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Mid Ulster District Council Streamlining planning services with Idox's Uniform

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Barry Hagan
Head of ICT
Mid Ulster District Council

Background:

Northern Ireland district council, delivering high-quality services for citizens across two counties

Mid Ulster District Council spans two counties – from Swatragh in the north to Fivemiletown in the south and from the Sperrin Mountains in the west to the shores of Lough Neagh in the east.

The Council focuses on delivering great value, high-quality services for residents, businesses and visitors. It aims to maximise growth opportunities to enhance the vibrancy of the district as a place to live, do business and visit.

Challenges:

The need for an efficient digital system to streamline planning with applications at an all-time high

The planning department at Mid Ulster was previously using a bespoke planning development solution, created by Idox to meet the needs of the national Northern Ireland planning system. With the number of planning applications increasing significantly during recent times, the Council was looking to deploy a solution with greater autonomy and versatility in terms of functionality to sustain the continued rise in applications. Having previously invested in its highly resilient on-premise infrastructure, it wanted to maximise this investment with a modernised system that could enable greater control of its data and mitigate potential issues such as data transfer.

According to Dr Chris Boomer, Director of Planning at Mid Ulster District Council, “We were looking for a more efficient digital system that helps our customers make submissions and amend revisions through an online platform. Transitioning to a paperless environment was an important goal for us as we were struggling to keep up with the amount of storage that planning requires, let alone the data disposal. And with demands in the world of planning continuing to expand, we also needed to be more effective with the use of staff and workflows. We required a system to help lessen the burden of paper-based administrative functions and free our staff to focus on planning work.”



Solution:

A comprehensive case management system designed to cater to the needs of local authorities and citizens

Mid Ulster District Council implemented Idox's Uniform software in the summer of 2022 to modernise development management processes, digitise applications and transform its land charges services. Used by a majority of UK local authorities for over 30 years, Uniform is a comprehensive case management platform designed to support the needs of local authorities and their citizens. A robust solution equipped with a range of core modules and related applications, it is developed to empower local authorities to provide responsive and resilient digital government. Available fully hosted in the cloud, or on-premise, Uniform enables the efficient management of regulatory services, including planning, building control, environmental health, estates management, land charges, trading standards, licensing and private sector housing processes.

When selecting a new planning solution, one of the Council's key considerations was to ensure a smooth transition. Having used the bespoke national planning development solution from Idox before, when Uniform was fully deployed on-premise, the staff already had a strong familiarity with the product. "I had already seen the full version of Uniform in operation at a Scottish local authority and knew it was very straightforward to use. It is far more advanced than the previous system as it is much more integrated, enables workflow management through the Enterprise module, helps reduce administrative tasks, and provides visibility of information and statistics through reporting modules," says Chris.

Barry Hagan, Head of ICT at Mid Ulster District Council, comments, "Since we were an existing customer of Idox, we had confidence in the company and Uniform as a product. The solution helps multiple local government customers across the UK provide planning services and presented a solution that met all our requirements. It was a cost-effective way of delivering value for money and online services for the wider population of Mid Ulster."

Given its prior investment into its on-premise infrastructure, it was important for Mid Ulster to deploy Uniform on-premise to ensure it could maximise its return on investment. "As data was on-premise we benefitted from full administrative control within our environment and services. Data transfer can be a difficult and complex process, so the fact that Idox has a strong reputation in terms of quality delivery and support was another key reason behind choosing Uniform," Barry explains.

Outcome:

Increased online submissions, better workflows and improved visibility and reporting

After taking the bold decision to migrate to a commercial off-the-shelf solution that could be customised and updated internally, the Council has already seen significant benefits. With a system tailored to the specific needs of Mid Ulster and its citizens, since mid-June 2022, 50% of planning applications have been submitted online. And with positive feedback from agents and customers, the Council has set a target of increasing online submissions to 70 to 80% before the end of this year. The Document Management System (DMS) has also enabled the planning team to work towards a paperless environment, helping to reduce administration by creating better workflows through the Enterprise module. This has also improved reporting and visibility of information and statistics to enable a clearer view of department performance.

Commenting on the rollout of Uniform, Karla McKinless, Implementation Project Lead comments, "From an implementation perspective, the Idox team has been outstanding through providing immense support. Their wealth of knowledge is vast – things that would have taken my team hours to figure out were rapidly resolved."

Talking about the working relationship with Idox, Barry says, "The team at Idox showed real diligence and care for the quality of the solution deployment. There was attention to detail in addressing technical nuances and a good working relationship with Karla's team."

Chris concludes, "With all things considered, leaving a heavily configured and highly customised system and migrating to a cost-effective, commercial off-the-shelf solution from Idox was the right decision for the planning team. Overall we view Idox as a secure, low-risk supplier that delivers a streamlined and flexible solution that delivers value for money for citizens and the Council as a whole."

Looking to the future in terms of how it might upgrade its technology and systems further, Mid Ulster's potential long-term strategy is to migrate to a cloud-based environment via Uniform Cloud.

Call us now on 0333 011 1200 or email marketing@idoxgroup.com to find out more about Idox's planning solutions.

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