Time to open doors to electronic document delivery at Newry and Mourne District Council

As the gateway to the North on the East Coast of Ireland, the historic city of Newry sits majestically between two areas of outstanding natural beauty – the Mountains of Mourne in South Down and the Ring of Gullion in South Armagh. The duty of serving the diverse needs of local people falls to Newry and Mourne District Council.

Newry and Mourne is a progressive local authority, committed to embracing innovative ways of meeting the needs of local stakeholders. Therefore, when the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and Electronic Document Record Management (EDRM) rules placed new responsibilities on local authorities across the UK, the Council was quick to act.

The FOI Act requires local authorities to provide unfettered access to documents that escape classification as ‘not for public consumption’. FOI requests must be addressed within 28 days. Meanwhile, EDRM rules require councils to move from manual to electronic systems and processes wherever possible to reduce cost, improve service, minimise delays and promote efficiency.

Another key driver for improving the way that the council collates, delivers and manages information was the need for increased taxpayer transparency and accountability. Seamus McGivern, Assistant Director of Finance and IT, explained: “There’s a degree of public cynicism about what the Council does and where money from taxation goes. So one of our objectives was to demonstrate – in keeping with current government policy – Best Value. This is part of our commitment to being accountable to Newry and Mourne’s citizens and stakeholders.”
Efficiency and accountability

However, Newry Council was not set up to deliver information in an efficient and timely manner because, like many councils, its processes relied upon paper and manual handling. As information requests came into the authority, the lion’s share of documents would have to be located, managed and delivered by a council official at considerable cost and effort.

The way in which Newry the Council used to prepared and delivered committee papers for councillors was one example of inefficiency already scheduled for improvement. Driven largely by people-intensive paper and email-based processes, it could take up to three days for officials to compile and deliver documents to elected members.

The Council’s aim was to automate the collation of pertinent documents, and then to automate the generation of some reports, agenda and papers. The timing of the legislative and internal challenges could not have been better. The project to streamline the delivery of information to councillors dovetailed neatly with FOI and EDRM requirements. “The ramifications of the Freedom of Information Act dramatically increased the extent of our plans. We had to know where all our information was then design an approach that enabled us to deliver it efficiently,” said McGivern.

Time for the right partner

The Council was already an established user of Lotus Notes and Domino Document Management, so Lotus software was the first choice for the new project. However, Newry the Council was uncertain whether Lotus technology could meet the challenges. “We didn’t want to commit to a Notes/DominoLotus solution then discover that it could not support all our goals,” explained McGivern.

It was at this point that McGivern discovered Time Technology, a leading IBM software, services and solution provider and IBM Business Partner. “Fate brought Newry and Time together, but once we discovered their breadth and depth of IBM skills, we were convinced they were the right people for the job,” he said.

Time Technology’s approach of putting business requirements first and technology considerations second was well received by Newry the Council. “It didn’t take Time long to get ‘up-to-speed’ with the Council’s vision for a new document management system. That gave us real confidence in their Lotus abilities and experience,” he explained.

Time’s initial engagement involved the completion of a Domino Document Management Feasibility and Improvement Study as well as a statement of project requirements. The company also achieved strong user acceptance for its proposed approach across the Council through the creation of project advocates and various workshops involving key users.

“We considered many different document management systems and suppliers, but felt that the Lotus Notes still had some life in it. Domino Document Manager was the most appropriate fit for us. Time Technology’s strong consultancy skills, particularly in the area of creating user buy-in, as well as their technical abilities, gave us a great deal of confidence. The end result of Time’s work was a clear and comprehensive route forward,” said McGivern.
The work begins

Time Technology’s consultancy exercise led to the total redesign of Newry’s document management system (DMS) across all departments. Now, Time Technology is beginning the construction of the DMS using Web Content Manager for DominoLotus Domino Document Manager.

The new system employs industry standard file types and provides high levels of security. It also boasts full index searching, structured mail archiving and user-friendly administration. Whatever information is held in the new DMS, it will be accessible to people on demand – a far cry from the old paper-based system.

“For the first time, we’re putting an automated workflow behind key council processes. This will expedite the creation of committee papers as well as the delivery of documents to local people,” said McGivern.

Common-sense information

The DMS will enable the authority to migrate from its current paper-based filing system to the latest in taxonomy-based intuitive electronic information repository.

A taxonomy is a method for categorising large volumes of information. One example is the Dewey-Decimal classification index used by most libraries.

The DMS will be built around a taxonomy that includes familiar concepts, such as file rooms, cabinets and binders; however information can be searched by index too. Workflow approval cycles will be used to maintain the integrity of information and documents will be consolidated into packages to save resources.

Soon, whenever a document comes into the Council it will be scanned and stored on the system, which will provide Newry with a valuable audit trail for all documents.

“The DMS will enable officers and administrators to track the progress of each communication as it progresses through council departments. That means our staff can focus on more specialised tasks while we maintain high levels of taxpayer service. We believe this will result in us being viewed as effective public servants committed to delivering a ‘Best Value’ service,” said McGivern.

Final information advantage

For a low initial investment, Time Technology has provided Newry with an open, robust and secure framework for future FOI and EDRM compliance. It will also help Newry to move from bureaucratic local authority to an organisation that shares knowledge with all its stakeholders.

While the Newry implementation is not yet complete, the Council already anticipates significant direct savings from the implementation. The DMS will eventually provide an information-rich backbone to the authority’s operations where 85 to 95 per cent of the Council’s communications will be made electronically.

“With Time Technology’s help we’ll ensure that the easiest place to store a document is the right place and we’ll satisfy challenging FOI and EDRM legal requirements. We’ll also open our doors to the public in a previously unheard of manner,” said McGivern. “We’re looking forward to the day when most requests are received and dealt with via the website without anyone in the Council getting involved.”

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