

ePlanning: Coffs Harbour City Council delivers 'digital first' promise to customers



Coffs Harbour City Council was an early adopter of the NSW Planning Portal, picking up key services in 2019. The Portal provided a comprehensive digital solution that enabled the council to receive and determine planning applications online. This has meant Coffs Harbour City Council has been able to focus on internal process refinements and apply a customer-centric approach to delivering services to its community.

A digital transformation

With more than 77,600 residents, Coffs Harbour City Council is one of the larger regional councils in NSW.

It processes on average 1160 development applications (DA) each year.

In 2015, Coffs Harbour City Council's Leadership Group adopted a Target Operating Model (TOM) on the back of an organisational restructure.

One of the main service principles of the TOM was 'digital first', meaning wherever possible the first option for service delivery would be electronic.

With this digital mindset, it was no surprise when the council became an early adopter of the NSW Planning Portal in April 2019.

Council collaborated with local planning consultants who assisted in the further development, refinement, and user testing of the NSW Planning Portal.

In November 2019, the council started to invite local building companies and regular applicants to transition to the NSW Planning Portal with any feedback received relayed back to the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's ePlanning Program.

The increase in the level of Portal usage was maintained throughout the later part of 2020 (via further promotion and collaboration with customers) and helped pave the way for a smooth transition on 1 January 2021 (when applications were required by legislation to be submitted to the council via the Portal).

Portal facilitates business continuity during Covid-19

In April 2020, when safety concerns around Covid-19 spread to regional NSW, Coffs Harbour City Council closed its Customer Service Centre for two months as a precautionary measure.

Thanks to the Portal, customers could safely submit their planning applications online while experiencing minimal impact to assessment timeframes.

The Portal continues to facilitate business continuity during the recent outbreak of the Delta variant.

21

... is the number of days saved on average for the determination of DAs at Coffs Harbour City Council. The average was 67 days (LDPM FY 2018/19). Data from January to June 2021 shows the average is now 46 days.

Faster, paperless results

The NSW Planning Portal has provided Coffs Harbour City Council with a more efficient and consistent approach to processing the submission of development-related applications.

Council now has a single submission channel for customers to use – which means staff no longer have applications submitted over the counter or via email which often delayed the referral of applications to those officers processing the applications.

Submissions over the counter also often required documents to be scanned or paper to be moved around the office.

“The implementation of the NSW Planning Portal has been a good fit for Coffs Harbour City Council as it further supports our digital-transformation journey, which has been a real focus for our organisation over the past six years.

“The Portal provides a digital space that not only allows our customers to submit applications at anytime from anywhere - but has resulted in improved back-office processes and operational efficiencies for our organisation.

“Our planning framework is not always something that’s easily understood – but the Portal is a good step forward in achieving a better understanding as it brings our customers, industry partners and tiers of government together in a collaborative space.”

*Chris Chapman
Coffs Harbour City Council Director Sustainable Communities*

Supporting Mums and Dads

One of the biggest challenges in transitioning to a digital approach for any organisation can be supporting one-off applicants or users.

While ServiceNSW is the designated support for the NSW Planning Portal, Coffs Harbour City Council has gone a step further in providing support, offering a more personal approach to help with the transition to a digital platform.

Kellie Lee, the council’s Information Management Team Leader, said her council took a one-on-one approach to supporting one-off applicants, who they affectionately refer to as Mum and Dad applicants.

She said, the council’s approach was to have “appropriate customer-service staffing resources” in place to support applicants with their enquiries.

“Some applicants were able to self-serve through the online user-guides, other applicants required a more hands-on approach to understand the new process,” she said.

“Applicants who had no, or very little, digital capabilities made appointments with customer-service staff who assisted with the creation of user accounts, completion of the online application and the scanning and uploading of supporting documents.

“It was rare that this level of support was required but we do have customers that are unfamiliar with online platforms.”

Coffs Harbour City Council has determined

1175

DAs through the Portal since adopting the Online DA Service in April 2019.

**All figures correct at 18 August 2021.*

Transition to Portal a success

Coffs Harbour City Council is now processing 100 per cent of development applications via the NSW Planning Portal and say that the transition has been a smooth one for all involved.

Information Management Team Leader Kellie Lee says that by using the Portal, the council has reduced assessment times, made planning simpler and provided more transparency for applicants and the community.

“A key factor in our success was the effort invested by staff to take a collaborative approach with our stakeholders, including the NSW Planning Portal Support team, other councils and our customers,” Ms Lee said.

She said that on the back of the success of the Portal, Council had taken the opportunity to review some of its related internal processes.

“These changes have assisted in providing prompt and early feedback to applicants and improved the quality of applications received,” she said.