

iPlan Users Group Meeting held on the 14 November 2011
in Committee Room 2

Chair: Peter Millward (PM) – Epping Forest District Council

Attendees: Nigel Richardson (NR) – Epping Forest District Council
Stephen Bacon (SB) – Epping Forest District Council
Theresa Parker (TP) – Epping Forest District Council
Mavis Bird (MB) – Epping Forest District Council
Ann Wood (AW) – Epping Forest District Council
Andrew Rich (AR) – Epping Forest District Council
Richard Witham (RW) – Lambourne Parish Council
Brian Surtees (BS) – Ongar Town Council
Adriana Jones (AJ) – North Weald Parish Council
Marie Hatch (MH) – Ongar Town Council
Chris Pond (CP) – Loughton Town Council
Chris Redman (CR) Minutes – Epping Forest District Council

PM welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Action/s

1. Apologies:

- Joan Bowerman (JB) – Matching Parish Council

2. Report by Stephen Bacon on the new EFDC Website and iPlan

PM introduced Stephen Bacon (Senior Systems Support Officer, EFDC), who gave a presentation to the group on the EFDC website and iPlan. SB began with an apology that the current system was rather outdated and not as good as it could be. He explained that the funding for the Consultation Hub that would have been an integral part of the system had been withdrawn by the Government, and so ICT had been looking over the last year at how to make more of the website. They had studied feedback on the current website, and look at how issues could be improved. This would include:

- How to improve a search by address. The new website will include a street finder – a ‘drop down’ list of street names in the EFDC area that would always be consistent, and all the user would have to do is input the property number. This would hopefully eliminate grammatical errors such as apostrophes in the wrong place and misspelt street names that would not yield good results. There will also be a facility for a free-text search. This will be the first option on the site showing that this is the most effective way to search.
- Improved facilities for online comments to applications. At present the

system for inputting online comments is rather long-winded and unwieldy and requires a lot of effort on the part of the user. The new system would include an 'add comments' button – when a letter is sent notifying consultees of a new planning application, a unique reference number will be generated and printed on the letter. This reference number can then be inserted into the 'add comments' and all personal details will automatically be added to the system rather than the user having to type them all in. These numbers can also be generated for the Planning Weekly List for the Parish Councils to insert. BS commented that this could make more work for the Parish Councils, as at the moment they just email their comments – SB said that we can accommodate both systems, and it was up to the user to see which was the better option for them. This should also stop the system timing-out on searches - SB added that we are just waiting for Northgate to implement the changes. BS asked if there could be a screen showing that the system has timed out – SB said that they would push Northgate for this and that we could suggest changes, but ultimately Northgate were in charge.

SB

- A complete update of the website to be rid of irrelevant content by April next year. An open-source format will hopefully be adopted which should prove to be a cheaper option – this will be going to Finance and Performance Management tomorrow to be discussed. It should also prove to be user friendly and the aim is for a minimum of 3 'clicks' to get to where you want to on the website. It will be based around living, visiting and doing business, and could also include Parish Council sites too.
- Use of our own online mapping program to replace Pinpoint mapping, which has had consistent data problems. As it will be an in-house program we will be able to fix it ourselves should anything happen, and we can also make it more interactive for public use. The Planning Directorate will also have greater control over the Planning pages – news can be updated daily, text size, text to speech, colour etc should be easy to change to help users. Photographs of different Parishes could be uploaded, and projects like 50 Favourite Trees could be hosted here rather than externally. You should also be able to get to the Planning back in 1 click, rather than the current 4 clicks
- A single search box for the application number if it is known to the user. BS asked if it could be pre-populated with the EPF prefix to show that the user is on the right track. SB said that he could get Northgate to try, but that it might affect searches for historic applications that may begin with a different prefix e.g. CHI.

SB

SB finished the presentation by looking at what the future would bring with the new website. The old website came with Northgate automatically as the back-office system, and had not been looked at critically before. Items on the wish-list for next year would include the ability to search without using the wild-card (%) and the ability to download all information in a single click. BS noted that sometimes it was difficult to find the document that was needed as many of them had the same title, and PM agreed that it was something that had already been raised and that this was being examined to see if improvements could be made. on. AJ wondered if the document lines could change colour to show that a document had been looked at, and SB thought that might be possible with Northgate's help. NR raised the fact that we were now indicating whether plans were existing or proposed, as we scan them and PM noted that there had recently been a lot of refinements in the way documents were indexed – previously it was mainly about getting the information in the system.

CP mentioned that it was annoying to search on older applications and get no results. PM said that this was because the microfiche records had not been placed on the system except for the registers. The high cost for capturing these records had originally made scanning the microfiche unthinkable, but changes in technology had now made this possible – however, recruitment restrictions, resulted in some limitations in the amount of resources available for this project. Currently spreading this project and cost over a three to four year period was being investigated.

