¹ <http://www.thinknpc.org/blog/5-types-of-data/>

² www.accessimpact.org

³ A useful list of these kinds of systems can be found here:
http://www.adaptaconsulting.co.uk/downloads/Guide_to_CRM_Systems_for_Not-for-Profit-Organisations-v5.pdf

Stage	Typical approach to case management
Stage 1: Basic, paper-based	<p>The very smallest project can sometimes get by with a limited paper based system. For example, referral forms will be kept on file, the register is written in a book and case notes are on paper. If more than one site is running then local sites keep their own files, and little data is centralised or analysed together. This type of system is inefficient, and organisations will find their data collection and evaluation requirements outgrow it. Any organisation looking to grow should try to move to stages 2 and 3.</p>
Stage 2: Basic, electronic	<p>In this system, standard electronic and online tools are used (such as Word and Excel), but data and information are in different files. For example, attendance might be recorded in a spreadsheet, referral forms and case notes are stored in Word documents and a tool like Survey Monkey could be used to collect some feedback and outcomes data. Local sites will still store their own data, but they might send some information by email for analysis at head office.</p> <p>This is a better approach but is still inefficient because someone will need to put a lot of work into pulling all the information together—and data quality is likely to be poor because the system is hard to supervise. This type of system will not support detailed analysis of project effectiveness.</p>
Stage 3: Integrated system	<p>In this approach there is one software system where all information is recorded and stored. This means data on service users and how they engage is entered, along with any feedback and outcomes they achieve—for example surveys they complete. All local sites have access to the system and data entry is monitored to ensure everyone is doing it well enough. Automatic reports are set up so that staff and managers can get updates, as-and-when they need them.</p> <p>We would suggest that any project delivering to more than about 100 beneficiaries per year should be thinking about this kind of system.</p>

What can a data system do?

A good case management system can help with:

Data entry

- Make **data entry** easier, more consistent and more efficient.

- **Eliminate errors.** Systems can be programmed to look for data that doesn't look right and needs to be checked.

Day-to-day functions

- **Streamline your work** by cutting down on duplication, paperwork and having information in different places—for example contact details can be stored on the system to help communication with service users.
- Ensure all staff and volunteers are **up-to-date** on each service user's circumstances—because the latest information is on the system. In this way, good systems help you provide a better service.
- **Store** your data securely. Organisations have legal responsibilities to keep data safe⁴, and a good system will help you do this. Permissions can be set so that people can't see data they don't need to, and personal data is kept secure

Data use

- Make your data **accessible**. A good system will help people across the organisation access and make use of the data you collect.
- **Compile or aggregate data** more easily and at the levels you need—for example you might want to look at results at individual sites, as well as the organisation as-a-whole.
- Help you to **present your results**. All good systems have built-in reporting tools that allow you to set up reports or dashboards which you can keep coming back to as more data are added.
- Enable **more detailed analysis**. Eventually, collecting the 5 types of data from lots of service users will enable you to really explore what is working and what isn't, and help you provide a credible account of the difference you are making.
- **Confidence**. Funders and stakeholders will feel assured that you have a robust system that enables you to deliver the best service you can.

Getting started

Initial considerations

Firstly, a word of warning—systems bring a lot of advantages, and we believe they are essential for any organisation over a certain size. But they are not easy to design and implement, and you must avoid the thinking that simply picking a system will be the answer to all your data issues. Three considerations are:

- You need to look at this and other guidance (see links on the page 4)—and do some careful thinking—before choosing or designing a system. Don't rush. We see lots of organisations that have ended up with systems that hasn't quite worked for them.
- You need to put enough time and resources aside to think about what you need and to consult with all relevant colleagues throughout the process.
- System design and rollout needs to be led by someone with enthusiasm for the task, preferably with relevant experience.
- Speak to other organisations that have been through the same process and potentially other specialists⁵.

⁴ <http://www.thinknpc.org/blog/gdpr-its-not-just-about-fundraising/>

⁵ For example: <https://www.wearecast.org.uk/>

When to make the choice?

Before choosing a system, you need to have a fairly good idea of:

- What data you want to collect: enter and analyse? This should emerge from your theory of change and measurement framework—which a lot of NPC's other guidance helps you to develop.
- What do you need the system to do? How you want it to work?
- What do managers—and any other colleagues need to get out of the system, both daily; and to help them take stock of how things are going?
- How the system could integrate with day-to-day work.

The answers to these questions will clearly influence your system requirements. But awkwardly the system you go on to choose will also constrain what you can collect and how it will work in practice. The trick is to start thinking about what system you need, and make a choice, *once you have a general idea what your requirements will be*. Then you can design the system specifics with the knowledge of what your chosen system can and can't do.

Getting advice

It can really help to **get advice and support** from someone with experience of designing and implementing systems. Private companies employ full-time systems analysts to do this work because they recognise the challenges involved, and the risks of getting it wrong. Smaller organisations don't have the resources for this, but it can help to appreciate that it is difficult and to try to find any advice that is available.

