

The Premier League – how Bracknell Forest pioneered e-planning

Introduction

Three years ago, Bracknell Forest Unitary Council took a hard look at the way they were approaching planning and decided there was room for improvement. Although the Council had invested in IT systems to automate some of the planning process, it was felt that this technology wasn't as up-to-date as possible and was not being used to its full potential, with the result that Planning Officers were wasting time needlessly on the 1,200 full applications the Council receives every year.

“Our main motivation was to make the whole system more efficient and more automatic, so that officers were freed up to really use their skills to their full potential.”

Steve Loudoun, Assistant Director, Environment and Leisure, Bracknell Forest Unitary Council

To achieve these objectives, Bracknell Forest began working with their partner IDOX group on developing a world class e-planning system which would deliver real benefits not only to the Council but to the businesses and individuals it serves. Absolutely key to the success of the project would be allowing users to make applications online and for the Council to be able to process them online, and to this end both Bracknell Forest and IDOX group worked with the Planning Portal to ensure that applications made through the Portal would be seamlessly integrated with Bracknell Forest's own systems. “It was a challenge,” Steve admits, “but now that it's up and running it saves our Planning Officers a lot of time, and massively reduces paper waste, so it was worth the effort.

But the modernisation process wasn't over yet – Bracknell Forest and their partner IDOX group were determined to fully involve the community in the planning process, and worked hard to offer a wealth of information on local planning issues. As one example, local development plans were brought online and information made available in a variety of ways, including maps for easy reference. Anyone with internet access can also view comments made on local plans and see the Council's responses, democratising the whole process.



Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with the local community happy to be able to access planning information from their home or business rather than the town hall. “Our challenge now is that we have raised expectations so much that we have to stay on top of the data, making sure it doesn't go out of date, or someone will definitely let us know”, Steve notes.



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As a result of all the work, Bracknell Forest became one of only three Councils in England and Wales to be awarded the full 21 Pendleton points, the key measure of a local authority's readiness for e-planning and resulting in an “Excellent” rating. But the work doesn't stop there. “We're proud with what we've achieved but there is still a lot of information out there that we don't have online, information on trees or contaminated areas, for example. We are striving to get to the point where absolutely everything that affects local planning is available through the internet,” Steve explains. “It isn't always easy going and there are a lot of challenges ahead, but we know that it is making a real difference to how planning is perceived locally.”

If you would like to discuss how we might help you or would like further information, please contact: marketing@IDOXgroup.com or call 0870 333 7101

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Case Study