

Text Messaging for Local Authorities

Fact! 93% of the UK population now uses a mobile phone



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About *iTex*...

iTex allows council officers and specified groups of people to contact each other - any time, any place, anywhere. It was developed by **Kirklees Council** and now offers other councils the opportunity to communicate with its local people and for those people to comment, respond and request information by return.

iTex has many varied applications and is already being used by a number of councils as a vital two-way communications tool. It's a computer-based system that is easy to install, operate and manage and can send messages to individuals or to specially selected groups of registered users. Those local people can then respond directly to the council by simply texting a given number.

Benefits include:

- *iTex* is a cost effective, adaptable and easy to use text messaging system for communicating with your audience
- Local people can register via a designated web-site to receive text messages from the council
- Enquiries will automatically trigger a keyword response
- Residents requesting information via keywords will receive an appropriate return message
- Local people can sign up for a whole host of text alerts from the council
- E-mails can be converted into text messages, and vice versa.

iTex is available as an off-the-shelf CD installation product, known as *iTex* Corporate, alternatively, if you have limited in-house ICT resources you can try the *iTex* Lite - this is hosted by Kirklees Council.

How much does *iTex* cost?

Different packages are available to suit your needs, but to give you some idea of cost:

***iTex* Lite** - One-off £350 setup fee and an annual service charge of £500. With this you can send as many text messages as you like for just 5.5p per message and there's no line rental charges.

***iTex* Corporate** is installed locally and costs just £1440 (this includes: installation, testing, technical training, plus 1 day of post installation support). Please note, that these costs do not include implementation of LGOL, SQL or Windows Servers. Further systems consultancy & training costs £360 per day, plus travel.

With ***iTex* Corporate**, you pay a line rental charge to our supplier Esendex, negotiated at a rate of £12 per month and 5.5p per message sent. If you want to use Freetext (i.e. so your customers don't pay for the text they send you) rental costs are £25 per month and you pay 5.5p for each incoming Freetext message.

For more information contact:

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According to the BBC (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 4 January 2006) *“the number of text messages sent in 2006 is expected to reach 100 million everyday”*.

iTex is an innovative, low-cost SMS text messaging communications solution developed by Kirklees Council for Local Authorities that works over any mobile network.

Case studies in this brochure on how Local Authorities are using iTex include:

- 1.** Kirklees Council: Chatback service - engaging with young people
- 2.** Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing - improving communications with council tenants
- 3.** Preston City Council - informing local people and visitors about events

1. Chatback

The Modern Way of Keeping in Touch with Young People

“The number of under-16s owning a mobile phone in the UK grew to 5.5 million in 2005 - an increase of nearly half a million from the previous year” (www.wi-fitechnology.com).

Kirklees Council has utilised the **iTex** system to create a two-way text messaging service for young people. The service is called Chatback and provides up to date news and information on issues and activities that are important and relevant to young people across the borough.

Chatback is aimed at young people in Kirklees aged between 13 and 21 who can register for the service by visiting the Chatback website or by sending a text message containing their full name.

The automated SMS registration facility returns a username and password enabling the user to go online and manage their own account by selecting topics of interest and taking advantage of special offers. The facility exists for young people to return messages with their views and or take part in polls.



As well as information on events, gigs, clubs and accommodation young people can also get advice on life issues, education, careers and benefits. They only receive information on the topics they have expressed an interest in.

Chatback has been promoted at local events and establishments that young people across Kirklees regularly attend. A poster campaign and a number of adverts and editorials in local newspapers, the local cinema and listings magazines also encouraged young people to register.

In a recent SMS text messaging poll Chatback users were asked if they thought Chatback was a positive service - 96% said yes, 'a positive service providing information that they would not otherwise find.'

Chatback has been fundamental in encouraging the council to do its best to meet the needs of its young people. This has fostered commitment from Council Services, Police, Fire Service, Connexions, Drug Sense and Kirklees Active Leisure. Chatback has also enabled small scale community projects to effectively market their activities to a large number of young people with little or no cost implications.

In a speech on 8th February 2006, MP Jim Fitzpatrick praised the **iTex** scheme saying, *"Another excellent example is the Chatback project in Kirklees. This is a low-cost SMS text messaging solution that works over any mobile network. It provides a sophisticated two-way message information service for young people. When did you last see a young person without a mobile phone?"*

For more details on how Chatback has helped **Kirklees Council** communicate with young people, contact Michelle Moorhouse on 01484 223239 or michelle.moorhouse@kirklees.gov.uk

2. Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing

The Cost Effective Way of Keeping Track of Rent Arrears

“Good, effective communication makes all the difference to good arrears recovery,” says Colin Hallas, Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing (KNH).

iTex has been specifically developed by **Kirklees Council** to make communication between council officers and council house tenants easy, reliable, trackable and immediate. It allows direct messages to be sent by each member of the rent arrears recovery section to individual tenants imparting, or asking for, information on a host of relevant local issues.

Messages are simple and straightforward and never contain private or personal information. Generally, messages contain a polite request for the tenant to call a specified number at KNH.

Each sent message is logged and the exact time and date when it was received by the tenant is recorded. **iTex** stores tenants’ responses for one week only, before which time the appropriate action will have been taken. The system incorporates a security device that requires logging back in by council officers if left unattended for longer than five minutes.

iTex allows council officers to send individual texts via their pc or via e-mail. It also allows tenants to respond in a similar manner. For tenants without mobile phones, the message is sent as a voice-mail message.

iTex is cheap and cost-effective. Average call charges are 2p cheaper than when leaving voice mail on landlines.

The system is very user-friendly. The rent arrears section has received no antagonism to this ‘big brother’ approach even from elderly tenants, traditionally less likely to embrace newer technologies.

iTex has been instrumental in helping Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing achieve an 85% response rate from tenants to the requests of rent arrears officers.

For more details on how Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing are using **iTex** to help keep control over rent arrears, please contact Colin Hallas on 01484 414884 or colin.hallas@kirklees.gov.uk



3. Preston City Council

The Easy Way of Informing People About Events in the Borough

Preston City Council is actively pursuing opportunities for utilising **iTex** for services ranging from reporting graffiti and requesting refuse collections, to advising tenants and guiding tourists and locals to special events.

In particular, **iTex** is proving to be very cost-effective in the area of tourism and leisure. It is far easier and quicker to send text messages to registered users than to send out flyers via the post. **iTex** is immediate.

With Preston's text number advertised on Virgin Trains, visitors - whether on business or pleasure - can be registered before they arrive in the city and get all the latest details on those leisure activities that interest them.

Peter Ryder, Head of Preston City Council's e-Gov department, says: *"The adaptability and functionality of iTex mark it as the best such system on the market today. It is easy to set up and use and the after-sales support from **Kirklees Council** has been outstanding."*

Once a person has registered and received a password, they can select the type of events that interest them. Texts can be triggered by keywords and sent to individuals or groups of like-minded people.

Although the system has only just gone live, the response rate has been encouraging with 120 requests so far for brochures and a similar number of sign ups for event information.

Preston City Council has also been using **iTex** intensively for Area Forums. Concerned citizens can air their views and bring matters of interest to the attention of the Forum organisers via a simple text message. Again, the response has been good, with 44 sign-ups which have, in turn, led to the setting up of secondary school-based forums.

For more details on how Preston City Council is using **iTex** to help keep locals and visitors informed about events, places and exhibitions, please contact Peter Ryder on 01772 906014 or p.ryder@preston.gov.uk

