Planning & Building Control New System

Stakeholder Briefing Note
Strategic Planning Committee

October 2022

The **public-facing webpages** and **back-office system** for planning and building control applications are moving to a **new improved system in Autumn 2022**

Why is the change happening?

The existing system is coming to the end of its life and will no longer be supported by its supplier meaning important reliability, security and accessibility updates will not be maintained, and the benefits of a new improved system will not be realised

What are the benefits of the new improved system?

The new system will provide a much-improved user experience for the public and officers searching online for application information as well as offering the opportunity to achieve a step change in efficiencies. Some of the specific benefits include:

- ✓ Improved **compatibility with various devices and formats** e.g., PCs, tablets, mobile phone, enabling full on-site information and updates
- ✓ Cloud-hosted in accordance with the government's Cloud First Strategy', so ability for officers to update cases whilst on site to **improve 'live' information** for the public, reducing the need to contact the call centre or officers
- ✓ Ability to set up **automatic email notifications** for case updates (e.g. when an application has been decided, or when enforcement action has been taken) to reduce the need for 'chasing' and manual communication
- ✓ Improved **'weekly lists'** and ability for Councillors and the public to set up **notifications for cases in particular wards**, using the new ward boundaries
- ✓ Improved **search functions**, making it easier for the public to find information
- ✓ Fully functional **Electronic Document Management System (EDMS)** making better use of 'meta data' categories to make it easier for the public to find the documents they are looking for, reducing the need to scroll down long lists
- ✓ Improved **accessibility** in line with the Government Design Principles
- ✓ Improved **speed and reliability** and less 'down time' when the public temporarily may have problems accessing cases and files

- ✓ Whilst planning applications can already be submitted into our system digitally via the national Planning Portal, applications for **Pre-Application Planning Advice** and **Building Control applications** will now also be able to be submitted directly into the system, attaching documents and paying fees
- ✓ Integration with the Government's **GOV UK Pay** platform to enable the payment of application related fees and charges and giving customers a greater sense of security when making online payments.
- ✓ Supporting the public getting the **right information first time** and interacting digitally
- ✓ Better **performance management** and monitoring through the use of intuitive and advanced reporting
- ✓ **Automation of processes** using workflow functionality which enables a reduction in manual handling and speeds up processing times
- ✓ Potential for testing the use of **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** for example to undertake the initial checking of planning applications

What services are affected?

- Pre-application planning advice
- Planning applications
- Planning appeals
- Planning enforcement cases
- Planning general enquiries
- Planning automatic notifications
- All Building Control applications

When is this happening?

*Precise dates **subject to change**:

- **October** – We will update our Planning & Building Control webpages with banners and warnings giving advanced information about the upcoming changes
- Officers will be limiting contact with customers while they prioritise processing applications and put automatic replies on emails to make customers aware.
- **Mid October** – The process of migrating data to the new system will commence, access to the Public Register will not be affected
- **Late October** - The new system will undergo final testing
- **Late October / early November** - The new system will be live via our webpages and the Public Register switched from the legacy system to the new system without any disruption

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Will there be any disruption to the service when the system transitions?

We are aiming to **minimise any disruption** to customers and the public whilst the change happens. The **public should not notice any major difference**, other than the improvements of course.

In the background, the **data from the old system will be migrated to the new system in the 2 weeks in the run up to Go Live**.

We will only add a limited number of cases into the old system to ensure we meet the relevant statutory deadlines. This means that most new cases will not formally be registered on the systems, and we will be working to add the 2 weeks 'backlog' of cases into the new system as quickly as possible after Go Live to catch up.

It should be noted that **officers will be extremely busy during this period** as we transition from old to new system. This means we will not have the capacity to deal with all of the correspondence with customers, the public and Councillors as quickly as normal, so **please bear with us during this time, your cooperation is appreciated**.

We will still prioritise the most urgent planning enforcement cases and respond as normal. Building Control will still carry out site inspections relating to all application types including dangerous structures, but our response times for validations, plan checking and replying to correspondence may be delayed.

Can people still comment on Planning applications during the transition time?

Applications that are live before the downtime are expected to remain available for commenting. There will be some time where the online portal will be unavailable while the switch is made between the two back-office systems. During this time representations can be submitted by email.

Will you still be issuing Planning decisions during the transition time?

We will still be able to issue planning decisions during this period but will seek to limit this as much as possible as decisions made will need to be duplicated on the new system.

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Can people still make Planning Enforcement complaints during the transition time?

The planning enforcement complaints questionnaire will largely remain available during this time for submitting planning enforcement queries. There may be a short period where it is not available while the new questionnaire is embedded on the Council's website. Only the most urgent complaints (Listed Buildings and Tree works) will be created as new cases and passed to officers. So there will be some delay to normal site visit and response times. Officers will continue to correspond on live cases and urgent notices will still be served.

Can people still submit Building Control applications during the transition time?

Building Control will be accepting all applications during this period and will still be carrying out site inspections relating to all application types including dangerous structures, but our response times for validations, plan checking and replying to correspondence may be delayed during this period.

Has the new system been tested?

Yes. The new system is an 'off the shelf' package from Arcus Global chosen following a competitive procurement process and has **already been operating successfully with real customers and members of the public in** Epping, Ashford and Wiltshire councils amongst others. The solution has been adapted for Haringey and officers have also been testing the system for the last couple of months and fine-tuning the system to make sure it works.

Even when we go live on the new system, it will be very much phase 1. This system is very powerful and vastly superior to our current system, therefore we will be looking to adapt and enhance the system further, in order to further automate processes, make communications with our customers/stakeholders easier, quicker and seamless and help officers deal with ever increasing demand.
We would encourage comments from all our stakeholders during this process, in order to help develop the new system into a system fit for the 21st century that helps all who interact with it.

There are still likely to be inevitable teething problems and there is a dedicated project team with Digital Services to ensure these are resolved as quickly as possible.

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What will the new system look like?

There will be a new interface for residents viewing and commenting on planning applications. Ashford Borough Council has recently gone live with the same system and a similar set up which can be viewed here.

There will be a new interface for submitting Planning Enforcement Questionnaires and general queries.

Intuitive customer grade user experience

Embedded reporting & analytics

Self-service & mobile working built-in; citizens & officers can access anywhere, anytime

User interface is highly customisable

Automated notifications, escalations and service breaches, both internally and externally

Data-driven workflow of core processes

Public Registers of all planning elements accessible via website

Online application forms & integration with Planning Portal for online submissions of applications

Online consultation of statutory, non-statutory consultees and neighbour comments

Contacts

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