

The Planning Portal partners with IBM to deliver a flagship site for the DCLG's vision for UK e-Government

Overview

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funded an innovative development by The Planning Portal Team to radically reform the procedures for submitting and processing planning applications in England and Wales. The project is hailed as a model implementation of DCLG's vision for UK e-Government.

The Planning Portal was developed and implemented in partnership with IBM and provides improved facilities for the public and planning professionals. It has eliminated paper-based procedures, delivered a 30 per cent reduction in rejected applications, and increased the speed of processing planning applications. Staff costs in local planning offices have also been reduced.

Every year local councils across England and Wales handle over 650,000 planning applications. Until recently, this work was completed almost entirely using slow and costly manual, paper-based processes.

The Planning Portal Team set out to radically modernise the way planning applications are submitted and processed. It has implemented an online service now recognised as a model deployment of e-Government in the UK.

Automation and Reform

The Planning Portal (www.planningportal.gov.uk) is a free Internet service giving access to information about local councils and local development plans. The portal guides the public and planning professionals through the planning process, allowing them to complete applications on-line, attach documents electronically, and make and track submissions and appeals interactively.

"We partnered with IBM for The Planning Portal project because of its high level of specialist business expertise and technical skills," says

Richard Goodwin, Director of the e-Planning Programme Board. "IBM showed a good understanding of our business requirements and was innovative in helping us design and build a successful portal."

Public and professionals can submit their planning applications online and track progress interactively, using The Planning Portal, a new service from the DCLG.

Award-Winning Partnership

Transforming the systems and procedures used by 387 local authorities was a major undertaking, and one that had never been tackled before. It required a close partnership between the Planning Portal Team and IBM.

Chris Kendall, Director of The Planning Portal said: "IBM Global Business Services played a major role in helping us analyse and re-model planning application procedures to extract maximum benefit from the online environment. Working in partnership we have achieved something quite special."

The Planning Portal is a flagship site for e-Government in the UK. Last year it won both the award for 'Best project – Government to business' at the Government Computing BT Syntegra Awards for Innovation, and the Excellence in Central Government: Strategic plan / achievement' at the e-Government National Awards.

The Rt. Hon. John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister commented: "The excellent Planning Portal makes the system easier to follow for applicants and residents."

Delivering the Solution

IBM was retained to host and support the original portal. As this initial contract neared renewal, it was apparent that the success and status of the Planning Portal would require a step change both in technology and services. Revised growth forecasts necessitated radical action to ensure that the service continued to meet demand and match user expectations.

IBM undertook a major software upgrade and migrated the service to a completely new highly-resilient infrastructure housed within IBM's e-business Hosting centre. In this new environment, the new Planning Portal handles up to 2,000 concurrent users, a 10-fold increase in predicted usage.

All local planning authorities in England and Wales are now accepting online planning applications via the Planning Portal, a target that was met ahead of schedule. Traffic through the Portal is increasing at an average of over 1000 additional users per month.

Cost-effective Customer Service

Local planning authorities connected to The Planning Portal experience a greatly improved quality of planning applications and the whole planning process is much more efficient, significantly reducing timescales.

It used to take 10 days to carry out checks on paperwork to ensure that a planning application was accurate and could be processed. By contrast, applications made via The Planning Portal are checked automatically and acknowledgement letters despatched the same day. Automatic checks have reduced the number of rejected applications by 30 per cent, and there has been a substantial saving in the time and effort spent by local authority planning staff processing applications.

Commercial customers also benefit from the improved service. "Planning agents are able to submit many more applications and be confident that each will be processed efficiently," says Stuart Mockford, Deputy Director, Transactional Services. "One agent submits eighty applications a week, tying up some £7 million pounds in turnover. With applications being processed in a fraction of the time, that money can be made to work much harder leading to a direct and substantial improvement to the agent's bottom line."



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