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CASE STUDY · MARLUC SYNOPSIS

# Derby City Council AI phone and web helper

IMPLEMENTED 2023 ONWARDS · GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICES · UNITED KINGDOM · BAND C · CLAIMED ONLY

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Derby City Council replaced its main switchboard with an AI helper, Darcie, in 2023 and upgraded it to generative AI in 2025. The council reports that about half of enquiries are answered without staff; the BBC reports the rate has been largely unchanged for three years and reports criticism from the leader of the Derby Conservatives.


**ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS**

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Facts and figures are as reported by the sources listed below, which may be incomplete, self-reported or out of date. Check the original source before relying on any figure.

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AT A GLANCE

AI used: Conversational AI phone and web assistant, upgraded to generative AI in May 2025, supplied by ICS.AI.

Implemented: 2023 onwards.  Grade: band C, Process change, Claimed only.

Headline result, as reported: AI helper answers 54% of Darcie's cases without staff, by the council's account in May 2026; BBC reports about half, largely unchanged since 2023

## 1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 7 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

### Organisation

Derby City Council. City council for Derby, England. Its digital helper Darcie handles customer service calls and web chats; a sibling helper, Ali, handles housing enquiries for Derby Homes. Canvas block: 3. Customers and proposition. Also 4. Operations and process, 8. Governance and risk.

## Business challenge

The challenge. The council says phone menus cannot handle the volume and range of requests a council receives and rarely help after hours, and that most residents ask similar questions about a few services. It also cites continued financial pressure on local government.

How it was addressed. Working with ICS.AI, the council added Darcie to its website in April 2023 and then to its phone system, replacing the main switchboard and number menu. Darcie answers routine questions at any hour, transfers callers to the right team and can text links. In February 2024 the council signed a £7 million contract with ICS.AI for a wider AI programme. In May 2025 Darcie was upgraded to generative AI, added adult social care queries and nine community languages. Residents can still ask for a human advisor during office hours. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]

## Who implemented it

ICS.AI (Software vendor): Supplies the AI platform behind Darcie and Ali and the wider AI programme.
In-house (In-house): Council teams run the service and handle transferred calls.

## Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: T3 API integrations. Deployment: Vendor SaaS. Vendors and products: ICS.AI, Darcie, Ali, ICS.AI Smart AI platform.

Where it was built in: On the council's website chat and its main phone line in place of the switchboard and number menu; answers from council service information, transfers calls to the right team and sends text messages with links.

## What changed

Before: callers used a switchboard and number menu. After: Darcie answers first and passes about half of cases to staff. Four full-time equivalent agency jobs were lost in the year after launch, per the BBC. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]

## What it cost

Initial cost £168,000, per the BBC; a BBC picture caption gives over £2 million. £7 million contract with ICS.AI for the next phase of the wider AI programme, by the council's account.

## What it saved

About £200,000 a year from four full-time equivalent agency jobs, per the BBC. The council says its wider AI programme has identified £12.25 million in savings across the authority; the BBC reports over £12 million, half from adult care. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]

## Governance and control

The council says every stage of its AI programme will be tested and comply with data protection law, and that residents can always reach a human advisor during office hours. It collects feedback after answers. After launch, a high volume of complaints led to a customer focus group, per the Local Democracy Reporting Service as reported by the BBC. Accountable owner: the Cabinet Member for Digital and Organisational Transformation speaks for the programme.

**S2 · Accountable owner · Claimed**
The Cabinet Member for Digital and Organisational Transformation speaks for the programme; a named operational owner for Darcie is not reported. [1] [2]

**A1 · Safe use · Claimed**
The council says AI will be used safely and ethically and every stage tested for function and data protection compliance. [5]

**A2 · Human in the loop · Evidenced**
Darcie transfers calls it cannot handle to staff; the BBC reports about half of cases need a human, and residents can ask for an advisor during office hours. [3] [6]

**A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Evidenced**
The council publishes resolution and feedback figures; after a high volume of complaints it set up a customer focus group, per the Local Democracy Reporting Service as reported by the BBC. [1] [3]

**A4 · Vendor AI · Not reported**
ICS.AI supplies the helpers under contract; how the council oversees the vendor's AI is not reported. [1] [5]

**A5 · Agent controls · Not reported**
No agents described.

**A6 · Standards and regulation · Not reported**
Not reported.

## What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– Volume: more than 3.2 million enquiries handled since 2023, by the council's account.

