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Planning Portal Programme - Engagement Of Partners

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Introduction

1.   The Planning Portal Programme is a very ambitious initiative aimed at providing the building blocks to transform the planning system in England and Wales into a system which is easily understood, open and efficient. This is no easy ambition given the complexity of the legislation and guidance underpinning the planning system and the large number of central and local Government organisations involved in the planning system. Despite these problems, the Planning Portal Programme is beginning to live up to its ambitions. Crucial to this and the long term success of the Planning Portal is the engagement of partners and stakeholders.

Background

2.   The Planning Portal Programme consists of three main projects:-

*   **the Planning Portal** - a general planning advisory service linking the public, business and other users of the planning system to a wide range of advice, guidance and services on planning and related topics. The Portal (www.planningportal.gov.uk) went live on 31 May 2002

*   **the Planning Casework Service** - an electronic planning casework document handling and tracking facility

*   **XML schema for planning applications, appeals and development plans.**

3.   Plus a whole series of legislative changes ranging from new procedure rules for planning and enforcement appeals in England and Wales to a series of Orders under Section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 to facilitate the electronic submission of planning applications and appeals etc.

About the Planning Inspectorate

4.   The Planning Inspectorate works for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (previously DTLR) and the National Assembly for Wales on a range of casework under Planning and Environmental Legislation, including deciding planning appeals.

How Did We Get Started?

5.   The genesis of the Planning Portal Programme goes back to the Planning Inspectorate's Information Systems Strategy published in 1998. This Strategy included a vision of the Planning Inspectorate's information systems in 2008 (which at that time we thought was an ambitious target) and the mechanisms for getting there. It differed from the Inspectorate's previous IT strategies in that it focussed on what our IT users considered to be their needs rather than what our IT department felt were the users needs. In order to ensure that the users' needs were actually delivered we set up 5 information

systems strategy boards each chaired by a director of the Planning Inspectorate responsible for delivering one particular theme of the Strategy.

6.   The engagement of directors in this way helped: to raise their awareness of the importance of ITC, demonstrated to the staff that we meant business; and ensured that our new systems better met the needs of the business.

7.   As part of our Information Systems Strategy we carried out a series of business process reviews of our main business activities, including the very complex procedure of processing planning appeals. The workshops were attended by a cross-section of administrative staff and Inspectors and lasted 2 days. At the end of each workshop the recommendations were presented to the Planning Inspectorate's Management Board. At the time, this was an unusual event for Whitehall encouraging the people at the coalface to suggest how to improve procedure! It also broke down the barriers between the Planning Inspectorate administrative staff and Inspectors and laid the foundations for our active partnership approach to the Planning Portal Programme. The workshop resulted in the introduction of new simplified statutory rules for the processing of planning appeals, which were an essential precursor of the new Planning Casework Service.

8.   Our Information Systems Strategy proved to be a success. We managed to deliver the bulk of our vision for 2008 by the end of 1999, including replacing our outdated IT infrastructure. This was not without its problems, particularly in relation to the management of change and working with hard-nosed project managers intent on delivering within time and budget.

Becoming More Ambitious and Externally Focused

9.   An early milestone in our IS Strategy was to roll out a computerised casework tracking system. The system had been under development for 10 years and although a vast improvement on our previous paper-based system, it was already out of date when it was rolled out in 1998. Our Information Systems Strategy therefore envisaged replacing it by 2005. However, we were overtaken by events.

10.   One day in November 1999 we were telephoned by the Finance Division in what was then DETR to ask whether we were interested in making a bid to the Treasury's new Capital Modernisation Fund. And if we were, they wanted an expression of interest within 2 days. After consulting the consultants who were advising us on the implementation of our IS Strategy, we decided to submit a bid of £750k to enable local planning authorities and appellants to track the progress of their appeals over the internet. We were then asked to submit a full business case to the Treasury via the Department by the end of January 2000. Both deadlines were short but we were helped by having a fully thought through Information Systems Strategy.

