

New Forest Connects to the Community - by putting Planning at the Public's Fingertips

One of the busiest planning departments in the UK has revolutionised their planning system through working in partnership with e-government solutions provider, IDOX plc. The implementation of the award-winning IDOX Software has resulted in New Forest District Council being able to deliver electronic access to services - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The New Forest is internationally known as an area of outstanding natural beauty and ecological value. It sits in the centre of the New Forest District, but around its edge are other important areas requiring the highest standards of town and country planning. The planning service at New Forest District Council strives to protect and enhance all of these areas, whilst promoting economic growth and essential facilities for the 170,000 people who live in the area. Due to the quantity of applications and queries received by New Forest, the efficient running of the planning service is of paramount importance. There are currently around 90 planning applications being received by the council every week.

The web-based electronic document management and workflow system, IDOX Software, has been implemented within the Planning and Building Control departments at New Forest District Council, making it possible for planning applications, drawings, maps and general information to be accessed online by the public (including architects and consultants) without ever having to set foot inside the council offices.

Access to Services

As part of their 'Access to Services' strategy, New Forest District Council took the unusual step of launching the system to the public before opening it up for use by council officers themselves. Now that the system is also being used internally, council officers have found it extremely beneficial and easy to use.

IDOX Software is also providing the additional benefit of a potentially 'less paper' environment. It is planned that IDOX Software will eventually be used by over 40 Planning Officers within the Council.

Benefits for Planners

Distinct benefits have already been identified by the internal staff who have recently started to use the IDOX Software system to transform their working procedures. The features they

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have identified as outstanding include the precise imaging facilities that enable the measuring of distances and areas from images of any format, the saving of time through reduced call-back costs to the public and the elimination of the lengthy process of continually retrieving and returning paper files. It is also anticipated that a significant amount of floor space, presently used to store vast amounts of paper files, will be freed up in the future (when they can eventually be destroyed). The remaining electronic files are legally admissible.

Planning Information - at the Public's Fingertips

An important and innovative aspect to the new planning service at the New Forest is the introduction of public access 'kiosks' located in and around the New Forest area in public places such as Visitor Centres and Council Offices. These kiosks are 'touch screen' interfaces that are easy to use and available, at no cost, for use by the public. Since the implementation of



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IDOX Software at New Forest, five kiosks have already been rolled out around the New Forest area. Due to the success of the project, there are plans to install more kiosks in many more key public locations such as Recreation Centres, Health Centres and Local Information Offices. In addition to being able to access council information via the kiosks, it is also possible, of course, to access, submit and comment on applications via the web, from any location and at any time.

Figures that Speak for Themselves

Since going live with the new online planning service in January 2002, the planning area of the council website has fast become the second most

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visited area on the site, at times receiving up to 2000 hits per week. Ken Connolly, Head of IT at New Forest, comments, “We were both surprised and delighted at the enormous up-take of this facility. It has really underlined the need to develop new channels of access to services. IDOX Software has helped us to sell the concept of e-government to both Members and Officers alike”.

What the Public Says

Extremely positive feedback has already been received from the general public, including many architects and other local businesses, regarding the service.

The following comments have been submitted to the Council:

“It was excellent to be able to view my neighbour’s planning application online. This has saved me a lot of time and effort. Thank you”. Mr. P. Jones, Lymington, New Forest.

“I object to my neighbour’s planning application and - by the way - it’s great to be able to submit comments in this way!” Mrs. R. Wilkinson, Brockenhurst, New Forest.

Ken Connolly tells us, “Planning is a service that is necessary, but largely unappreciated. Helping people to interact with that service in their own time and from their own homes, or an office more local to them, has produced some very positive feedback. It is proving to be an extremely worthwhile initiative”.

New Forest District Council is thoroughly committed to the modernising government agenda, and this move ensures they are pushed to the forefront of effective electronic service delivery, as per the directives that have been set by central government.

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