

## City of Parramatta's ePlanning Journey

### Executive Summary

The City of Parramatta Council recently adopted two of the key digital planning services on the NSW Planning Portal. In doing so, it provided leadership to other councils in helping to facilitate the build of IT hardware that will maximise the benefits of the ePlanning Program for all stakeholders.

This case study includes:

- an overview of the ePlanning Program
- background on the City of Parramatta and its manual development application service
- an outline of the council's journey to adopting ePlanning digital services, including its leadership in promoting the build of the Council API (Application Programming Interface).

### Overview of the ePlanning Program

The ePlanning Program is driving the digital transformation of the NSW Planning system. It has created an online environment – the NSW Planning Portal – where community, industry and government can work together to meet their legislated obligations.

More recently, the ePlanning Program has developed key digital planning services that can be accessed via the NSW Planning Portal. These services include:

- The online Development Application (DA) service
- The online Concurrence and Referral service – for those DAs that require advice from a State agency
- The online Complying Development Certificate (CDC) application service – a fast-track approval pathway for basic residential developments.

These digital services provide an alternative to manual paper-based processes. Rather than submit a DA to council in person during business hours, applicants can now submit applications online at any time. All parties involved in the DA process (applicants, councils and State agencies) use digital dashboards on the NSW Planning Portal to complete their tasks. They can also track the progress of the application as it passes through the system, from submission through to determination.

These key digital services:

- simplify complex approval processes by integrating and standardising multiple forms
- improve the transparency of the NSW planning system
- ensure accountability of all stakeholders
- reduce determination times
- reduce the burden on local and State governments.

“We co-designed the services with the help of councils and State agencies to ensure the system meets the needs of the people who use it,” says Gino Cavallaro, Executive Director ePlanning. “By listening to our stakeholders across NSW, we’ve been able to do more than just digitise processes. We’ve improved the customer experience, which encourages applicants, councils and State government to collaborate more effectively.”

Since going live in December of 2018, the Online DA service has been adopted by 20 councils and more than 2500 applications have been submitted. The online Concurrence and Referral service, which only went live in January 2019, is mandatory for all councils by 1 January 2020. So far, this service is being used by 63 councils and 24 State agencies. More than 1700 requests have been submitted, for which almost 600 decisions have been received. The average assessment time for an Online Concurrence and Referral is down to 22 days from 40+ days when submitted manually.

The Online DA service was integrated with the Online Concurrence and Referral service in March 2019. This enables those councils who use both services to manage their application case load from one dashboard.

“Digital transformation involves integrating digital technologies with planning processes and policies to create a more efficient system that is easier to understand and engage with,” says Cavallaro. “It requires a shift in culture, which is why we encourage councils to find a champion among their staff who can work with the Department to drive change from within.”

The City of Parramatta Council has two such champions: Sasi Kumar, Team Leader – Development Advisory Services, and Jerome Pagitz, Engagement and Improvement Manager – IT.

## City of Parramatta Council

The City of Parramatta Council holds significant strategic importance for NSW. The State government has invested heavily in infrastructure as part of its commitment to encouraging growth in the area. The addition of this council to the ePlanning Program marks a turning point in the delivery of digital planning services.

On average the City of Parramatta only processes 800 DAs a year, which is low relative to other councils, but it is the high value of those DAs that is noteworthy. It represents a considerable portion of the overall value of DAs processed in NSW.

The City of Parramatta Council adopted both the Online DA service and the Online Concurrence and Referral service in July 2019, with a plan to possibly adopt the Online CDC later this year. These digital services work in tandem with their existing manual Development Lodgement (DL) service. So far, they have received one Online DA submission and have made five Online Concurrence and Referral requests.

## Background

Sasi Kumar explains that the City of Parramatta Council introduced its manual DL system in October 2017, following a much-needed overhaul of its internal processes. Applicants submit a hard copy of their application over the counter during business hours. No checks are performed at this stage. All other documentation is provided digitally on CDs and USBs. Council sends a letter confirming receipt of the application, stating they will get back to them within 72 business hours.

Following a “clearing house” process involving planning and other staff, a meeting is held to decide on each application. If the DL is accepted, the applicant is notified by mail to make the fee payment through the councils’ online payment portal. Once the payment is made, the DA is then assessed. If a DL is returned, the applicant is asked to provide additional information.

For those applicants whose DLs are returned, the council offers a Lodgement Advisory Meeting to help address key issues in the application. This is designed to reduce the shuttling back and forth of DLs.

For DAs that required State agency advice, prior to adopting the Online Concurrence and Referral service, the City of Parramatta followed the same process as all other councils. It would mail all the documents to each State agency and request a cheque from the applicant. At times, if email

addresses of applicants or agency contacts weren't provided, considerable time would be wasted chasing people over the phone.