Problems with image quality on scanned documents were then discussed. CP mentioned that they had experimented with just using scanned images for 2 months, but they had difficulty mainly with legibility and scaling problems and had to refer to paper copies many times. PM noted that steps had been taken to improve the quality of images because of feedback – officers may now decline to validate an application if the plans are not legible. AJ supported Planning and said that during the time she worked with the scanning team, scanned images were good on Information@Work but that the quality was reduced when it appeared on the website. PM noted that our software is based on Adobe PDF images, and that Microsoft Office is not compatible with this. SB has been looking at practical solutions, and says that Adobe 10 will not be used any more, that alternatives will be tried until one is found that is most compatible. The new version of the website will be tested in Safari, Google Chrome etc to see which is best. CP pointed out that they use Google Chrome and that it cannot retrieve the web-casts – SB said he would investigate. RW noted that if text was zoomed in on scanned plans it was often badly pixellated. PM said that we were gradually improving image quality and DPI, but the resource issues in the last couple of years had made it hard to progress. SB added that we now have more storage capacity than we had, which may result in an improvement in the quality of documents. He suggested in the meantime that images were scanned in greyscale, and to avoid images being too large to process by avoiding scanning in colour for colour's sake.

The group thanked SB for his presentation, and SB left the meeting.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Page 1 Officer Introductions – RW would like the word 'projects' removed after 'iPlan' from his introduction, so that the paragraph now reads '...and has worked on iPlan in the past with EFDC'.

Page 5 Any Other Business – It was mentioned in the previous minutes that AJ would be submitting a report of her experience at EFDC. She has since decided that a report would only be specific to her experience as everyone would experience the visit differently, and so instead of a report she would like to encourage other Town and Parish Councils to visit EFDC. PM agreed and added that a visit was not just about iPlan – Trees and Landscape, Forward Planning and Enforcement were other areas to meet, and on their recent visit Theydon Bois had met the Contaminated Land Officer – Planning are happy to facilitate requests that may include special interest areas and that visits to Planning that included a flexible structure had proved to be very productive.

The group agreed the rest of the minutes of the previous meeting.

4. Items raised by Parish Councils regarding iPlan, Electronic Planning Records and the Corporate Website.

4.1 CP raised an issue about scale bars on scanned plans. He commented that when iPlan was first introduced, scale bars were often missing – he noted that this has improved considerably. However, when plans are projected he has found it difficult to try and measure the plans unless they use a pair of blackboard dividers, and wondered whether there were any practical suggestions. NR said that we could ask for measurements to be included on the plans, but that this could result in a confusing image. Perhaps the answer was to have measurements between buildings – CP agreed that this might help as it was often difficult to get a relationship with other properties. NR also mentioned that block plans were often out of date when they have been submitted – it was not until the officer was out on site that these problems were picked up. BS thought that critical distances could be useful if marked on the plans e.g. this wall is 3m from that wall etc. NR said he would look into it, but that agents may get frustrated as we would have to update the validation checklist. AJ thought there may be a governing body that deals with quality issues such as this – other Councils may be experiencing similar problems. Perhaps there could be a national standardisation on plans, or a national architect body. BS agreed that the reduction of anomalies would be in everyone's favour. NR and PM to check with PAS who have links with the Planning Portal.

NR/PM

4.2 BS wondered what the timescale was for when an application is received to when it potentially goes to committee – sometimes they had only a weeks notice and they were finding it hard to get people to the committee if the notification was received late. NR thought it was 9 days before the meeting, and MB added that once an officer puts a recommendation that the application was going to committee it was immediately on the website as an unofficial notification. BS said that unfortunately it doesn't show the date of the meeting – MB and NR noted that it was published but you would have to search by EPF. BS asked if other consultees were informed by letter? NR said that neighbours and the applicant were. MB suggested that she could communicate and e-mail this to the Town and Parish Councils with details of all applications that are going to committee – this would give potentially 2 weeks notice, and all agreed that this would be a good idea.

MB

4.3 CP asked what the mechanics were for receiving online comments of object/support/no comment. TP answered that they were inputted to Northgate, and emails to officers were also put into the back-office system. BS asked whether other options were preferred e.g. support with comments, but all agreed that they were fine as they were and assured the group that they were relayed to the planning officers.

4.4 CP also raised the point that on the notification system, often there were not many neighbours notified about a rear extension – as you would need 4 objections to get this application to committee, often 4 people were not notified and so it could prove hard to get this sort of application to committee. CP also wondered if a picture could be taken of the yellow site notices as often these were missed, and use the GIS system on the phone to tell users exactly where it is? NR to look into this.

NR

4.5 **Any other business**

JB asked how smaller Town and Parish Councils could pay for broadband connections needed to display scanned images, as they do not often meet and it is not something they can all afford. BS said a mobile broadband dongle could be purchased for around £30 that would solve the problem. PM asked whether the smaller Parish Councils had thought of sharing resources, and CP mentioned that he could bring it up for discussion at the next EALC meeting. All agreed that shared use of equipment could be the way forward. BS asked for some information to be supplied about the best software to use for the different systems to be sent with the agenda pack, and PM said he would liaise with SB on this.

CP

PM

BS thanked EFDC for creating the iPlan User Group and its help in facilitating ideas to take things forward. CP agreed, and said that things had already moved forward because of the group.

Next meeting to be confirmed by PM