

DETAILED DESCRIPTION – MEPA eAPPLICATIONS, MALTA

1 – Identification:

- Title of the case

MEPA eApplications

- Name of the organisation

Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA)

- Name of the person in charge

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- Level: national

- Sector: Public services

- Conference sub-theme: 1

2 – Summary

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority handles over 8000 applications for development permissions every year. Plans, documents and correspondence with various stakeholders are processed for each application. eApplications brings together different platforms and technologies into one homogeneous system which allows clients to view application details, submit and pay for applications online and send/receive correspondence digitally thus increasing participation, efficiency and transparency. Internal case processing and all internally generated documents are digitally recorded within the system. A role-based security system allows users with various rights to interact with the system in a secure web-based environment.

3- Quality Improvement issues

Strategic Objectives

- Creation of the 'electronic' file and Improved work management
- Rapid and secure delivery of information to every desktop.
- Approach zero delivery time for interactions with clients and stakeholders
- Secure display of all correspondence / documents received to authorised users
- Alignment with e-government strategy

Operational Objectives

- Parallel working processes leading to reduction in processing times
- Workflow integration to assist in workload management & reduce processing time
- Submission of on-line applications
- Submission of letters / documents during the processing of the application

4– Project Background

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) is the national agency responsible for land use planning and environmental regulation in Malta. Established under the mandate of the Environment Protection Act (2001) and the Development Planning Act (2001) of the Laws of Malta, MEPA is also responsible for the implementation of around 200 Directives, Decisions and Regulations under the EU Environmental Acquis.

In addition, MEPA acts as the national focal point under a number of international environmental conventions and multilateral agreements, including the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.

The eApplications initiative was designed and implemented with a view to facilitate the practical implementation of Malta's national and international obligations, by dramatically improving public access to information, facilitating decision making, radically improving transparency and efficiency of the regulatory processes.

The introduction of eApplications has also been a significant step forward for the Maltese government's drive to promote information society, e-governance, and democracy. The initiative is in line with the EU drive to promote better regulation, as it reduces the administrative burden on citizens and enterprises.

The introduction of eApplications could serve as a useful blueprint for other local, regional and national environmental and land use planning administrations across the EU as an effective model of environmental governance embracing the principles of information society.

5 – The Actors

- Who was in charge of the project?

The ICT applications development and support team within MEPA

- Who supported/steered the case?

The MEPA Management, especially Director and Assistant Director of Corporate Services Directorate; The Ministry for Investment, Industry and Information Technology

- How was the personnel involved in the initiative?

Interviews in the analysis and design stages for internal MEPA users. The applications development and support team was involved throughout the full development cycle. The development of the system was outsourced to a local supplier.

- How were the customers/users' needs and opinion taken into account before, during and after the process?

Before and During – various interviews and meetings with key users/stakeholders were carried out to introduce users to the concept, for information gathering and requirements specifications

After – Roadshows and training sessions with key users and stakeholders were held to introduce them to the system and its functions. Suggestions for improvement were gathered and many implemented.

- Where there conflicts between stakeholders, and how were they handled?

The initial and most important target group of the eApplications system are the Maltese architects. These are the agents who make the submissions on behalf of applicants and as

such are the ones who will be the major users of the system. There are about 550 warranted architects in Malta.

Another target group are government entities, committees and other organisations with whom MEPA consults on submitted applications for development permission. These "Consultees" have an area of expertise for which their comments on a particular submission may be required. There are about 150 consultee bodies with which MEPA corresponds on a regular basis.

Applicants and the general public can have access to view application details, increasing transparency both in the processing of cases as well as in monitoring. Some 8000 applications are received yearly.

A future target audience will all include those be Operators who need to obtain any kind of environmental permit.

Needs and issues emanating from the various user groups were sometimes conflicting and had to be addressed. These were tackled through the introduction of a role-based security system. This gives users access to the same application however manages to offer functionality securely through the role each user is employing for different applications. Furthermore, the system aims at strengthening user participation in the application process and hence bridges the gaps and differences which arises between back-office processing staff and outside users.

- Was the project led jointly with other organisations?

MEPA is the only organisation who worked on this system , however, our partnership with the Ministry for Investment, Industry and Information Technology enabled us to utilise eGovernment services and involve government entities.

- Was any external assistance needed or available?