If you already have a system

It's quite possible that you already have a system that can be adapted to suit your impact management needs—so you can avoid the time, cost and stress of getting a new one.

But be wary of sticking with a system that's not right. If it doesn't—or can't—do the things listed above, you'll need to make a change.

How to choose a new system

When deciding on a new system it is almost always best to look at off-the-shelf systems. Many of which are set up for the charity sector and are relatively inexpensive.

A mistake we see quite often is organisations trying to build their own systems using Microsoft packages like Access or Excel—often with the support of friend, relative or colleague who 'knows a bit about IT'. Generally, these amateur systems are not a good option because: they cannot match the functions of off-the-shelf options; will have glitches or bugs; are unlikely to be updated; and won't come with any ongoing support.

If you have had any experience of choosing a system before, you will know it is hard decision. The market place is very diverse, companies range from global corporations to one-man-bands; some are orientated to the charity sector some are not. Pricing is confusing, and there is a risk that promised functions will not turn out as planned, leading to hidden costs down the line.

We discuss the factors that you should think about below. There is also some more guidance here:

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/how-to/planning-a-good-database>

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/how-to/choosing-a-database-supplier>

<https://www.powerobjects.com/2015/07/14/how-to-define-scope-for-a-dynamics-crm-project/>

What to consider when choosing a data system

All systems vary in terms of how they charge for the service. There is usually an annual cost but that might consist of a flat fee and / or cost for the number of users who access the system. You can't really rely on the published pricing on company's websites, you need a precise quote once the company understands your actual requirements. It is very important to check for any hidden charges in your subscription which generally come up when you need to make changes or adaptations, or to add new functions (see discussion of adaptability below). If you are at the point of signing-up with a provider it is vital that both parties are clear what is included in the cost—and what is not.

Helpfully, companies often make a basic version of the software available for free. These are usually too limited for ongoing use, but can be useful for getting a feel for how the software works. Also, some software platforms allow you to purchase bundles of user licenses (eg 10 for the initial subscription and then packages of 5 users at a time thereafter). This allows you to scale-up the cost as more people need access to the system. Some software platforms also have different licence levels, so that you only pay for the functions you are going to use.

Levels of use

An important component of the pricing structure is the likely levels of use. So, it's important to be clear from the outset about:

- How many different projects do you want to be able to use the system for?
- How similar or different are these projects? Can the same basic system be used for all of them, or will a lot of adaption be needed (see below)
- How many service users do I expect to enter each year?
- How many staff / volunteers will need to use the system to a) enter data; b) access data?

Adaptability

You will inevitably want to adapt the system. A key question is whether you will be able to do that yourself or will you have to get the companies' developers to do it? Systems that enable you to do your own adaptations are generally more complicated to use, but getting the provider to do your adaptations can be expensive. The key questions to ask are:

- What can be adapted easily? What cannot be adapted?
- How much will we need to learn to make adaptations?
- Will the provider be able to make adaptations if necessary? How long will this take? How much will this cost?

Working arrangements

If you don't have IT expertise in your organisation, the support available through the company supplying the software becomes a big factor when deciding the best option. Different providers will provide different levels of service. Generally, the more you pay the better the service will be. Questions to ask are:

- What does their ongoing support look like? Telephone, online or self-service?
- What training do they offer?
- What manuals/user guides are available?

It is also a good idea to ask to speak to other customers—to understand how it has worked for them.

Is it being developed?

A good tip is to check when the software was last updated and whether development is ongoing? The best systems will be ones that are constantly evolving to meet the needs of clients. On the other hand, a system that has not been updated for a while is an indicator that it is not very popular and probably not very good. Sometimes you can tell this from the way the system looks and feels, and the quality of the website—but not always.

Integration

An issue that sometimes arises is how a new system will fit with existing or old systems. As far as possible we would encourage you to make a clean break; your new system should be able to do everything you need. But local sites may be attached to existing ways of doing things and you may well have data stored in the old systems.

Questions to consider are:

- Will you be able to **easily** transfer data collected from your old system into the new system?
- If you are going to keep running old software how will it integrate with the new system? Can everything be done automatically? You do not want people manually transferring data over.

Security

To meet your legal obligations the data will need to be secure, so the first thing to check is that potential suppliers are compliant with data protection and [GDPR](#).

It is likely that you will want to store some personal data on the system (such as names and addresses) and you will need to check how this is handled and that nobody will be able to access it unless they have the right permissions. This can get quite complicated when you are working at different sites. For example, you might have senior staff that you want to be able to access all data (except personal data) and local staff who only need to have access for their team (but will need to see personal data). It is even more complicated when you have service users volunteering, who you may not want to be able to access data for other service users. Once again, it is a good idea to give some thought to this up-front, and discuss with colleagues and potential suppliers before committing to a system.

Hardware requirements

Finally, don't forget to check that you have the equipment you need to run the new system—including tablets and smart phones if you want people to enter data on the move.