11.   As part of the process of working up the business case, we held a workshop with representatives from the Government Offices for the Regions, the DETR, the Royal Town Planning Institute, Inspectors and procedure staff. It soon became apparent that we had not been ambitious enough in our earlier bid. The clear message from our stakeholders was that in order to improve the planning appeal system, it is necessary to link the Casework Tracking System with online advice and guidance. The concept of a planning portal was born. We increased the bid to £3m and waited for the Treasury to make a decision. To our surprise, the Treasury did not ask a single question about the bid but nevertheless told us in April 2000 that we had been successful. The next 3 months was spent trying to agree the terms of a press notice with the Treasury, DTLR and the National Assembly for Wales. This filled us with foreboding of the task ahead in trying to engage a huge range of stakeholders and partners.

12.   The next step was to appoint our Programme and Project Management Advisers (Hedra). This was done in October 2000. We then got to grips with thinking about the overall programme and project management arrangements. They consisted (see Annex) of:-

- a Programme Board - responsible for setting the overall strategy and considering cross-cutting issues;

- separate project boards for the Planning Portal and Planning Casework Service;

- a Stakeholders Board;

- independently chaired Programme and Project Assurance Teams; and

- a series of Design and Implementation Teams reporting to the project boards.

13.	The terms of reference and membership of each of the Boards can be found on the Planning Portal Programme web site (www.planningportalprogramme.gov.uk). Each Board consisted of representatives of key stakeholders and partners. They were nominated from the various representative organisations and from organisations which expressed an interest in taking part in the Programme following a series of round robin letters. We also drew on those people who had volunteered for the original January 2000 workshop. Nevertheless, a lot of work had to be done to convince people that the Programme was on behalf of the planning community as a whole and not the PINS Portal.

14.	The real benefit of involving key stakeholders and partners at all levels of the programme, project and development arrangements is that it ensured that the end to end process was considered. This benefits everybody. It increased trust, ensured that systems meet everybody's needs and that we did not lose sight of the big picture, which in our case was the need to modernise the planning system as a whole, not just those areas in which the Inspectorate have a direct interest. A practical example is that if people are better informed about the planning system before making a planning application to their local authority, they are less likely to submit an application which is turned down. This in turn reduces the workload for everyone, including the Planning Inspectorate.

15.	The lessons from this part of the process are:-

- ensure that all key partners and stakeholders are properly represented;

- members of the various boards are clear as to their role, both as members of the Board and in representing their community of interest;

- replace people who do not pull their weight;

- engage the Boards in crucial decision making, listen to what they have got to say, exceed expectations and communicate effectively.

16.	As a first step each project and their design and implementation team was asked to produce a blueprint of its service in 2005. This was deliberately set to link to the Government's 2005 target for electronic service delivery. The teams recommended that the scope of the projects should be expanded to include local authority as well as central Government services, online development plans and a national online planning application form. DTLR subsequently agreed to provide a further £3.7m to expand the scope of the Programme.

17.	The procurement process commenced in July 2001 and contracts were let for the development of the Planning Portal and the Planning Casework Service in November 2001. Stakeholders, partners, PINS staff were all involved in agreeing criteria against which the bids were to be assessed and in the assessment of the various bids. They have also been involved in the rapid application development workshops and subsequently testing of the services to be delivered on the Planning Portal and Planning Casework Service.

18.	So far so good. But how do you ensure that our partners and stakeholders use the Planning Portal and Planning Casework Service?

Keeping Partners Engaged

19.	And that is where the roll-out and take-up strategies take over from the design and implementation of the Planning Portal.

20.   Our targets are:

- There are 431 Local Planning Authorities in England and Wales.

- Our aim is 80% of planning agents to be using the Portal by 2004.

- All LPAs and Government departments to be delivering services electronically by 2005.

- The Portal is to be regarded as an authoritative, single point of reference for all planning matters.

21.   That doesn't mean that we will achieve all 431 at once, but the way that we try to achieve the targets has a number of challenges. We cannot just assume that the launch of the Portal is automatically as ubiquitous and wanted as *'sliced bread'*.