The system design and development was outsourced to a local supplier due to its complexity and implementation timeframes. However, the applications development and support team was fully involved in analysis, design and testing. Furthermore system integration with back-end systems was also developed by the internal development team.

- Did you employ consultants?

No

6 – The Work process / the Approach

For the development and implementation of the system, standard project management was used whereby project plans were monitored and updated in weekly and monthly meetings. Change procedures are in place whereby changes in requirements and new requests can be implemented and incorporated within the system. User forums are setup where user requirements are discussed and suggestions taken on board. Furthermore, e-mail mail shots are regularly sent to eApplications users with updates and changes to the system.

In order to get together such diverse user groups various roadshows, demonstrations and training sessions were organised to ensure user involvement. User acceptance and take-up was high on the priority list.

The monetary cost of the project was around €120,000, however, internally in terms of staff man hours used for the project development cycle (excluding support and maintenance following first launch) was around 30 man months.

7 – The Measure of Success

Given the complexity of the system and its diverse user base, it has managed to achieve different results for different user groups.

Agents (Architects) - Agents have an indispensable tool which has managed to make their life much easier and increase their efficiency. They now have different payment channels including on-line. Different tools are available to help them submit applications online, including site delineation directly on the base map, geo-referencing of plans and marking of photos. Calculation of fees required for the application and submission of (different format) documents is also possible.

Direct, secure, communication with verified receipt mechanisms and document uploading is available through the system and has replaced physical mail communication. This has resulted in a significant reduction in waiting time.

85% of architects have registered for eID and are utilizing the service.

Applicants - Applicants have an online detailed status of their application directly connected to back-end systems. Also, registered users can opt to receive electronic communication thus reducing waiting times. A status notification service is also available through SMS notifications.

There is a general drive through government and hence e-gov services for the public to obtain eID and utilize such services. Over the past weeks we have noted a significant increase in the registration of public users both through the availability of a specialized eID registration desk at the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and also at Local Councils.

General Users - General users use the system in a variety of ways: Checking on applications and application status for planning applications which in some way might impact them. This can be done through various search tools, including directly from the map. Up-to-date details of applications and permits are available and are used for consultation purposes. Legislative documentation through the website is indispensable for all user groups.

(Internal) Case Officers - Parallel case processing has now been established for different parts in the life cycle of an application, including consultations and board approvals. Direct on-line communication with consulting bodies and agents has proved to increase efficiency and reduce turnaround times. Availability of full electronic data, including plans and file 'minutes' has reduced dependency on the physical file with the result that the process is now more streamlined and a misplaced paper file is no longer an issue.

Boards and Committees - Boards and committees now rely on electronic case file documentation and do not necessarily require the physical file for assessment and decision. Use of electronic tools has also resulted in better decision making in that information is readily available and thus cases can be assessed better by board members.

Consulting Bodies - Consultations are now being carried out electronically through the system in a secure, online environment. Parallel consultations are now possible since all documentation can be made available through the system. Again, efficiency gains have been registered and turnaround times reduced.

90% of Consulting Bodies are registered to use eApplications system with significant advantages on turn around times.

The system has impacted the Organisation in different ways. Cost efficiency through the reduction of paper use and less use of mail services has already been registered. Reconciliation of fees received for applications has been drastically improved and human resources which were fully dedicated to this have now been redeployed more efficiently. Although more resources have been now dedicated to the full digitisation of paper documents

upon receipt, it is anticipated that this should reduce over time once a full take-up of the system has been registered and thus users make increased use of the online channel. Initiatives are also being put in place to favour this online communication, including the availability of high-end technology aiding the on-line scaling and measuring of plans.

Although the system has been in use for a relatively short period of time, it has already managed to obtain recognition both locally and internationally. In fact it was voted the best e-business solution for 2007 by the Computer Society of Malta. Also it was awarded a 'Special Achievement in GIS' at the 2006 ESRI International User Conference.

Both MEPA and central government have invested in the development and implementation of the eApplications infrastructure. This investment is already bearing fruit, both in terms of efficiency, availability of information and user participation in the planning application process. It is anticipated that over the coming months and years the return on investment should increase once we have full take up of the system and society in general is more aware of the use and benefit of electronic online systems. All stakeholders now feel that the whole system leads to more timely quality decisions. Furthermore, agents, applicants and users in general have tools which permit them to fully participate in the process.

