

Report

Implementing e-Planning in England and Wales

Document control

Version	Changes	Author	Date

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1. Implementing e-Planning in England and Wales

Implementing e-Planning requires high level vision, supported by 'What' and 'How' strategies to ensure continuous sustainable improvements in service delivery. These strategies must embrace the theory behind the "Modernising Government" agenda in order to deliver all the objectives for improving service delivery, thus effectively engaging the whole community and ensuring the goal of sustainable development and that economic growth becomes a reality.

A number of papers have already been produced which address some of these questions, but few, if any, have addressed the real practicalities: "How" to implement an e-Planning solution that will interact effectively with the public. Idox has carried out extensive research in this area and this paper broadly outlines the main initiatives required.

Planning Departments are at an important crossroads in their history. Central government is demanding the electronic delivery of services, often replacing the use of paper. It is right to do this, but acknowledges the difficulties of moving from a paper-intensive department, into a "less" paper environment, whilst opening up new channels such as the Internet. The Government is also encouraging greater community involvement in the planning process at all stages – from policy initiation and strategy formulation to decisions on planning applications.

New channels for interaction with the public are set to ease the strain on resources and improve response times – providing information in a format, and at a time, most convenient to the individual. The Internet has made dramatic, real differences to people's lives. The next generation will make the assumption that all services are delivered in this manner.

The New Planning Act also envisages a radical rethink for delivering planning services in the future. The emphasis of e-Planning is on providing services to suit customer needs and there are a number of challenges to be faced:

- How will you revise the corporate strategy to produce a more citizen-oriented, consultative focus?
- How will you lead the cultural change that will be required within both the Authority and the Community?
- How will you instigate the drive to succeed throughout the organisation?
- How will you break down departmental barriers to allow collaborative working to take place?
- Which types of technology will be required?
- How will you deal with outdated legacy systems?

The most significant problems regarding service delivery within planning departments are:

- Significant officer resources are spent providing information obtained from a computer screen, either over the phone or at the reception desk(s), when this information could be provided over the Internet or by email.
- Many day-to-day issues are caused by problems relating to the movement of paper and information – finding it, passing it around, storing it and making it available to the public and to staff working from home.
- Considerable costs are incurred due to the floor space taken up by paper storage.
- Little information is available electronically to the public and there is little communication with them by email.

Local Planning Authorities now need to face up to this challenge. The key to success is implementing the requirements with minimum disruption to existing internal systems, processes and performance.

2. What Services Should Be Delivered Electronically?

Generally, all aspects of the planning service, currently available on paper, should be available to the local community in an electronic medium. Both the Pendleton Criteria and the PARSOL e-Planning standards set out the output measures against which service delivery will be tested. This should include the following as a minimum.

2.1 Strategic Planning and Policy Development

e-Planning is a crucial cornerstone for community led initiatives like Local Framework documents. There is now an increasing demand from all sides for more local involvement in planning issues. Informing the Council on areas/issues of concern at a strategic planning stage is crucial to delivering community-led Local Plan.

The Council needs to put in place a system that will allow people to bring forward issues and concerns. These should be logged, added to and allocated a priority. General members of the public should be able to see what has been reported, or commented on, and what the priority is. As an issue moves up the priority list, officers carry out investigations, draft a report, consult, incorporate relevant comments and report to the appropriate committee for approval of the policy. During this process, it is important that people can see and participate in the debate. This access should be honest, transparent and open, including internal debate e.g. between policy officers and other amenity groups.

Once the policy is adopted and implementation starts, the local community should also be able to see and comment on the monitoring and outcomes – as a starting point for the next review process. For citizens, it is important for them to have access to background papers from within the Council and other policy makers. This will ensure more informed contributions.

Development Plans and non-statutory guidance should start from the bottom-up rather than the current top-down approach. The Government has recognised this and has proposed local framework documents as a way forward. As a minimum, Councils should make all current plans, guidance and development briefs available in an easy to use electronic format. The review process should also include the ability for all stakeholders to comment on any aspect of the plan and a facility to track changes to the plan. The system therefore needs to provide for secure logins and verifiable emails to ensure that information passes from and to the Council and other stakeholders appropriately.

2.2 Economic Development and Regeneration

Information about economic development and business advice initiatives should be included. This can include a register of major sites available, what incentives are available and the likely planning use(s) preferred by the Council. All the grant schemes should be included, with the ability to make the application on-line and to track and monitor progress. Information about regeneration schemes should be included with the ability to comment on various aspects of each scheme from initiation to post completion surveys.

