

South Gloucestershire - Improving Planning Services Online

Located on the north fringe of Bristol, South Gloucestershire Council occupies an area of diversity, providing services to both urban and rural communities. Working with information management solutions provider IDOX plc, the Council has improved the efficiency of its planning service, raising both the quality of communication within the Planning Directorate and making participation in the consultation process far easier for its customers.

Planning Directorate: a Multi-Site Department

One of the most influential factors underlying the Council's decision to overhaul its technological infrastructure was the multi-site location of its Planning Directorate. Providing planning officers with access to the many documents required was especially difficult and vast amounts of paper documents had to be transported, by van, from one site to another. The process was time-consuming and inefficient. There was also an ever-present danger that files might be lost in transit. Cheryl Bryant, (Development Control Admin Manager, South Gloucestershire Council) recalls that the situation could, at times, be "frustrating and time wasting".

Document Management

A system was required that would allow documents to be converted from paper to electronic form and, more importantly, that would integrate seamlessly with the Council's existing MVM technology. In response, the Council decided to implement an electronic document management system (EDMS). A number of EDMS vendors took part in the selection process but IDOX Software stood out. "IDOX is tried and tested. We knew that it had worked at Wandsworth Council, which had MVM too. We looked at a number of other systems but these didn't come anywhere close to delivering the integration we wanted". Cheryl Bryant, (Development Control Admin Manager, South Gloucestershire Council)

Scanning

Since the installation of IDOX Software in December 2002, over 42,000 current and historical planning applications have been captured in electronic form. Additionally, some 5,000 historical building control applications have also been scanned. As electronic documents held in electronic form are now admissible for legal purposes, the Council is gradually able to destroy paper archive files, culling up to fifty per day. As a result, storage space has been saved and cost-savings made. Scanning has been

rolled out to two other services within the Planning Directorate within the last six months.

Over 280 users are currently set up with access to the system. As well as the Planning Directorate, other departments such as Community Services also have access. The project has also resulted in the creation of an important "corporate standard", or benchmark, for document management across the Council.



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Cheryl Bryant, (Development Control Admin Manager)

Planning applications can now be viewed electronically, from any PC within any one of the Planning Directorate's sites, making information sharing between sites considerably easier. Files can also be downloaded on to laptops and used off-site. Documents cannot be lost, nor do administrative staff have to spend valuable time retrieving files from paper archives.

Public Access

December 2002 also saw the implementation of IDOX Web Access technology. It is now possible for the Council's customers to view and comment on planning application documentation electronically, via the Council's website. A one-stop shop, has also been set up in the Council's reception area for viewing by those who do have time to visit the department. Cheryl Bryant, (Development Control Admin Manager, South Gloucestershire Council) commented on the public's reaction to the online facilities: "The public's reaction has been very positive. The work we have done enables the public to view planning applications in their own time and make consultation responses on line."

While fewer visits are now made to the Planning Directorate's offices by the public, the number of responses to consultations has risen not only by post but the Council receives over 100 per month via the public website. Interestingly, the largest number of hits to the Council's website, apart from the vacancy board, is now made to the Planning Directorate. Responses to

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questionnaires sent out with planning decisions indicate that satisfaction with the Council's planning service currently runs at 81%. This figure, says Cheryl Bryant, has risen several points since the introduction of the online service.

Council members are particularly satisfied with the new system as it allows documents to be displayed electronically at meetings. And, with planning committees sitting at both the Council's East and West sites, this represents a great benefit. Previously, displaying paper documents at meetings had been an inefficient and cumbersome process. Now, members of the public are even able to bring applications in CD form to committee meetings.

Contact Centre

Public access to the planning process has been further improved with the development of a contact centre. Some 80% of planning enquiries can now be dealt with at first point of contact, freeing planning officers from the necessity of answering routine questions. IDOX Software has made the working of the contact centre particularly efficient: staff have electronic access to all relevant documentation and answering queries from applicants is therefore much easier.

Future Developments: People-based Workflow Technology

Wise spending of IEG monies has led to the Council's receipt of a very generous Planning Delivery Grant (PDG), to further improve public access to its planning services. Part of the PDG has been used by South Gloucestershire Council to install IDOX people-based workflow.

The workflow module, which has been implemented after a consultative process involving Council staff, allows the electronic allocation of correspondence. The exact stage of an application's progress can be tracked, allowing contact centre staff to identify which planning officer is handling an application and expected processing times. The Council, which is hoping to achieve "excellent status" for its customer service standards, believes that enquiries from the public will, as a result, be handled far more effectively.

People-based workflow also allows accurate and consistent management information to be generated. Such information is invaluable, allowing managers to identify processing bottlenecks and, most importantly of all, to monitor officers performance against a range of indicators for BVPI 157 and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

The Website: Future Developments

The Council is also taking further steps to improve the usefulness of its website: thanks to IDOX Web Access Module and e-Forms technology, the Council's customers will shortly be able to submit planning applications online and make payments for applications via the Internet.

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Cheryl Brant (Development Control Admin Manager)

The Council also hopes to create an interactive Local Plan on its website. With Internet access to the Local Plan, the Council hopes to encourage a greater number of responses from the public in relation to local planning issues.

Knowledge Management

Finally, in response to the challenges of the Freedom of Information Act 2005, South Gloucestershire Council is implementing IDOX Knowledge Management technology. This will allow free text retrieval on documents held in the electronic archive and, in turn, enable the Council to respond efficiently to any demands for information by the public.

A Successful Project

The implementation of IDOX technology at South Gloucestershire Council has been a success story. Cheryl Bryant, Development Control Admin Manager, feels that the new system "has proved useful for everyone, both customers and staff" at the same time as providing a more efficient service. Even more importantly, the Council can now be far more confident that it will get to December 2005 "with all the ticks in all the right boxes".

<http://www.southglos.gov.uk/planning/applications/index.htm>

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