Transforming working practices across planning, environmental health and housing with automation

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL
www.stroud.gov.uk

To meet the dual aims of cutting costs and improving services, Stroud District Council selected, NDL's Digital Transformation Suite to underpin three initial projects. Once these had proved to be successful, it then extended use across the planning, environmental health and housing departments, where it is helping to eliminate re-keying, provide better customer services, improve data quality and transform working practices.

The Challenge

In 2009, Stroud District Council faced reduced funding but recognised it needed to improve services through more integrated technology solutions. To save costs and to retain control, it decided to carry out as much of this as possible in-house without resorting to expensive third-party support.

As a result, it selected RPA platform, SX, from NDL to support this. This integration technology links and integrates with systems regardless of vendor or age, taking the place of proprietary APIs and saving the time and cost of acquiring multiple adaptors.

According to Sean Ditchburn, IT Investment Manager at Stroud, "this meant we could streamline processes and take away duplicated data entry without having to go cap-in-hand to vendors: it broke this chain of dependence."

The Solution (first phase)

Over the next year, Stroud embarked on two one-off projects using NDL's front-end apps and automation tools which would otherwise have taken a significantly and possibly prohibitively long time.

Key Benefits

Extendable tool for cross-council use

Lower admin overhead

Changed working practices

Improved customer service

Better data quality

"
It means there are now a host of things which we can either streamline or where we can do something which previously would have been impossible because of time and cost. awi is probably our most extendable developer tool and our use of it is only limited by our imagination.

Sean Ditchburn
IT Investment Manager, Stroud District Council
"

Firstly, it **digitised 150,000 microfiche images** for the planning department and transferred them to the central Idox document management system (DMS): this cut the time needed to carry this out from up to three years to three months. Secondly, it used the Digital Transformation Suite to **reset 1200 incorrect codes on its Idox Uniform environmental health system, which took one afternoon rather than a week** if it had been carried out manually.

Also as part of this first phase of implementations, Stroud introduced mobile working for its building control team using digital pens: SX, NDL's RPA Platform automatically transfers notes taken on site into its central building control and DMS. By replacing the previous paper-based system and enabling automatic capture of notes into its central systems, the team was reduced from eight to six with **an estimated annual saving of £60,000.**

The Solution (the next steps)

As a result of these initial successes, Stroud realised that NDL's Transformation Suite could underpin its aims of rationalising systems and introducing new ways of working across the Council.

According to Sean Ditchburn, "people are queuing up with ideas on how to use it". So the Council embarked on a wide range of additional projects across different departments which are driving significant savings and efficiencies:

Building control digital pens: Stroud has built on the original project to enable officers to make internal and external meeting notes using digital pens which are then loaded using SX Into the DMS. Previously this would have been written on paper and notes typed up by admin staff.

The planning department:

- **Email planning alerts:** there are usually two or three relevant regular consultees for every planning application, with 3000 planning applications received each year.

Previously, consultees would receive letters through the post notifying them of relevant planning applications. The total cost of this, including time, printing costs and postage, was significant. This process has now been automated using MX, NDL's Mobile App Platform: a letter is still produced but this is captured as a PDF and automatically sent to consultees as an email. Thus these printing and postage costs have been eliminated.

- **Online planning comments:** the Council receives hundreds of online comments on planning applications. Previously, the admin unit would receive these in email form and then would carry out the time-consuming process of re-typing them into Uniform: these however were not then available for public viewing online. Now, these comments are loaded automatically via SX into the planning system and converted into a PDF which is then posted online. This has the dual benefits of saving the overhead of re-keying the emails and providing better customer service.

- **Planning photos importer:** while carrying out inspections, planning officers take up to 30 photographs per visit. Previously, these were then handed on a card to the admin team with a list of descriptions: the administrator would then try to match the photo with the description and manually load this into the DMS. Now, the process is carried out automatically using SX to transfer the image and description into the DMS.

> " We are continually finding new ways of using NDL's Transformation Suite. Sometimes the most off-hand conversations lead to the development of an application.
>
> Sean Ditchburn
> IT Investment Manager, Stroud District Council "

Environmental health and waste:

- **Bulky collections and street scene:** Stroud has used SX to automate a number of services across environmental health and waste. When a customer reports a problem to the customer service centre, the details are typed into a web form and SX then automatically transfers this into the relevant Idox system. According to Sean Ditchburn, "this means the customer service staff don't have to use either Confirm or Uniform, which has significant advantages for both training and licensing costs. In addition, we are providing better customer service because the call takes only half as long as there is no need to navigate around the back-end system."

- **Dog warden notifications:** Stroud has two dog wardens who are based almost entirely in the community. Previously, any notifications received about lost or stray dogs were sent to the wardens by a telephone call which would often lead to delays. Now, the customer services team log these notifications into a web form which is transferred via SX to Uniform and then automatically sent by both text and email to the two wardens.

- **Gazetteer:** when alterations were made by the County to the street gazetteer, 2000 codes needed to be changed in Stroud's own system. It was estimated that it would have taken a week to carry this out manually. Instead, it used SX to do this automatically, saving a considerable amount of time.

> **People may have a gripe about an inefficient process and we're able to say: we can do something about that**
>
> Sean Ditchburn
> IT Investment Manager, Stroud District Council

What's Next?

Stroud will continue to use NDL's Digital Transformation Suite across many different departments to automate processes and provide better services, with many projects already in the pipeline:

Planning: enabling enforcement officers to use mobile working, either through tablets or digital pens, which will then be linked seamlessly with the back office using SX.

Housing: adapting the current planning photos application for use by housing officers. There are also plans to enable housing officers to log repairs while on site which will then be uploaded into Northgate Housing and sent automatically to the contractor. With several thousand houses and many different repairs, this will significantly reduce the current administrative burden of carrying this out manually.

Environmental health: the current bulky waste and street scene application will be extended to cover other environmental nuisances including bonfires, noise and pollution. In addition, there are plans to automate payments for pest control using SX.

For more information about NDL's Digital Transformation Suite;

www.ndl.co.uk   **info@ndl.co.uk**