

Richmond taps into Latent Demand for e-Planning

With over 300 new applications per month, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is one of London's busiest planning authorities.

Following the installation in September 2003 of UKPlanning, a managed e-planning service developed by IDOX plc, the borough has witnessed a dramatic improvement in the level of interaction between its planning services and the local community. The implementation of UKPlanning, which enables planning applications to be viewed and commented upon electronically by the public, has resulted in over 100,000 case file viewings during the last year. The Council also now receives over one hundred online comments per month.

Cllr Lance Quantrill, Member for e-Government at the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, commented: "One hundred thousand viewers can't be wrong! The new system has revolutionised the consultative process. We now have an almost infinite capacity to handle enquiries. The system has satisfied an unknown demand that was previously suppressed by lack of facilities and has delivered greater value to those who needed it."

He added: "It is a delight to find a software programme that is installed on time, works from day one and does what it says on the tin!"

Improving Access to Planning Services

Prior to October 2003, plans could only be viewed at the Libraries or the Civic Centre: however, with 40% of the borough's adult population commuting to work, for many residents, interaction with local planning services required taking time off from work.

At the same time, with an ever greater number of residents with Internet connection - Richmond is amongst the top London boroughs in terms of connectivity (with over 80% connectivity) - the Council realised that the Internet would provide a valuable solution to the issue of accessibility.

In early 2003, through its monitoring of the PARSOL (Planning and Regulatory Services Online) project, Richmond upon Thames Council was convinced that the development work carried out by the London Borough of Wandsworth, in

conjunction with IDOX, could provide an interactive e-planning service. Impressed by the work at Wandsworth, Richmond opted to implement the IDOX UKPlanning managed service.

Installation

Unlike other technological implementations, the UKPlanning managed service - which is now subscribed to by eighteen local authorities UK-wide - utilises a simple methodology,

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allowing rapid deployment, minimising disruption to council staff and ensuring that the public can access the service as soon as possible.

Importantly, the UKPlanning service provides an almost instant, end-to-end e-planning solution. Within one month of installation of the new technology at Richmond, planning applications could be published on the Web and within two months, the system was being accessed by the public. And, with the 2005 deadline looming for the electronic delivery of key public services, this represents a lifeline for those councils (such as the many criticised in the Pendleton Report) that still may not have fully achieved e-government targets in vital areas such as planning.

Now, when an application arrives at the London Borough of Richmond's planning offices, it is registered, numbered, assembled within a case file and posted to IDOX. Indexing, preparation, scanning and publishing of documents to the Statutory Register online is undertaken by IDOX, within three days, and is quality assured.

Following scanning, any "public" documents are published directly to the Council's website whilst the day's caseload is transferred to Council's UKPlanning server in an overnight synchronisation of databases. The server



The River Thames at Richmond

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is incorporated into the Council's own network as well as connected to the UKPlanning Hub. The Hub, in turn, provides a "back-up", ensuring that in the event of any kind of failure on the Council's server, all documents can be restored.

The system allows planning applications to be conveniently displayed on the Council's own website for review by the public, 24x7 and from any location with Internet access. Members of the public can search the Council's online database of applications, make electronic copies of documents, and submit comments electronically.

Planning applications can also be stored and retained by council staff, while the system's workflow technology allows managers and team leaders to distribute and manage online comments or other tasks electronically. Audit trails can also be created which enable the progress and history of a document or case file to be tracked, or the throughput of applications to be monitored.

Benefits

With around fifteen thousand case files now viewed per month, Richmond Council is experiencing unprecedented levels of interest in its planning service. Under the old paper-based system, this level of interaction with the public was simply quite impossible. Indeed, the present viewing levels suggest that a latent demand, previously suppressed by the lack of suitable facilities, has been satisfied.

The new electronic system has also brought significant improved efficiency: considerable time-savings have been delivered and Richmond Council estimates that, without the new system, it would have needed between 3 and 4 extra employees if those viewing onscreen had phoned or visited the planning contact centre. Additionally, with fewer routine enquiries to handle, staff now concentrate on the more complex aspects of planning services.

Importantly, as members of the public have generally carried out an Internet search before ringing the planning office, they are well briefed and queries are of a more informed nature. As a result, exchanges between planning officers and callers are now far more productive.

The Future: Online Planning Applications

Further enhancement of the system is currently taking place: electronic forms will be available shortly, enabling citizens to submit applications for planning and building control online, as well as to attach supporting documents and to pay for applications electronically. The forms, which allow validation by the user throughout the application process, will also significantly reduce the submission of inaccurate, or incomplete forms, which currently runs at 20%. This, in turn, should overcome both the frustrations experienced by the public and reduce the effort expended by planning officers in solving these problems.

Serving the Community and Complying with e-Government Imperatives

The London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is now able to serve the community more effectively than ever: it is able to process planning applications more rapidly and cost-effectively. At the same time, local residents and businesses can contribute to planning processes in a transparent and accessible manner, which, importantly, will also improve the quality of development proposals. Crucially, for the Council itself, the 2005 e-government imperatives can also be met with confidence.

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