2.3 Pre-Applications Advice

Pre-application meetings can inform local communities of the direction of thinking for a proposal at an early stage. Again, hosting pre-application discussions in an open environment will mean that planning decisions will be trusted. Councils need to be able to forward and receive comments on various aspects of pre-application discussions from the local community and amenity groups. This may include a secure electronic area for meaningful debate to take place.

2.4 Applications

Recent surveys amongst the public¹ suggest that the third most popular service local communities want on the Internet is the facility to view and comment on planning applications. It is also the most popular transactional service - the first two relate to information only.

Councils need to provide access to the planning registers in an interactive electronic format. This should include automatic electronic tracking to inform all involved in the planning process. In future applicants, agents, consultees and neighbours will expect to be better informed. This should include providing a copy of the report (delegated or committee) to all concerned.

2.5 Consultations

In future, people will expect the Council to allow comments to be made in an electronic format and accept them as valid. These need to be combined with comments received on paper. In a truly transparent system, all comments should be made available to create an open forum for discussion. Objectors would also expect to view the comments made by statutory consultees, as well as other Council officers. Consultation should be meaningful and replace the current notification system. If objections are not material or do not have sufficient weight, objectors will expect planning officers to explain why before the report is finalised.

Electronic consultation with statutory consultees will result in faster turnaround if comments can be either e-mailed or appended directly to the application, plans and drawings. There will be no need to post paper copies in the future.

2.6 Complaints of Alleged Breach of Planning Control

Planning Authorities will need to put in place an effective complaints system to enable effective enforcement, which keeps the complainant informed about action taken and progress on achieving compliance. This will require secure logins for tracking correspondence on a secure web page.

2.7 Appeals

An electronic appeals system will be a reality soon and planning authorities will need to ensure they have systems that can integrate with the Planning Inspectorate's portal. However, it is even more important that the Council manage the process of involving the local community in the appeals process effectively through the electronic medium. This should include a tracking system accessible to all stakeholders through the Council's e-Planning system.

2.8 Decisions

Councils already have a requirement to maintain the decisions register and allow access to it. This will need to be extended as part of the e-Planning solution. This register may even need to link up with other portal systems, for example the National Land Information Service (NLIS) to ensure a seamless service. Decisions are an important part of investigating the history of any building or site. Councils should also consider including reports as part of the decision.

¹ YouGov Reviving Democracy 2002

2.9 General Communications/Queries

In most Councils about 20% of communication within the department will not relate to any statutory function. This can be anything from general advice, suggestions, plaudits and enquiries following searches etc. This will need to be managed effectively to ensure e-Planning targets are met. This can be achieved through the use of case and correspondence management systems designed for the Internet. This will allow citizens to track what has happened to their letter/email/telephone call and set expectations for when the Council will respond.

2.10 Service Performance

Service performance should be effectively communicated to ensure that citizens know what to expect from the Department but also to use the e-consultation process to guide and set performance targets/priorities for the future.

3. Advantages of e-Planning

3.1 For Local Planning Authorities

The key advantage of e-Planning for planning officers will be the availability of information, at any time, from their desktop. This should release the pressure of administrative tasks, releasing officers for the “real job of planning”. The results will mean:

- increased throughput
- reduced stress, and
- best value and other targets will be met, or indeed, exceeded.

The opportunity to access information from anywhere will also lead to a more flexible form of working, for example, home working. A corresponding improved work-life balance will be found.

3.2 For the Community

Most communities want a quality planning service reflecting their needs and aspirations. Electronic government will facilitate the move to ever-improving services provided at the point of need, at a time most convenient to the residents and businesses of each local area.

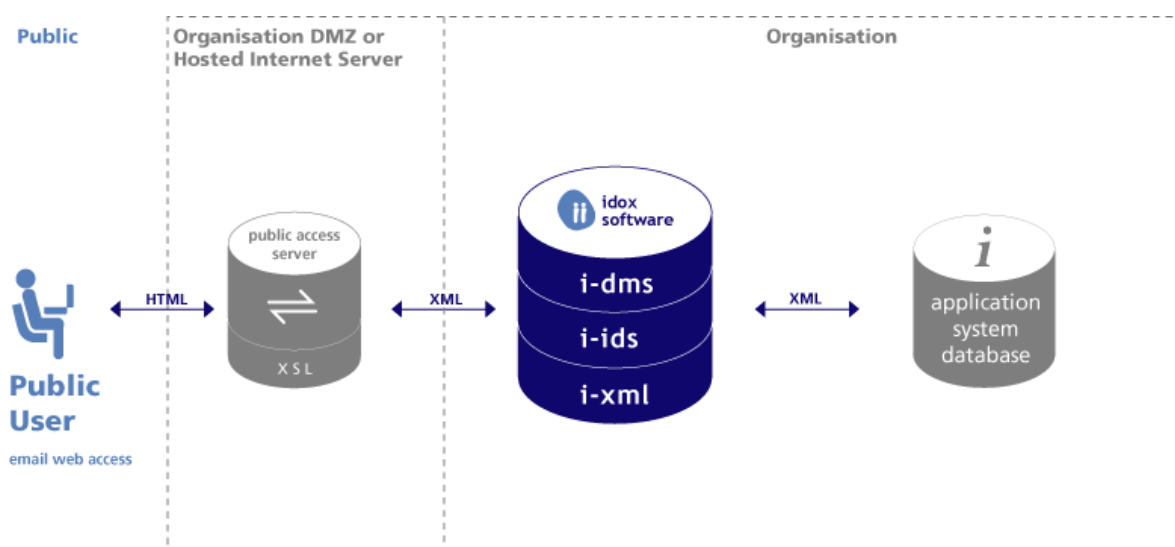
Residents will be able to access free planning advice anytime, anywhere, thereby reducing the need to visit the Local Planning Authority offices. It will be possible to view all current and decided planning applications and comment online with regard to applications and policies at every level of Government. Applications may be submitted and tracked on the web and the timescale and response rates should be much improved.

