Planning Public Access Implementation Update
North Area Committee – 24 March 2011

Background

Public Access for Development Control was originally implemented in 2005. The success of this was limited to textual information being made available over the web. At this time the Council did not have the necessary document management system (DMS) in place to publish documents.   The Council procured IDOX DMS in 2008 and in early 2009; IDOX released a new version of the public access module

The new module provided; multi-browser functionality; increased user accessibility approved by the RNIB; ability for customers to register, create profiles and receive automated notifications of planning applications in their area; comprehensive search facilities (including spatial searches) and allow "favourite searches" to be created and saved and enabled tracking of application status via email with hyperlinks to the relevant applications embedded within the email.

It was a pre-requisite for Tranche 5 of the Customer Access Strategy (CAS) that Public Access for Development Control was implemented by 1st April 2010, to facilitate the closing of the Planning reception and the transfer of services to the Customer Services Centre (CSC).

Public Access for Development Control went live on 31st March 2010.
New Tree works applications went live in November 2010.

Feedback

During June and July 2010, Officers visited the Area Committees to publicise the changes to the delivery of frontline planning services and raise the awareness of the Public Access System. Feedback has also been obtained from the Residents' Association and Agents' Forums held during 2010. Councillors and other service users e.g. Personal Search Companies have also provided feedback.

Feedback received has been a mixture of:

1. How the online system operates and suggestions for improvements
2. Administrative processes that support putting information online
3. Customers seeking general assistance

The feedback has been underpinned by customers experiencing a significant change in how they accessed planning services, (e.g. closing of planning reception and services delivered from CSC, reduction in the availability of hard copy files and online services) and also for officers in changes to how they work, (e.g. indexing documents into the DMS, redaction of personal information, publishing documents online).

Summary of Issues Raised and Resolution

How the system operates

- Search tool not intuitive (where site address is complex) or does not recognise abbreviations

    o Wildcard searches do not work on complex addresses e.g. 21 to 23 Milton Road will not be found by entering 21 % Milton Road) – raised with IDOX Development. Still possible to locate applications at these sites via Property or Spatial Map search

    o Use of Abbreviations or apostrophes e.g. Rd, or St John's will not return records. Guidance provided within online FAQ document.

- System not allowing comments to be submitted on last day of statutory consultation period

    o This is a system bug and reported to IDOX – awaiting fix, will be rectified in next software release.

    o Additional text will be added to public access system to advise that if the application is pending decision then to check with the case officer over making a comment.

- Difficult to Identify all consultation responses – e.g. held in two places depending upon channel submitted

    o All comment submitted online through PA are displayed within the "comments tab". Personal information is automatically removed.

    o Letters or emails that are received must have personal information manually removed; therefore, these are scanned and held within the DMS. All documents stored in the DMS appear on the "documents tab".

    o Additional text and notifications will be added to PA to assist customers in locating documents/comments.

Suggestions for improvements

- Provide linkages between Public Access and Committee Reports e.g., application ref on committee reports have a hyperlink to online case documents.

    o Has been added to work programme to look at in the future

- Provision of an online Measuring Tool

    o We have met with the IDOX Product Manager to request development of an integrated tool within Public Access. IDOX recognise the importance of this and they are at the early stages of development.

    o Where customers need to view plans for measuring then this is facilitated at the CSC

- Terms and Conditions of use required review

    o The Council's general website and specific PA terms and conditions of use have been reviewed with Legal Services and published.

Administrative Processes

- Consistent classification (descriptions) of Documents

    o Work processes were reviewed during November and standard classification guidance issued to staff.

- Documents not displaying (online notification that document is unavailable for viewing)

    o Certain document types are held in a queue for removal of personal information before they are released. The redaction queue is checked daily. All other documents appear on PA as soon as they are indexed against a case, normally within five working days of receipt.

    o Additional help text will be added to PA to advise customers

- Some documents incorrectly indexed against a different case or documents missing

    - Many officers, from planning services, application support and the corporate post and scanning team, carry out indexing of documents. As with the filing of paper documents mistakes can occur, where these instances are found they are corrected immediately.