8 – The Main Obstacles of the Case

Management at MEPA made a commitment to the eApplications project and with their support, business process re-engineering of the application flow was possible. Digitisation services for all applications and correspondence was established and integrated within this process. Meetings, roadshows and training assisted in overcoming the resistance met by users. The diverse user group requirements required a well thought out hierarchical security model, giving flexibility as well as different functionality availability.

9 – Lessons learned

The integration of various systems, which at first glance may seem incompatible, is one of the most important and interesting lessons learned. Bringing together older user systems, newly acquired user systems and online systems can be tricky since a number of different interfaces need to be created and managed. However, we have eApplications communicating continuously with a 10 year old client server system, with data and user requests passing seamlessly between these 2 systems. We have also built bridges between eApplications and the Maltese Authentication gateway, the Maltese payment gateway, the MEPA Billing and Payments system, a MEPA Fee Calculator system and the MEPA Geographic Information system.

The eApplications system is built with flexibility in mind and as such it is possible to easily adapt it for any kind of applications. Currently, it is set up only for applications for development permission, however, any kind of environmental application can very easily be implemented and supported within the system with practically no changes to the software.

The use of GIS has become increasingly important in land planning and in many other areas, where representing data on a map can be more informative and user friendly than in other formats. This system provides the user with GIS functionality online enabling him greater access to information and even providing him with dynamic data querying facilities.

On a different level, we have managed to bring together different user groups to share the system and information without duplication. This service can be used as an example of good practice, which obtains results and uses efficient innovative technology.

10 – Project Innovation Content and Adaptability

The whole system goes beyond state-of-the-art in that it has managed to bring together very different technologies and systems through one coherent user-friendly interface addressing

one of the most important processes with the Maltese Islands. The use of eID as an eGovernment service coupled with role-based security policies ensures authentication and system security mechanisms. This system is in the forefront for web based services for land use in Europe.

Within the system itself there are several facilities which go beyond normal prevailing technologies, such as the Geographic Information System (GIS) component. This displays a map with the current application case highlighted on default (selectable) GIS layers related to planning use. The eApplications system allows the user much more flexibility in that different layers, such as environmental information, can be selected/viewed in relation to the current location on the map.

On submitting an application the system allows the user to delineate a site location geographically, and also insert geo-referencing points on the map. These points are then matched to the same points recorded on the "Block Plan" submitted for the case and thus it is possible to view the plan within the GIS map as the proposed building will be laid out.

Furthermore, the user has the option to query available data both textually and geographically and view the results online or export them to set formats.

The document viewer built within the system is also of interest. Within the same browser window the system displays all images and pdf documents and provides various document handling tools without the user having to download these locally. Furthermore, the user does not need to install any additional software to be able to use this viewer.

Workflow is incorporated through "To Do" lists connected to messaging services. All users of the system have a personal "To Do" list which handles the notification of correspondence received addressed to the user or related to the case currently being processed. Internally correspondence/messages are handled through automated queues which forward the notification to the responsible officer depending on the current application status and location.

The system is also linked to various web services connected to back-end databases which process and output data based on user selections and actions.

- What would you recommend to someone who would like to benefit from your experience?

To use a flexible open system which will easily adapt to changes and new permit streams. A good security system based on roles needs to be well planned and implemented. User and management involvement and commitment is fundamental for the success of such a project.

- In what situations could the project be reused? Did any special factors contribute to the success of this project?

Any organisation which accepts applications can benefit from this project, especially eGovernment services. The Geographic Information element which allows the user both to delineate the site as well as displaying site details can be reused in many scenarios, both in public services and commercial organisations.

- What type of organisation (size, field, and so on) could benefit from this experience?

Any organisation can benefit from any of the various online functions included within the system

- Have any other organisations adapted all or part of your project?

No

- Why should this best practice case be presented at the conference?

MEPA eApplications is an innovative system solution offering a common front-end for different user groups and stakeholders. It has managed to increase transparency and participation in one of the most important and sensitive processes within the Maltese Islands – land use. This is achieved through a user-friendly interface connected to back-end processing systems which provide up-to-date on-line data processing and information. Through the increased information and participation of the public and the possibility of on-line reporting of illegal developments this system has assisted in monitoring and curbing illegal development.

This system which incorporates a platform for various permitting streams through a single user-friendly front-end based on pioneering technologies, such as GIS, can be used as a prototype and could easily be show-cased in other European countries.