22.   The key challenges we face are:

- ICT investment in planning departments is extremely low;

- the perception of planning is often a 'Cinderella' compared with other council services;

- we have a limited budget to achieve a full, national roll-out;

- we are attempting to cross the central/local divide, by introducing a service which affects local delivery of services;

- ...all in 2 years (the limit of our agreed funds, in expectation that we will pass the operation onto another body in April 2004)

23.   A new team was set up in April 2002 with a clean sheet of paper, to complete the implementation, set up and run the operation of the Portal for 2 years, roll out and promote the service, and transfer the operation to another body in succession to the Planning Inspectorate.

24.   It was decided that the new team would have a very non-Civil Service, and almost a commercial shape to it. This was because many of the skills required to successfully run and promote a portal are not within the civil service, and the stretch targets mean that we need to motivate and incentivise the team to deliver significant targets in a record time. Most of the senior posts are recruited direct from the private sector, on fixed term contracts. Most of the people selected are used to working in partnership to achieve goals, whether they are commercial partnerships around delivery of services (i.e. simple trading agreements) or modern, collaborative approaches to delivering Internet-based services.

25.   The team is now building on the success established through the partnerships needed to get the service design and built. The 150+ organisations involved in the design and management, through the Programme and Project Boards,. Assurance Teams and testers are continuing to be involved, as we establish new groups for working with

- Stakeholders

- Suppliers

- Other Government Departments

- Local Planning Authorities.

26.   A fundamental plank in our strategy is to use the ICT suppliers who provide planning and development control systems. These are suppliers to the LPAs, and we share a common problem: How to get the level of investment in ICT in planning up to the same standard as the rest of the IT in LPAs? The development of Electronic Service Delivery systems, such as web sites, electronic forms, interactive forms, case tracking and consultation/e-democracy tools is shared by us, LPAs and all the suppliers – *we need to work together* to make a difference in the planning system.

27.   We see a need for both push and pull. The LPAs desperately need new technology and support in transforming their services into the electronic services world.   The establishment of XML Schemas by the Planning Portal programme is helping to make it easier, and working with suppliers to ensure that their system are capable of supporting a common planning application form, for example, helps make it easier for an LPA to adopt the new ways of working.

28.   The Planning Portal Management team has a major role to play in marketing – selling the benefits and helping planning departments make their business case internally for investment and transformation of their services.

29.   Making the Portal a single, authoritative source of planning advice and services also requires working with other providers of planning services, such as legal publishers (such as Sweet and Maxwell, Haymarket and Butterworths), information providers (such as Landmark, ABI, and Ordnance Survey) and other government departments and agencies (Environment Agency, Countryside Agency, Land Registry.) The service must not be rigidly defined as 'public' or 'private' if it is to be regarded as a true *one-stop-shop*. This also requires a different mind-set from traditional government portals, and has characterised the way that we work as a team, and with partners.

30.   The lessons we are learning are:

- Whatever we do, we must establish with LPAs that we are *adding to*, not *taking away* from local efforts to provide e-planning services; this spirit of partnership has to recognise local pride and achievement if we are to attract all LPAs to use and contribute to the Portal;

- We must listen to the market, and respond appropriately; our success will be driven by the rate of usage by planning agents, the public, elected politicians and LPA planning officers themselves. If our initial plans and business cases are incorrect when we try to persuade people to use the portal, then we must alter our plans;

- We have ambitious targets, but they must be sensible as well. The spirit of the team will be broken if we are constantly failing to achieve our own goals in an environment of highly faceted, complex customer groups, multiple services and very tight timescales;

- The way we *do business* with public and private and public sector partners alike must be commercial, professional and fair, and also recognise that commitments need to be trusted on both sides, even if it supply of a simple hyperlink from one site to another;

- Some services will be perceived as potential competition to existing services, so a spirit of '*co-operation'* is required when creating portals – we can collaborate with someone who would be a competitor in another world, if we both gain from working together;

We *must* foster a dynamic, can-do style working with partners if we are to achieve the goals we have set ourselves.