    - Further training has been carried out.

- Data Integration (e.g. some appeals not appearing on PA – as trigger field not completed in planning database for historic records – which have been transferred from legacy systems)

    - Data cleansing has been carried out

- Speed at which documents are added online

    - Guidance on the expected turnaround time for documents has been provided on web pages and in a FAQ document

- Download speeds

    - Plans ands drawings are scanned in at 200DPI for quality/definition purposes. The Corporate Post and Scanning Team have undertaken download testing.

    - The documents we have backscanned for the period (2004-2008) and added online have been grouped by document type for each case (rather than individually). This was done to reduce costs. This results in longer downloading times for these documents. We have provided information on this in a FAQ document.

    - A development request has been made to IDOX to consider adding a "File Size" field, which will help to pre-warn customers if it is a large file.

    - Electronic files submitted by agents/developers are loaded automatically, so we have little control over file sizes. We will look to develop guidance notes for the submission of documents.

- Data Protection queries

    - Terms and conditions on the website have been updated for general use and also specifically for the use of PA.

General Assistance

- Lack of trust that the "online electronic file" is different to the former files viewed at planning reception

    - What is online is the same as the officer working file apart from any confidential information.

- Viewing difficulties with orientation and size of plans on home PC's

    - In the majority of cases viewing the plans at home is sufficient for customers to make comments. Where there is a need to scale plans or look at a number of plans together, then this is facilitated at the CSC.

    - Larger screens are also provided at the CSC

Improvements Carried Out

In reviewing feedback a number of improvements have been carried out, some are mentioned as part of the above resolution responses.

A comprehensive PA FAQ document was published on the Council's website during the first week of February and is accessible from www.cambridge.gov.uk/publicaccess

In December, we commissioned IDOX to carry out some "skin" changes to the cosmetic look of PA. This will provide additional online help text, improved navigation, links to new terms and conditions and improvements to the side menu bar. The side menu bar, will be visible at all times and will provide links to the FAQ document, links back to the system availability (planned maintenance notifications) and a contact email address.

This work has been completed by IDOX and is currently in our test system. We will be looking to update the live system as soon as possible in the next few weeks.

Future Work

The council is committed to continually improve its online planning services and the following work is planned for 2011/12.

- Update the published weekly list report to make it more customer friendly e.g. full officer name, rather than officer code and supplementary list. Also to provide hyperlinks to the application within PA.
- Upgrade the Public Access system, once IDOX provides the next software release.
- Continue to promote the use of PA and encourage applications and comments to be made online.
- Continue to review and respond to customer feedback and refer suggestions to IDOX for future releases
- Measuring Tool to be implemented during 2011/12 (subject to availability).
- Develop guidance notes for the submission of electronic information (formats, file sizes etc)
- Look at linkages to PA from published committee agenda papers
- Complete review of and update standard letters ensuring they both promote PA and are customer friendly

Conclusions

The implementation of PA has brought about a significant change in the way officers work and how customers access and participate in the planning process. Feedback has been largely positive with greater 24/7 access to live information.

At the outset it was recognised that together with services transferring to the CSC and restructuring taking place at the same time, it was a tremendous achievement by all parties concerned to go-live by the 1st April 2010 deadline. Since that date we have spent a considerable amount of time on refining processes, training, resolving issues and improving the system. Initial operational teething problems have been overcome.

I hope it can be recognised that exposing in one go, thousands of planning records and documents, captured over many years in different planning systems meant that huge scrutiny was placed upon our data and processes all at once. The recent release of crime mapping and the public response shows what a complex process this is to deliver.

The PA system is fundamentally robust and sound. It is provided by the leading local government planning database supplier and is well supported and will continue to be developed and upgraded.

Paul Boucher
Business & Information Services Manager, Environment Department
14 March 2011