The over-riding benefit is that planning services will be transparent and communities will feel more confident that they are an integral part of the decision-making process.

3.3 How to Meet Public Demand for Access to Local Planning Authority Services

A key requirement of e-planning strategy is for ‘joined-up’ service provision so that the citizen need not be constrained by the inner workings of different service providers. It is important that a citizen is able to receive the required information with the minimum of effort and it is therefore essential the Local Authority systems can “talk” to each other, even across various Authorities and partnering organisations.

Online information is easily available 24/7 using standard Internet access security, thus allowing planning officers, Councillors and other stakeholders access to planning documents and case files. For example, Councillors can view all new correspondence received, and replies made, before the next surgery meeting, or Planning Officers can pull up case files if working from home. There are other services that would benefit from access to planning information out of office hours, particularly through the use of wireless technology. For example, many lives might be saved, and firefighters themselves would be better protected, if they were able to pull up building plans (structure elements) on a PDA, or in-cab laptop, on the way to a fire.



The user would make a request over the internet to the Local Authority “Public Access Server” which would itself send off a request to each of the different participating local authority/ organisation servers. The Public Access Server waits until it has the results from the relevant local authority servers, and presents the consolidated data in a way that is easy to understand for the public. This process can be used for any service provided in conjunction with other organisations.

The use of e-forms, which are user friendly, will facilitate this data transfer without the need for Council staff to be involved, whilst maintaining the integrity of the Council’s internal network.

3.4 Corporate Requirements Imposed by Central Government

The Government has released mandatory technical policies and standards for achieving interoperability and information systems coherence across the public sector. These are set out in the e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF)².

The main thrust of the framework is to adopt the Internet and World Wide Web standards for all government systems.

There has been a strategic decision to adopt XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language) and XSL (eXtensible Stylesheet Language) as the core standard for data integration and presentation. This includes the definition and central provision of XML schemas for use throughout the public sector. All public sector information systems must be accessible through common browsers.

3.5 Integration

In order to fully implement e-Planning it is essential that all those interactions with the public that can be dealt with electronically are stored in a way that ensures simple retrieval and presentation. This requires an Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) solution that is fully integrated (using XML) with the legacy applications in planning departments. These should include application processing systems, property databases and Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

² e-Government Interoperability Framework (v6). Cabinet Office. 2004

Full integration between the EDMS and the Planning Application System will provide additional benefits, e.g.

- reducing the amount of manual input required and allowing instantly verifiable data
- no requirement for training on existing systems as the existing one will be integrated using XML with the document management system
- if a new vertical application is required, it can be installed independently of the EDMS and integrated at the Council's discretion.

What councils will require is a system that, through a Public Access Server, can transfer information using XML from the web directly into planning systems within the department and release information back through the public access server.

There is a need, particularly in all property-related services, to have a common reference. This reference should be in line with the requirement for each local authority to contribute to the National Land Property Gazetteer and should therefore be compliant with BS7666. The EDMS should therefore include, or link to, a BS7666 address database. This is a single, corporate database and integration with an EDMS would allow direct update of information that is then immediately available to all users in any part of the organisation. The use of a BS7666 database will enable address validation in many areas of service delivery.

The EDMS chosen should be integrated with the GIS to enable access to information through a map front-end. This link also allows the searching of data by identification of an area of interest e.g. within 30m of a site.

3.6 From Paper to Electronic

Currently, most documents are retrieved from paper files. There is a recognised filing error rate of 2% for any manual system (including microfilming). Files and contents are inevitably damaged as a result of constant use and with so many people requiring access, there are always difficulties in locating them. They are taken off site, lost, and the consequences of natural disasters, such as a flood, are catastrophic.

