

Carmarthenshire shares its experience of implementing e-Planning Services

Carmarthenshire Council is one of the twenty-two unitary authorities in Wales. The Council, created by the amalgamation of three smaller authorities in 1996, serves a large, rural area.

In January 2004, Carmarthenshire Council installed UKPlanning, a managed e-planning service developed by IDOX plc. Through its use of UKPlanning, the Council has been able to make a large number of its planning services accessible to local residents via the internet. The Council has, as a result, seen public involvement in the planning process increase dramatically: during April 2005 alone, well over 17,000 planning documents were viewed online.

Eifion Bowen, Head of Planning, Carmarthenshire Council commented:

“The UKPlanning system has improved Carmarthenshire’s capacity to consult on planning applications by making the information more accessible to the general public. Having access to development proposals on a 24/7 basis has enhanced the service we can offer the county’s residents. In a large county such as Carmarthenshire, it means applications can be viewed online without the need for long journeys. Internet access is also available at our libraries. The process has facilitated formal consultation and helped with the storage of the 3,000 applications we receive every year”.

2004 Best Planning Website in Wales

Carmarthenshire’s willingness to embrace new technology has also resulted in official recognition: in 2004, the Council’s online planning service was voted the best in Wales. The 2004 Planning Website Survey (carried out by Peter Pendleton Associates, on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) awarded Carmarthenshire the highest score of any Welsh authority. The Council is the only Welsh authority to have implemented the UKPlanning service.

Why UKPlanning?

Carmarthenshire’s planning department required a reliable solution that would allow e-Government objectives to be fulfilled. At the same time, the Council wished to avoid a lengthy, complex installation that might potentially disrupt services. With eighteen councils already subscribers, the UKPlanning managed service represented a well-tested and cost-effective solution.

Unlike other technology implementations, UKPlanning removes the need for planning departments to set up their own internet solutions. Disruption for council staff is minimised and public access to the service can be achieved very rapidly, often within weeks of an order being placed. Importantly, the service is calculated on a “pay-as-you-go” basis and no major upfront investment is required. In addition, the authority does not have to bear the cost of maintaining equipment.

As part of the UKPlanning Managed Service, officers also have access to the IDOX Information Service, one of the foremost information services on community, economic, environmental, and physical regeneration and development in the UK.

Scanning and Storage of Documents

Subscribing to the UKPlanning service has removed a sizeable administrative burden from Carmarthenshire Council. Now, when planning applications are received by the Council, they are simply posted to IDOX (along with any supporting documentation) where they are scanned, indexed and published to the Council’s website. All documents are returned to the authority within a week, while site and press notices inform the public that documents are available for viewing online.

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Information is kept accurately up-to-date, and fewer resources have to be diverted into routine administrative tasks. As applications are stored electronically, pressures on floor space are also reduced.

As well as digitising current planning applications, Carmarthenshire Council is also in the process of converting older documents into electronic form. Formed from three smaller councils in 1996, the Council has inherited a considerable number of paper files, some of which date back to the 1950’s and 60’s. The Council anticipates that historic applications will eventually be



Kidwelly Castle, Carmarthenshire



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available for viewing by the public as well on www.ukplanning.com.

Enhancing the Consultative Process

Carmarthenshire Council is now able to offer a variety of planning services via its website. Site users may view the application and decision registers electronically, as well as any new application notices. Application forms, drawings and attachments can be viewed online and the public can submit comments via the Council's website. The site offers downloadable forms and online guidance regarding the planning process. The progress of an application may also be monitored electronically. Importantly, with planning committee reports, schedules and minutes all available online, local residents are able to participate more easily in the planning process. The Local Plan is also available electronically.

To further improve public access to the planning process, the Council's online service can be accessed from any library in Carmarthenshire, as well through a series of information points in authority-owned buildings.

Popularity amongst Local Residents

Carmarthenshire's online planning service has proved extremely popular: in April 2005, some 10,842 case files were searched and accessed online while, in the same month, 17,342 documents were viewed, 31 application comments registered and 214 new case files created electronically. Local press campaigns have also helped boost public interest in the service. Detailed statistical evidence generated by the UKPlanning Service (for example, the five most searched on documents or case files each month) is also proving useful, allowing the Council to gauge public concerns more accurately.

Emily Dent, Data Management Officer, Carmarthenshire Council, commented: "UKPlanning has proved excellent from a customer service point of view. People are getting more involved in the planning process. We're definitely pleased: the implementation worked well both internally and externally".

Efficiency Gains

Carmarthenshire Council has also seen its own performance improve: planning officials no longer need to spend large amounts of time searching for paper files and, in addition, planning applications can also be processed more quickly. Interaction with

statutory consultees has also improved, for example the Environment Agency and Welsh Water. Previously, any correspondence between the Council and other agencies, regarding a planning application, had to be

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accompanied by photocopied versions of the relevant documents. Now, other organisations can simply be referred to Carmarthenshire's website to view any necessary plans or drawings.

Looking to the Future

Carmarthenshire Council intends to introduce a number of further improvements to its online service. The Council eventually hopes to receive applications electronically, while a Welsh version of the UKPlanning service is currently in development.

In Conclusion

Carmarthenshire Council faced a daunting task: improving accessibility to planning services in a large, rural area, underserved by transport links. However, the council's progressive stance (Carmarthenshire was the first council in Wales to offer Internet access to planning applications) has paid dividends, as is reflected in its high Pendleton score. The Council has both improved the quality of the service offered to local people and discovered a latent demand for access to the planning process. Local communities are now able to contribute and comment more easily and transparently, which, in turn, is likely to result in an improvement in the quality of development proposals. The service is truly one that can be said to be "useful, usable and used".

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