

LOLA COMMUNITY CHARGE SYSTEM (1990)

Introduction

The Community Charge development had Martin Jackson as the project manager with Steve Barfield and Nigel Stratton-Fidel the main programmers.

Background

The Conservative government introduced legislation to replace the domestic rating system with a new form of taxation which was to be known as the Community Charge. This would be levied as a flat rate tax on all adults. In England the start date was 1st April 1990.

The previous tax system was property-based and was in need of updating as the valuation of domestic properties was out of date and led to many anomalies.

The go-ahead was given in 1987 and LOLA started work immediately. The Rates team at that time was in a good position to do this work as it had just completed an update of the Rates online programs.

The initial transactions allowed browsing and updating of accounts, but after each account was accessed the transaction ended and a new one had to be started. This was not particularly user-friendly and so 'linking' and 'chaining' fields were added to all the screens so that the user could go from one transaction to another for the same account or stay on the same screen but for a different account without having to go to a starter screen.

Initial Programs

The first thing to do was to send out letters to all domestic properties that included a form to fill in showing all adult residents as well as all aged 16 to 18 that would soon be eligible for taxation. Upon receipt of these forms people were linked to properties. Reminder notices were also produced if forms had not been returned. Additionally, on-line transactions were created so that amendments and additions to be made and viewed.

Main application

Although a simple concept, the Community Charge had many additional features such as various discounts and benefits that could be requested and applied. These were done in a series of new online transactions which were needed to be in place before the 'go live' date.

The main batch system consisted of bill production which had an annual run sending out bills to everyone and a weekly run for any changes. Alongside the bills additional documents were produced for payment slips, standing orders and direct debits.

In order for the Councils to keep costs to a minimum the Post Office offered discounts if the bills were sorted into postcode order and to achieve this a very sophisticated multi-mailing machine was required. This was able to read OMR symbols which were printed on the bills and accompanying documents. Optical Mark Recognition allowed documents to be matched and enveloped together, along with optional inserts such as leaflets and advertisements. Batches of documents were separated by marking the start of each batch of envelopes with a coloured stripe so that operators could band them together to enable them to be suitable for a postman's delivery walk.

Once bills had been issued, payments were received and had to be applied to accounts. For non-payers, Reminders were issued, then Final Notices, Summonses and as a last resort, Bailiff Letters.

At year end a new set of bills were produced for the next year and any outstanding debits or credits were applied. Histories of payments and changes were kept and could be viewed.