


East Dunbartonshire Council: Local Plan Online



East Dunbartonshire Council (EDC) engaged 1Spatial to develop and implement an interactive local plan that would be both easy to use and highly informative, and allow users to access maps and related policies without downloading sometimes-bulky PDF files.

EDC needed a solution that fitted into the council's future corporate plans for spatial data: firstly, meeting e-government demands and secondly, providing the public with online access to accurate council data.

The Challenge

EDC was established in 1996 and provides the majority of local services within the community from schools and libraries to consumer advice and planning. EDC's long-term goal is to ensure that data concerning all these services are available online to the public.

The local government-administered planning function has been 'electronically enabled' to a greater or lesser extent by most UK local authorities. One aspect of this function is the management of the local plan by local government. Traditionally, the local plan has existed as a substantial document that sets out the context, policies, constraints and development opportunities for a local planning authority area using detailed cartographic depiction. As such, the traditional format is ill-suited to electronic communication and consumption. The local plan system requires that plans be periodically reviewed and updated, involving a significant degree of consultation with various stakeholders and interested parties via circulation of a draft proposed plan.

EDC engaged 1Spatial to develop and implement an application that:

- Would be easy to use and highly informative
- Could be readily related to other relevant information resources
- Would incorporate many interrelated factors
- Would allow stakeholders and other involved parties to make informed judgments on planning matters

Overall, EDC wanted the online system to provide the basis of an effective way of communicating their local plan.

EDC recognised that the design of a user-friendly interface would be an essential prerequisite to such an initiative. In its traditional form, a local plan is a heavily cross-referenced document that uses various codes to cross-reference local plan maps with policy statements and location specific objectives and users normally have to consult across a number of different pages. Maps contained within such pages are only ever as up to date as the date of printing or copying as a PDF file. The systems tend, therefore, to be slow and complicated to use, and even resulting in out-of-date information being downloaded. Part of the challenge for 1Spatial was to provide a solution that did not depend on the downloading of large PDF files, but supplied online access to the most accurate local data, instantly.

The Solution

1Spatial's approach centred on use of a 'selection tab' interface. This interface allows the user to easily move from a map view of designated local plan areas to both the full text content of the local plan and specific policy statements. This approach is preferable to using separate pop up windows for displaying associated text, as it avoids the problem of browser windows disappearing behind other current session windows. It also ensures the current map view and any associated text remain synchronised.

The map view depicts current planning applications; the user then selects an application of interest to ascertain its details. In future developments of the system the user will also be able to navigate to application details from an address or name entry without needing to go through the map. The application's map viewer functionality was implemented using the Autodesk MapGuide® LiteView version 6.5 with OpenGIS® (WMS) standards. By using e-GIF compliant 'iframes', refreshes of the map view (as the user zooms and pans) are restricted to the map view canvas area, thereby alleviating any need to refresh the entire browser window. For the East Dunbartonshire application, the map data resides as shape files linked to Oracle database records. The system ultimately provides users with a 'redline' function allowing them to create their own map annotation, thus supporting and encouraging feedback.

The interactive local plan was developed as a component of a wider information resource, allowing the user to move from the local plan into other topic areas. These topics extend to community facilities, provision of education, gritting routes, council ward electoral areas and current planning applications as a new pending content item.

The initial application has been hosted offsite by 1Spatial. Although necessitating data duplication, this arrangement allowed EDC to progress development of the application, demonstrate its functionality and enable initial operational use in order to prove the application's business case without firstly needing to satisfy internal security requirements.

"1Spatial have worked with East Dunbartonshire for a number of years and in that time they have proven to be professional, flexible, friendly and patient. All work has proven to be of the highest standard and we look forward to evolving our mapping solutions with them."

David McMorran, East Dunbartonshire Council

The Benefits

The development of the Online Local Plan has contributed to the implementation of e-government as a corporate strategy within the council, and demonstrated that EDC are making good use of the technologies available to them. Members of the public can have more efficient and comprehensive access to the local plan, and associated documentation, from the comfort of their own homes.

