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Lancaster City Council Transforms its planning and building control processes with Uniform Cloud

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Sara Noon
Systems Manager
Lancaster City Council

Background:

Lancaster City Council is a district council committed to delivering sustainable economic growth, a greener environment, regeneration, and improving the health and wellbeing of its 140,000 residents. One of the key developments the Council is busy working on is the £125m Eden Project North eco-tourism attraction in Morecambe which is focussed on marine life and expected to attract an average of 750,000 customers each year, creating hundreds of jobs in the district. With several projects underway to invest in and regenerate the area, it's imperative that the Council can benefit from streamlined planning and building control processes to unlock maximum efficiency and value.

Challenge:

The world of planning is ever-changing and as a forward-thinking organisation, Lancaster City Council was an early adopter of using technology to digitise its case management process for planning and building control. The Council wanted to move away from inefficient, paper-based processes and harness the power of digital technologies to facilitate online applications, reviews, and approval for planning and building control certificates. It was looking for a system that could adapt and keep up with future industry demands across elements such as enforcements, development control, pre-applications, site/condition monitoring, legal agreements and appeals. As such, Lancaster City Council needed a modern, unified solution tailored to the specific needs and intricacies of the planning and building control sector.

Solution:

Lancaster City Council has now been working with Idox and its Uniform software for thirty years. Uniform is a comprehensive case management software with a range of core modules and related applications that enables efficient management of regulatory services, including planning, building control, environmental health, estates management, land charges, trading standards, licensing, and private sector housing processes.

As early adopters of the Uniform system, one initial challenge that the Council faced was some hesitancy about moving away from traditional paper-based processes for a tech-based solution. According to Mark Cassidy, Head of Planning and Place at Lancaster City Council, “It was a huge leap for a local authority to embrace a digital solution at that time.



There was some nervousness, about not having the safety net of paper-driven systems and using computer-based software for tasks such as; automatically recording and history-checking cases; generating letters to go to statutory consultees; notifying people about the breach of planning control; and sending out templated letters to complainants. However, the benefits of using Uniform to gain operational efficiencies and eliminate human errors in these tasks were clear from the start. We initially used the system for planning control and later moved to include building control enforcement, listed buildings, public access and LLPG (Local Land and Property Gazetteer) in the following years.”

Moving to the cloud:

Lancaster City Council decided to migrate to the hosted version of Uniform to benefit from advantages including automatic software updates, unlimited storage, cost efficiency, improved data security, and more that cloud-based technologies offer. Sara Noon, Housing Systems Manager at Lancaster City Council explains, “moving to hosted was an obvious choice because we knew we would always be on the latest version of the Uniform software and could take advantage of the new features that came with each upgrade”.

From sign-up to full implementation, it took 12 months for Lancaster City Council to migrate to the hosted version of the software. Commenting on the experience, Sara says, “The migration was well planned and paced properly to allow us the right amount of time to test each element during the Test implementation and a further period of time working directly with the Idox implementation team before sign-off of the Live system. It was a gradual process – ensuring everything was implemented correctly and worked for us.”

Outcome:

Moving to a fully managed, cloud-hosted solution helped the Council leave behind costly on-premise IT infrastructure. “Migrating to the cloud-hosted version of Uniform helped us achieve substantial savings as we no longer have to invest in the hardware estate and associated licensing and consultancy,” Sara points out. Through end-to-end system integration, Uniform Cloud has helped the Council streamline processes, automate tasks, and deliver a more responsive service – from receipt of an application to decision and subsequent reporting. “With Uniform Cloud, we can now organise virtual planning meetings and display plans on screen, enabling everybody to look at the same document at the same time. With an integrated system in place, we don’t need to print

and send every single application and the supporting documents to the parish councils – saving us a significant amount of time and money,” Mark highlights.

Uniform Cloud allows the Council to consolidate all property applications in one location which are then distributed to other systems – leading to data consistency across systems. Moreover, implementing the system has reduced technical administration time for the Council as security and maintenance is all managed and executed remotely. “Prior to the migration, planning for every patch and upgrade was a serious challenge, with the added fear of downtime if something went wrong. Now, the system is always up-to-date in terms of legislative changes and guarantees uptime – thereby ensuring uninterrupted service for our staff and public,” Sara adds.

Uniform Cloud proved to be a great asset for Lancaster City Council during lockdown when the Council had to switch overnight from office to home working. “With Uniform Cloud, we were already moving towards the idea of agile working where employees could work from anywhere. So, when lockdown started, nothing changed from a compliance perspective; we just had to provide the staff with equipment to work from home. Everything in the backend was already set up for remote working – allowing employees access to every bit of information they needed,” explains Stephen Gillespie, Planning Systems Manager at Lancaster City Council.

Looking to the future, Lancaster City Council is keen to explore Idox’s comprehensive suite of mobile apps, designed to support core modules for planning and building control. “It would make huge improvements for the Council as smart apps deliver flexible, mobile working for officers, enabling risk assessments and inspections from anywhere and on any device, as well as offline working in locations without a mobile internet signal,” Stephen concludes.

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