What data do you want to collect?

This is a big question because the system will only be successful if it helps staff collect the right sort of data and is easy and intuitive for them to use. Off-the-shelf systems are designed with certain assumptions about how they will be used, and the kinds of data entered. You need to explore this, and think about whether those assumptions match your own. We suggest communicating your broad needs to potential suppliers and getting their agreement **in writing** that they can fulfil them.

The issues to check are:

- What does the data entry process look and feel like?
- Does it allow open-field/qualitative responses, multiple choice tick lists, etc? As well as options such as photo upload, location tagging and bar code scanning?

- Can data from previous sessions be 'fed forward' to avoid re-entry (you don't want to keep re-entering the same data if a service user's situation has not changed).
- Can the system be accessed and used offline? Does the offline version have reduced functionality?
- What does the system look like on different types of devices—including smart phones?
- Can surveys be sent directly from the software? And can survey responses be automatically linked back to an individual's records?
- How are dates handled? Are they automatically entered?
- How can the data entered be checked or monitored for quality? Can data be edited once entered?

What outputs do you want?

The other side of the equation to data entry is the outputs you want. All systems will offer ways to generate automatic reports—but these will rarely meet *all* your requirements, so you will need to be able to adapt them.

Some issues to consider are:

- Who needs reports, at what levels in the organisation and, what kinds of reports do they want?
- Do you want to report on change over time (distance travelled)? This is quite difficult data to summarise and it's worth asking how potential systems handle this.
- Can you filter reporting results to drill down into information?
- Do you want to use it to set performance indicators and to monitor against objectives and targets? Will the system allow us to set up '[dash boards](#)'.
- Do funders / stakeholders want direct access to any project information?

Ultimately, even the best system won't enable you to do all the analysis you could need, so it's important that you can easily **get all your data out of the system to analyse it separately**. Hence, it is vital to confirm **in writing** that you will *own* the raw data and can download it easily whenever you need it.

Summary

In all, it is worth spending time looking at the different options available, and potentially factoring in a trial period. You can often get free demonstrations from the company selling the software, which will allow you to ask specific questions and see what it is like.

And it bears repeating that this process of researching different options should include consultation with all potential users of the software, including frontline staff and volunteers.

Appendix: List of electronic case management systems

In this section we list potential providers of systems that we are aware of. We have not had time to 'review' them so present it only as a starting point for your own research. If you run a system that is not listed below, please get in touch and we will add it when we update this guide.

We want to do something more substantial than this and provide information about what each system offers and what it costs. So, if you run one of these systems and want to provide us with a description—let us know. We would be particularly interested if you could provide clear information about functionality, pricing and existing clients.

We would also like to hear from charities that have used one of these systems and want to share feedback.

Charity/social sector specific

The following are all CRM systems designed specifically for use in the charity / social sector:

Apricot	http://www.gallerypartnership.co.uk/apricot
Better Impact	https://www.betterimpact.co.uk
CIVI CRM	www.civcrm.org/
Charity Log	www.charitylog.co.uk/what-we-do/crm
Harlequin Software	www.harlequinsoftware.co.uk/software/service-delivery/
Iizuka	www.iizuka.co.uk/
Lamplight	www.lamplightdb.co.uk
LASA AIMS	www.lasa.org.uk/aims/
Psiams Systems	www.psiams.com/about/
Makerble	https://www.makerble.com/
Risi Tracker	http://www.insideoutcomes.co.uk/products-and-services/risk-tracker-software/
Sinzer	www.sinzer.org
Substance Views	http://www.substance.net/views/
Supporting People Assistant	http://www.tmwk.co.uk/spa.html
UpShot	www.upshot.org.uk

Consultancies

The following are consultancies providing system services and design for charities – often building products in other systems

Realsystems	http://www.realsystems.org.uk/
Economic Change	http://www.economicchange.co.uk/
Evide	www.evide.org.uk/

Commercials

It is worth being aware of the main international companies providing these kinds of services. They mainly have commercial customers, but may offer special rates and dispensation to charities

Salesforce	www.salesforcefoundation.org/nonprofit
Sugar CRM	www.sugarcrm.com
Trivaeo	www.trivaeo.com
Zoho Creator	https://goo.gl/YqqjZr

Sector specific

There are also many sector specific systems available:

Social care / Health sector

Access PeoplePlanner	https://goo.gl/SByQKi
Carenotes	https://www.oneadvanced.com/products/carenotes/
ECCO (Evidenced Client Centred Outcomes)	www.eccosolutions.co.uk
OSKA	www.octaviasoftware.com/

Housing / Homelessness sector

In form	www.in-form.org.uk/
Better Futures	www.ccpScotland.org/hseu/

Advice and advocacy sector

Advice Pro	www.advicepro.org.uk/
Blue Door	http://www.bluedoorsoftware.co.uk/

Young people

Career Vision	http://careervision.co.uk/products/core-iyss/
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