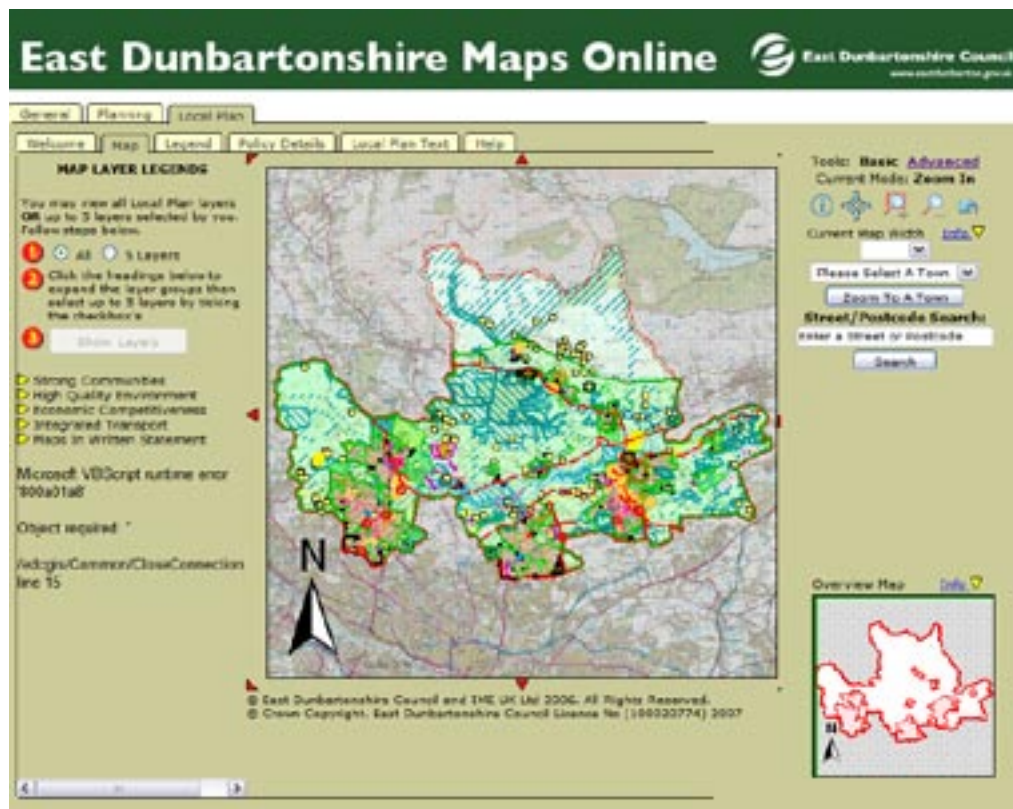
The manner in which users can move from a map view of specific local plan areas to the full context of the plan, or move from the plan to other, associated topic areas means that time is saved and staff are more efficient in terms of service delivery.

Ultimately, the application demonstrates a more effective way of communicating, engaging and eventually obtaining consensus on matters relating to EDC's Local Plan. This approach offers distinct advantages over others, through a combination of an intuitive user interface and linkage with other information resources.

The Future

Once adequate security measures are in place, the application will be migrated 'in house' to become an integral component of EDC's overall delivery of electronic services. It will then link to a live version of EDC's Corporate Address Gazetteer and become a component of an online property search function, as well as an online planning application submission function. The latter function will use the redline functionality and Ordnance Survey MasterMap® to provide users with a tool to create their own planning application extract maps. The application will also enable reporting on a variety of other council areas, for example abandoned vehicles, lighting/road faults and linkages through to the Council Payments site.

In the future, the application will become a core component of EDC's electronic service delivery. The online system will provide a means of interlinking several important information resources for the benefit of both internal staff and external clients, all of who have an interest in the planning process and other council services.



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