



The Government's Planning Portal

A host of Local Authorities across England have been reaping the benefits of a faster, more streamlined approach to the planning process thanks to their involvement in a trial of a new online service developed by the Government's Planning Portal.

34 Local Planning Authorities (LPA) across the length and breadth of the country have participated in the trial of the e-Consultation Hub – a large national project aimed at making consultation on planning applications quicker, more effective and transparent.

Launched in spring 2008 by the Planning Portal and funded by CLG to help drive and enhance the Government's modernisation agenda, the Hub has been introduced to provide all the stakeholders in the planning process with the capability to complete both their internal and external consultations online.

Planning applications generate around one million consultation requests per year from LPAs to a wide range of consultees, including national agencies, parish, town and community councils and utility companies.

As the number of applications received electronically continues to increase, planning department staff often have little option but to create multiple paper copies of application case files. The copies required and the processing costs involved can dramatically increase when LPAs consult with both internal and external consultees, particularly with those who require multiple paper copies of applications and supporting documents.

However, the introduction of the e-Consultation Hub has alerted the LPAs to the benefits of switching from a paper-based system to an electronic process and the potential it has to improve flows, and generate a much greater degree of participation by individual citizens and others potentially affected by the planning process.

The Hub allows LPAs and consultees to consult on planning applications via two methods; non-integrated (email and web pages) or fully integrated (web service).

Non-integrated LPAs, consultees and citizens will access the Hub through the website where they will have the opportunity to consult on planning applications and respond to consultations 24 hours per day.

Fully integrated LPAs and consultees can implement a connector which allows them to consult on planning applications via their back office system (the LPAs and Consultees' own internal systems). The e-Consultation web service enables LPAs back-office systems to interact with the service to consult and notify of decisions on planning applications. The web service also enables consultees to respond to consultations and receive notification of decisions via their back office system.

Once inputted, this information is transferred from the back office systems to the hub via Extensible Markup Language (XML). The XML schemas have been created by the Planning Portal and are now available to assist the LPAs and consultees' ICT suppliers in the development of a connector. The development of these new connectors will also make a significant improvement to the efficiency of the process.

Each of the LPAs, consultees and parish councils have boundary lines which are defined in Geographic Information System (GIS) files known as shapefiles. The Hub can store all of the shapefiles for each LPA and parish council, and any consultee organisation that has signed up to use the hub.

When consulting on an application, the LPAs enter the site address which identifies the location of the consultation and the LPAs are then presented with a list of consultees that have an interest in that particular area. If the site address is within the boundary of a consultee, they will be added to the list for possible consultation. The LPA will then decide which consultees and parishes they wish to consult.

A future enhancement to the Hub will be the inclusion of the rule base. This will provide automatic selection of consultees who must be consulted on a particular application. There are two elements of the rule base:

- Rules that are computerised based on the reasons for consultation according to the General Development Procedure Order (GDPO)

King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council Case Study

Lee Osler is the Planning Administrative and Performance Manager at King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council. His team have been making good use of the Hub since they came on board the pilot scheme in August 2008.

"We were selected by the Planning Portal to use the Hub as part of the pilot project and English Heritage was used as our consultee throughout," Lee said.

"Currently, we are only consulting with one internal consultee but we're finding that the system is working really well and they have been very complimentary of it. We're definitely getting our responses quicker. Our colleagues receive an email prompt to say that they have received a consultation and the system provides them with a deadline for response.

"We receive approximately 2700 planning applications per annum. Since we introduced the National Standard Application Form in February 2008, 50% of all applications have been submitted electronically through the Portal. This has resulted in less paperwork. If we can sign up more consultees to the Hub, we will make huge savings in printing and postage costs as we will be printing fewer plans and supplementary documents.

"We are currently trying to encourage more consultees to use the Hub, including internal consultees. King's Lynn and West Norfolk covers a large geographical area consisting of just over 100 Parish Councils. At the end of 2008, we sent a questionnaire to all the parishes to enable us to assess the potential uptake of the Hub in the future. The results have been very encouraging with 50% responding. Of these Parishes that have responded, 40% are interested in receiving their consultations through the Hub and 20% have requested a presentation explaining how the Hub works and the benefits it can bring.

"I would recommend that other LPAs trial the Hub so that they can assess how it can work for them and to help them develop the confidence in the system – even if they only use it for internal consultations. There's no reason why they shouldn't be able to use it alongside their existing systems to enable them to evaluate it.

"I would also suggest that they make sure that their software suppliers are intending to build the connector which will enable the integration and that they consider installing the Adobe Measuring Tool so electronic drawings can be measured on screen. We feel that this will be a major asset when trying to encourage consultees to receive consultations electronically through the Hub. This has certainly been the case when talking to the Parish Councils. The measuring tool has enabled us to validate applications electronically which, in turn, is speeding up the validation process. Consultees receive their decisions quickly and the planning officer has more time to consider the application."

- The inclusion of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). This allows consultees to upload a shapefile of an area of interest where they will be automatically consulted if a site falls within that shape. October 2008 saw the successful completion of the official trial of the live system and the LPAs involved are already reporting significant improvements in the way they deliver their planning consultations.

Consultations are being issued and actioned at a quicker rate and significant savings are being made on printing and postage costs, due to the fact that LPAs are printing fewer plans and supplementary documents. It is also being advocated as an effective mechanism for managing the internal consultation process.

Based on the positive feedback received from those teams fully involved in the three-month trial, Chris Kendall, Director of the Planning Portal is hoping that up to 100 LPAs will have signed up to the new system by August 2009.

"I am delighted that LPAs are beginning to fully recognise the benefits of using the e-Consultation Hub," Kendall said. "Currently many LPA staff spend considerable time, effort and money printing and circulating paper application files to consultees. The hub standardises and e-enables this

Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames Case Study

David Grasty is the Systems Improvement Manager in the Directorate of Environmental Services at the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames Council. His team have all been trained to use the Hub to manage consultations with English Heritage as well as their internal design and conservation team.

And they have seen significant improvements in the day-to-day management of the consultation process.

"As a mechanism for managing the internal consultation process, it's fantastic," he said. "We used to receive a lot of our communications via email and we had to develop our own ways of managing them – and everyone had a different way of doing it. The Hub now manages it all for us. All we have to do is log on and we're alerted to any comments made to consultations, how many days we have left on each, and we're able to assign tasks to individual officers so we know who is working on what.

"What the system has done so well is that it has put an end to the postal element of the consultation process. Where we once had to send our letters to English Heritage through the post and wait for their response, we can now do it all through the Hub. It also allows us to see when correspondence has been received and actioned.

"There are still some elements of double key entry that we still have to do as we don't have a connector – but that is very minimal," Grasty added. "Overall, it now takes less than five minutes to complete every consultation through the Hub.

"If LPAs currently have no effective way of managing internal consultation, then I would definitely recommend that they try it – if only for the improvements it can make to this process.

"The system itself is very easy to use and would take very minimal training time. We're even going to expand our use of it to include all internal consultations on applications and pre-applications. We're very happy with the system."

process delivering significant efficiencies for all participants and revolutionising the way LPAs and consultees interact.

"As a result The Planning Portal team have obtained firm commitments from key statutory consultees to adopt the National Hub as their preferred method of consultation.

"Currently, ICT suppliers are developing a Connector which links the LPAs back office system with the Hub and this is an excellent example of the public and private sectors working together to improve services for customers."

Stuart Mockford, Head of Corporate Development at the Planning Portal