– Around-the-clock answers to routine questions, and nine community languages since 2025, by the council's account.

– 77% of residents who gave web feedback on Darcie described it as positive, by the council's account.

DID NOT

– The share of cases resolved without staff has stayed at about half for three years, per the BBC.

– Darcie struggled to understand the Derbyshire dialect in a BBC Radio Derby test; the council acknowledged room to improve.

– The leader of the Derby Conservatives said the system can feel like a digital barrier for elderly, vulnerable and less digitally confident residents, per the BBC.

UNPROVEN

– The £12.25 million identified savings for the wider programme have not been independently checked.

– Whether residents whose calls are passed to staff get a quicker or better service than before.

## Timeline

Apr 2023 Council adds the Darcie digital helper to its website [6]

2023 Darcie replaces the council's main switchboard [1]

Sept 2023 Council director reports 43% deflection on over 62,000 calls, against a 21% target [7]

Feb 2024 Council signs a £7 million contract with ICS.AI for the next phase of its AI programme [5]

Jan 2025 Darcie has taken around 765,000 calls; about half transferred to staff [6]

May 2025 Generative AI upgrade, adult social care queries and nine community languages added [2]

Jul 2025 Council acknowledges Darcie struggles with the Derbyshire dialect after a BBC Radio Derby test [4]

## 2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

### Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable.  Grade: C, Process change.  Proof: Claimed only.  Level of change: Process change.

Process change (Level 2, band C). The council's contact process now starts with an AI helper; a small staffing change followed.

Graded C. The council's front door for phone and web enquiries was redesigned around an AI helper that answers or routes calls, and staffing changed slightly. Results are the council's own figures; the BBC reports they have been largely flat for three years.

### The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The council redesigned its front door around an AI helper and kept a human route during office hours. The council's figures show steady volume, but the resolution rate has not risen much in three years, so the benefit depends on how well the other half of callers are served. For other public bodies, the transferable points are to publish resolution and complaint figures over time and to test with local accents and vulnerable callers before relying on the tool.

1. Publish resolution rates over time, not only totals.
2. Test voice assistants with local accents and vulnerable callers.
3. Keep a clear route to a person and report how it performs.

### Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Self-reported results, with independent reporting: the BBC reports council figures, the cost and job change, a failed test and criticism.

Evaluation method. Self-reported council figures: share of cases answered without staff, call volumes and feedback scores, relayed and questioned by BBC reporting.

Sources disagree. The council's May 2026 release says 54% of Darcie's cases are answered without staff; the BBC reports about 50% on average. The council gave 57% in May 2025 and 58% in July 2025. The BBC article gives an initial cost of £168,000 in its text and over £2 million in a picture caption. The lead article's 45% of inbound calls and more than 40 departments match 2023 trade reporting of council statements; no GOV.UK page on the case was found.

Status. Ongoing: Darcie remains in use; in May 2026 the council said a similar upgrade for Ali was planned in the coming months.

## 3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/derby-city-council-darcie-ai-phone-helper


[1] Derby City Council: Council's digital helpers mark three years of success (May 2026)
https://www.derby.gov.uk/news/2026/may/councils-digital-helpers-mark-three-years-of-success/

[2] Derby City Council: Council's digital helper Darcie gets next generation upgrade for phone calls (May 2025)
https://derby.gov.uk/news/2025/may/councils-digital-helper-darcie-gets-next-generation-upgrade-for-phone-calls

[3] BBC News: Derby City Council's AI helpers only resolve half of cases (May 2026)
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1d2z253dgro

[4] BBC News: Council AI helper struggling to grasp local dialect (July 2025)
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cr4wkgyq259o

[5] Derby City Council: Council embarks on next phase of using AI to streamline services (February 2024)
https://www.derby.gov.uk/news/archive/2024/february/council-embarks-next-phase-of-ai/

[6] Derby City Council: Meet Darcie our digital helper
https://www.derby.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/customer-services/digital-helper-darcie/index.html

[7] Housing Technology: Derby's AI-powered phone handlers with ICS.AI (September 2023)
https://www.housing-technology.com/derbys-ai-powered-phone-handlers-with-ics-ai/

Derby City Council website: https://www.derby.gov.uk



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