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Stuart McMillan, Planning and Building Standards Team Leader

ORGANISATION

South Lanarkshire Council

INDUSTRY

Local Government

SOLUTION

Objective KEYSTONE

BENEFITS AT A GLANCE

- 400% increase in web usage for consultations
- 30% increase in online representation
- Enhanced tracking and management
- Improved administrative access
- Reduction in administrative functions

Digital consultation delivers improved services to residents

The introduction of Objective Keystone into South Lanarkshire Council has resulted in a 400% increase in the use of the council's planning website for consultations and a 30% increase in the number of representations taking place online.

Prior to working with Objective, South Lanarkshire Council employed a range of traditional methods for delivering consultations to residents, with the majority of activity carried out on paper and all response tracking handled manually.

Although a limited web-based system had previously been trialled, it was rapidly abandoned as it emerged that the financial burden of permanently implementing this made it an unjustifiable drain on resources. A number of problems had been highlighted in this trial, including the system's lack of connection between documents and submitted forms, which meant that a separate input process was required before the data gathered could be used to track responses. There was also no mechanism for submitted representations to be made available to view online, and more importantly it did not give consultees any degree of certainty that their comments had been received. Consultations continued to be carried out by tracking representations manually until an effective means of e-enabling the process could be identified.

These issues led them to look to outside vendors to implement their vision of providing the public with an effective online representation system.

Stuart McMillan, Planning and Building Standards Team Leader: “Our existing consultation methods worked fairly well, but we were conscious that the advent of new technology was enabling new means of communication. Since our initial trials had been unsuccessful, we embarked on a programme of in-depth research into the marketplace to find ways to adapt the way we work and take advantage of new technology to better serve our residents.”

KEY METRICS

THE PLANNING CHALLENGE

The need for a more streamlined approach to consultation was highlighted by the proposed introductions of a new local plan for the entire region, which would replace the five existing, area-based plans that had been in place for up to ten years. This South Lanarkshire Local Plan (SLLP) would be the first council-wide local plan to be delivered by South Lanarkshire Council and would provide the blueprint for policy on future development locations and standards for the next five years.

In preparing the finalised version of the SLLP, the Council's planning and IT services sought to develop a framework that would enable online consultation, giving customers greater choice, confidence and transparency in this important, statutory, phase of plan development.

Stuart McMillan explains: "Consultation is crucial to the development and success of local planning documents, and we wanted to implement a strategy that would streamline its process, as well as reduce administrative burden."

McMillan continues: "The development of planning documentation typically involves consulting with a large number of stakeholders, both internally and externally, including government agencies, developers, professional agents, utility providers and community councils. As such, the process has often had a high level of administration associated with it."

"One of the main difficulties in bringing these diverse stakeholder groups together is the prolonged timescales that often ensue. This has the knock-in effect of monopolising resources and professional officer time which would be better spent dealing with the mass of response," McMillan adds.

The combination of limiting factors often resulted in the loss of validity in plan policies as the gap between preparatory work and final adoption extends and the relevance of the consultation is diluted over time. As such, stakeholder consultation has often been seen as a legislative necessity rather than adding value to the plan making process.

Without an effective information management system, Managers were unable to review and streamline many of their document-centric business processes, such as correspondence, housing management activity, tenancy enforcement and planned and responsive repairs to drive the proposed efficiency savings.

SEEKING A SOLUTION

Firstly, South Lanarkshire Council wished to extend the choices available to customers in how they could make their representation via electronic means as well paper submissions. "The format for online feedback needs to be completely user friendly to allow the submission experience to be successful. In this age of eGovernment the public need a fast and easy way to communicate their views, without any elaborate process. We did not only want to achieve a system that could be used solely for this purpose, we wanted also to have one in place so that the South Lanarkshire Council and other councils could benefit from it in future," Stuart McMillan explained.

South Lanarkshire Council looked into all available options on the market that were suitable to deliver complex online planning documents, after which they concluded Objective Keystone met all the necessary criteria. Objective Keystone was identified as meeting all of the essential functionality criteria laid out in the project plan, and its strong public sector user base further reinforced the suitability of the software for the task.

As a result South Lanarkshire Council had a system which allowed managers in the planning service to track and manage representations made. The key benefit of this was that as a web-based system where administrative access could be made from any computer with an internet connection. For the planning service this was a great advantage as the system offered a flexible tool for dealing with representations in a variety of submitted formats.

KEY BENEFITS

RESULTS

The results from using Objective's solution were substantial. In July, when information about consultations was available online but prior to the consultation period itself, the local plan pages of the council website received just over 1600 hits. During the six week period for consultation in August and September where Objective's solution was implemented, this rose to over 8000 hits. This increase in usage was brought about through the simple inclusion of a web link to the consultation in all communications with residents.

At the end of the consultation period around 1000 individuals, groups and organisations had made their representations. From that figure, 115 did so by e-mail and 191 via the online system, meaning that over 30% of all representations received were in paperless form. As well as this, 19% of the 191 online submissions were 4% above the national benchmark.

Stuart McMillan said: "This increase in electronic representations is a real demonstration of the effectiveness of the system. With 8000 web page hits, the potential to increase the levels of online submission in the future are strong."

"By working together with Objective we were able to produce a system where people can fully participate in decisions that affect them and their local communities. The work undertaken by Objective and the project managers to adapt the software for use within the Scottish framework means that the system is now readily adaptable to any local plan consultation exercise in Scotland," McMillan adds.

"An excellent partnership has been established with Objective and will continue as the system adapts to any changes required by the new Planning Bill. We are extremely happy with the results of the project, as it has increased the number of electronic representations and reduced the administrative task. We look forward to working with Objective on other projects in future."



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ABOUT OBJECTIVE CORPORATION

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