

Leicestershire Rural Partnership – building an online community

Introduction

The Leicestershire Rural Partnership has built community participation and awareness of local services and amenities.

The Online community portal provides detailed community information for residents and visitors and helps them to use online council services.

With IDOX group expertise it has enabled a consolidated view of planning applications to be made available in record time.

Bringing communities closer

Leicestershire Villages (www.leicestershirevillages.com) is an online portal providing local and community information to residents of and visitors to Leicestershire, which comprises: Charnwood, Melton, Hinckley & Bosworth, Blaby, Oadby & Wigston, Harborough and North West Leicestershire. The site encourages people to access council services electronically and become more involved in local activities and issues both online and offline.

The site has been live for three years and has been developed through the Leicestershire Rural Partnership. The partnership consists of 19 distinct organisations, working together to deliver a better quality of service to rural areas. Funded by Leicestershire County Council, the portal allows county, district and parish councils, voluntary organisations and community groups to promote their services online. By enabling community groups to post and maintain information themselves about their own village, it increases responsiveness and encourages active participation.

Key services available on the site include a function giving citizens access to information about local amenities. The 'find my nearest' facility makes it easy for people to locate shops, services and schools within a specified range. For example, citizens can find all the bakeries within a certain distance of their house, the nearest health clinic, or even the closest public telephone or cash machine.

The next challenge

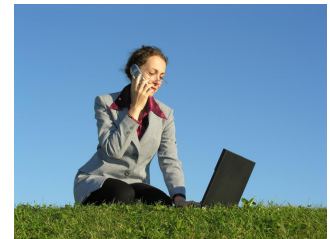
Initial feedback from the local community was very positive, and many constructive suggestions for additional services were received. One of the most popular requests was for the ability to view all Planning applications – something which at the time required separate visits to each District Council site.

This capability would not only meet citizen demand, but would have the additional benefit of freeing up time spent by district councils responding to citizens' phone calls, to focus on other activities.

“In order to provide planning information via the portal we needed to find a way of linking it to each District Council website. When looking into the options, we discovered that not all of the Councils were using the same software to make applications available online. This was an added complication in developing a link between all of the sites which would enable planning applications to be searched regardless of District Council boundaries.”

**Ray Smith, Project Manager,
Leicestershire Villages**

Ray Smith and his team had a set budget and just two weeks in which to deliver a solution. Faced with this extremely pressing deadline, they decided to focus their resources on completing a pilot project with two of the authorities, Charnwood and North West Leicestershire.



Case Study

IDOX group enables integration in just two weeks

North West Leicestershire makes its planning applications available on its website via Public Access – the self service facility provided within IDOX group software. Through Public Access, users can search and retrieve applications stored in the Council's IDOX group UNI-form Property database; make and calculate costs for submitting a planning application and view applications on a map.

Leicestershire Villages approached IDOX group to find a way of making a consolidated view of this information available on the portal. Working with the partnership, IDOX group extended the functionality of its e-planning connector to provide an interface to the portal, allowing it to display a brief reference of each planning application.

“The IDOX group interface has enabled users to view and search for planning applications within a 15-mile radius by using the ‘find my nearest’ facility. Further details can be obtained by simply clicking on the application number which will, via the connector, transfer them to the PublicAccess part of the relevant council’s website”.

**Ray Smith, Project Manager,
Leicestershire Villages**

Positive Feedback

The pilot was delivered on time and to budget, with the interface going live by the end of March 2006. Feedback from the general public on the new capabilities has been extremely favourable. Parish Councils have also benefited from the new service, because they are now able to provide feedback on planning applications to District Councils by downloading information and viewing comments posted by citizens.

“The project has proved to be a great example of how to improve the take-up of online services by providing specific information relevant to every community throughout Leicestershire,” adds Smith.

“We were very impressed by the speed with which the team at IDOX group were able to help us, and the quality of the technical support provided. Due to the success of the pilot, we are now working with IDOX group to enable us to replicate the functionality for the other five districts using the IDOX group planning system.”

**Ray Smith, Project Manager,
Leicestershire Villages**

Mrs Lesley Pendleton, Leicestershire County Councillor with responsibility for rural affairs and Chairman of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership said: “Rural areas can be very isolated. Electronic service delivery is becoming increasingly important, as it gives people the opportunity to access services as easily as those in other areas of the County. It also gives people choice as to how they access council services. Leicestershirevillages.com provides us with a way to reach these isolated areas, we are very pleased that it is now possible to view planning applications in both Charnwood and North West Leicestershire and look forward to them being available across the whole of Leicestershire.”

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

www.IDOXgroup.com

Case Study