

Sharing the knowledge in Oxford

Case study

Oxford City Council encourages sharing of information across departments, using geographical information systems (GIS) and a rationalised back office regime. By implementing the 'capture once, use many times' principle, the council has created an efficient planning and information-sharing system.

Key learnings for other councils

- Exchanging knowledge via one information source across the council can assist in breaking down 'silo working'.
- Spatially referencing information creates a shared understanding of all aspects of local government service delivery.
- Sharing information outside the council can reduce avoidable contact.

Background to the council

Contemporary Oxford is a densely-packed urban space, with more than 151,000 people living in a 46 square kilometre area. Oxford is ethnically and culturally diverse, with the third largest minority ethnic population in the southeast. Around 32 per cent of Oxford's population consists of 16 to 29-year-olds.

Oxford is a global brand for a range of industries – education, health, bioscience, information technology, publishing, the motor industry and tourism. However, average earnings of residents are lower than the regional average and the city contains pockets of severe and multiple deprivation.

Oxford faces an affordable housing crisis. House prices are almost ten times greater than annual incomes and there are large concentrations of homes in multiple occupation. There are a significant number of homeless and other vulnerable groups.

Who was involved?

The GIS strategy has been implemented by the Property Systems team within the council. However, it relies on continued information sharing throughout the council's departments.

The problems and how we tackled them

In the mid-1990's council staff were relying on paper registers of planning applications and tree preservation orders (TPOs). Other information

resources were often held in more than one building. This made knowledge difficult to share between departments and it took a long time to serve citizens.

In response to this, a large project to rationalise back office systems took place. Now, one database and one GIS mapping system feeds the council's information portals, including the public-facing internet and internal intranet system. The system is also accessible to officers in the field by hand-held devices and by staff working from home.

The system works because every addressable and non-addressable object within the district is assigned a unique property reference number (UPRN). This is done in conjunction with the local land and property gazetteer (LLPG) and means there is no ambiguity about the actual location of any feature. When a user interrogates the system, GIS spatial layers identify the location or extent of addresses, applications, constraints or policies.

Access to sensitive data is controlled but apart from that, all departments can see data from other parts of the council. By spatially referencing the information, different service areas can be joined up. This enhances the intelligence capacity and knowledge of the council as a whole and helps to integrate the different service areas. For example, the development and building control departments can be alerted to unauthorised development when the council tax team requests a new UPRN.

The system is also being used as part of Oxford's bid to reduce avoidable contact. The same information from the system is shared externally as well as internally. When a new planning application is registered on the system, it is available on the external website in real time.

An external user of the website can type in an Oxford postcode and the system will return information about the locality. This includes local councillor information, planning applications, building control applications, TPOs and local planning policies. There is also a "Find my nearest..." service, which lists non-council information including petrol stations, post offices, doctors surgeries and restaurants.

A number of feedback mechanisms exist within the external site. These include the facility for residents to report faults like potholes in roads or to submit comments on planning applications. Residents can also register for alerts about new planning applications within a selected radius of up to 10 chosen postcodes.

The newly-procured council customer relationship management (CRM)

system will also use the LLPG unique number. This will enable all the information for one location to be available to contact centre staff.

Outcomes and impact

The system is used across all parts of the council from community safety through to planning. On average, the website receives more than 5,000 'hits' a month on the page giving access to the planning applications area of the system.

Other benefits of having the knowledge all in one place and shared across the council include the ability to monitor land use effectively against national and local indicators. In Oxford's case, this includes student numbers and university student accommodation developments. Because data is captured only once and maintained to a high standard, staff have confidence in the data. External use of the information via the council's website has provided greater customer satisfaction.

Liz Godin, Customer and Service Support Manager for City Development, said:

"There has been a significant reduction in telephone enquiries. And there are fewer personal callers seeking information relating to planning applications since the material accessible via our website has become more comprehensive. This is a good indicator that this local planning tool is making great strides in improving our frontline services, thus reducing the need for unnecessary customer contact."

Comments received about the 'Planning finder' alert system include:

"This is a really nice service! Thank you for providing it for Oxford", "I have just signed up to your service, which I may add looks to be an extremely useful site".

The Mayor, Councillor Susanna Pressel, says:

"The first email has already arrived and seems to work like magic!"

Oxford is linking everything through the UPRN, capturing the location in the GIS system, eliminating duplication of data entry and joining up activities. This has led to a culture shift away from the silo approach in local government.

What could we have done better?

The information sharing strategy was implemented on limited budgets using only proprietary software. The strategy worked because the team fostered good working relations with all the council departments. Through persistence, it won support from the top of the organisation.

It has been a lengthy process, negotiating funding and managing the data capture projects that finally led to this integration of information.

Oxford is proud of the quantity and quality of the electronic information already captured. But there is still work to do to improve the range and quality of the information available to everybody.

Useful links

[Oxford City Council](#)

Contact

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