Irrespective of the solutions adopted, it is now clear that the first stage will require the conversion of back office functions and records to electronic formats in order to provide a seamless interface with the customer-facing front end. Planning staff can interact with the public in a variety of ways and any e-Planning solution must support these interactions, whether that be face-to-face consultations or consultation by email.

For example, in the process of any planning application the following types of documents would be typical:

- an e-form application
- CAD drawings sent in at a later date
- video recording of the site taken by the planning officer, or even the Committee
- voice recorded notes to accompany them
- emails between different members of the planning department, between the applicant and the planning department, or other interested parties and the planning department
- minutes of consultative meetings regarding the application taken by hand or recorded and
- the decision itself in the form of an electronic document.

The use of an EDMS would allow any of the above to be stored electronically, whether the format of the information be voice or video recordings, emails, electronically-generated documents or scanned images. The solution must incorporate electronic forms, dynamic workflow mechanisms, knowledge management, in addition to records and document management. Once a “back office” solution has been implemented, it will be possible, using an XML server, to make information available on the Web from existing systems to officers, members and citizens.

3.7 Requirement for Management of all Communication

As more communication, both within and outside the authority, is undertaken electronically, there is an increasing need to manage and control the flow of that communication. It should be possible to treat email in exactly the same way as paper correspondence, which, once scanned, can be fully managed until a satisfactory response has been dispatched or action take. The processing of paper correspondence will be far more efficient if scanned and then managed electronically. Authorisation can be achieved using electronic signatures or Personal Identification Number (PINs).

The second part of modernisation of a planning service is the use of an integrated workflow tool. As email becomes more widely used and the normal means of communication, it is increasingly necessary to impose a management framework on its use. The workflow must make use of electronic mail facilities available to manage correspondence and casework.

The workflow tool needs to be capable of being used by planning managers to produce a full range of management reports and to measure performance against the Statutory Performance Indicators.

Access to the workflow should be available to partner staff, members, potentially MPs and to the Authority's external partners.

4. Examples of e-Planning in Action

Outlined below are typical planning processes where enormous benefits could be derived if they were provided electronically.

4.1 Making an Application

Completing applications online is a flexible alternative for citizens and agents alike. This saves time and money for the applicants, agents and the council.

1. A person may fill out an electronic form on a web page, delivered to the web browser using HTML
2. This is submitted to the public access server, which validates the data. As part of filling out a form, documents may be attached and uploaded to the Public Access Forms Server. The format of these may vary but is likely to include word documents, PDFs and, for property-based applications, common CAD formats.
3. Once validated, the form image is passed into the EDMS to inform officers that an application/report has been received, requiring action.
4. The data from the form is passed as XML into the Planning Application System (any open system from providers such as MVM, CAPS/ESRI, SX3, Innogistics, Accolaid).
5. A system generated application number will be given. This is still generated by the Planning Application System and returned to the Public Access Forms Server in the XML call.
6. The system will provide an acknowledgement by email, which will be contained within the Authority log of outgoing emails.
7. With adequate security arrangements all stakeholders in the process can track the progress of a submission at anytime.

For security reasons both the Planning Application System and the EDMS should reside within the Authority's network environment – only the Public Access Server resides in the DMZ (De-Militarised Zone). This protects the Council's network from attack and/or penetration.

4.2 Paying for Services

Payment is received through the Council's own payment server or Web bank. This ensures that the fees are received at the same time as the application. Once payment is confirmed, the information (including a receipt number) is recorded in the audit trail and passed into the Planning Application System.

4.3 Making Comments or Providing Feedback

An electronic comments form saves the time and resources taken to write and post a letter. Experience has shown that being able to view current and decided applications online ensures informed comments.

4.4 Managing Consultation

e-Planning tools are ideal for managing the processing of contact with all stakeholders in the planning process, which has proven to be heavily paper intensive. At present electronic records cannot be shared between services for consultation purposes. This leads to problems when transferring data, which must be either printed or exported to another format.

An alert service can be provided on the Internet to proactively “push” information to statutory consultees or members of the public e.g. new applications, committee reports, complaints etc., or indeed internal teams such as One Stop Shops or Call Centre teams. Corporate sharing of information electronically will provide easy access to all relevant information from any office location, thus improving the consultation process which is so vital in the current planning system.

5. In Summary

Idox has been helping planning authorities publish information on the Internet since 1995. With experience of over 50 planning departments across the UK, the company has undertaken detailed studies into the implementation of Planning services online. To find out more, please contact an Idox representative or email marketing@idoxgroup.com.