Overall, the City of Parramatta was satisfied with the reforms of its internal processes but was conscious of the fact that there was no integration between approval pathways. It considered building its own online solution and its IT department researched the options.

"The initial reason for getting on board with the ePlanning Program was we didn't want to spend money to create our own system if there was one already available," says Kumar. "And we knew building it wouldn't be easy."

Kumar convinced his managers that the ePlanning Program would dovetail neatly into the council's reformed DL processes.

## The Council's ePlanning Journey

In April 2019 the ePlanning Change Team met with the council to introduce the new digital services on the NSW Planning Portal. Training staff, along with planning expert and Director ePlanning Tim Archer, walked council staff through the different dashboards, showing how the services were integrated.

As digital transformation champions, Kumar and Pagitz then worked with their colleagues to ensure everyone understood how the system could help them work more effectively with their constituents.

"For a digital transformation of this size, internal communication is very important," says Kumar. "Everyone is entitled to an opinion and I needed to listen and respect that, then make a decision on each particular issue which I could present to my manager."

"My strategy was to include people in the conversation when required, rather than have everyone involved from the beginning."

## The Case for APIs (Application Programming Interfaces)

One of the barriers to adoption for some councils was the disconnect between the NSW Planning Portal and the Property and Rating systems used by councils to manage a diverse array of processes, including rate payments, pet registrations and the storing of DA data. When an applicant submits a DA through the NSW Planning Portal, council have to transfer that data to their own system.

By building a two-way API between the NSW Planning Portal and each council, the ePlanning Program created a workable solution that can be adopted by all NSW councils. The onus is on councils to work with their IT vendors to build their end of the API so it can connect with the ePlanning Council API.

The City of Parramatta Council not only saw the benefit of this solution but provided leadership for other councils on this front. In June 2019, Tim Archer and Andrew Seymour, ePlanning Solution Architect, met with Infor – the City of Parramatta's chosen IT vendor – and all its NSW council clients (about 12 in total), including the City of Parramatta. Archer and Seymour presented the Council API concept, outlining exactly what data would need to be transferred for the system to work.

The benefits of Council API were also discussed. Providing a two-way connection between the NSW Planning Portal and a councils Property and Rating System eliminates the need for double data entry, reducing the administrative burden on councils. It also allows councils to interact with applicants from its own familiar system rather than expecting them to be across two systems.

More importantly, it channels important planning data into the Department's Development Data Analytics (DDA) warehouse, which can then be fed back to councils in the form of State-wide reports made available on the NSW Planning Portal. This functionality will effectively replace the Local Development Performance Monitor – an annual report compiled from data submitted by councils – with a quarterly report drawn directly from councils' Property and Rating systems via the Council API.

The data collected will enhance the analysis capabilities of the Department and councils, encouraging evidence-based decision-making and helping to shape better policy outcomes for the people of NSW.

Jerome Pagitz from the City of Parramatta formed a Microsoft Teams site to share information with all the other councils working with Infor. He then led a data mapping exercise between the Infor platform (Pathway) and the Council API to get a better understanding of the how the system will work.

### **Decision made**

In July 2019, the Change team returned to Parramatta to provide a more in-depth presentation of the system. City of Parramatta were aware that the Online Concurrence and Referral service was mandatory but wanted to be sure that the Online DA system was the right fit for their constituents and staff.

“At the initial session, there was scepticism from our end,” says Kumar. “But the second session in July was much more detailed. The training resources the Change Team used really helped and our specialist staff had a better idea of what they needed.”

Both services were adopted.

On the 1 August 2019, ePlanning's Council API went live. The ePlanning Team will continue to work with Infor, the City of Parramatta and the other Infor councils to assist them in their commitment to build the connecting API.

The ePlanning team is also working with the four other IT vendors that service the remaining councils across NSW to ensure all councils can realise the full benefits of the ePlanning Program. Given the complexity of the task and the fact it is managed by third-party suppliers (financed by councils not the Department), this aspect of the Program is expected to take at least 18 months to complete.

### **Benefits Realisation**

It's early days for the City of Parramatta but the benefits of adopting the ePlanning digital services are already apparent.

“The way the applicant can view the progress of their applications is a big help,” says Kumar. “It gives them transparency of the process and will therefore reduce the administrative burden on the council.

“The integration of the services is also helpful. It saves us a lot of time because the documentation is already in the system.

“The support from the ePlanning team has been excellent. They are prompt and very good to us. If I need resources for training, I know who to go to. If I have any IT queries, I know who to go to.”

### **Next Steps**

The Change Team will continue to work closely with City of Parramatta staff to ensure their transition to the new system is seamless and comprehensive.

“One of the greatest strengths of this Program is the way it inspires councils to come together to share information and insights,” says Cavallaro. “The City of Parramatta has been integral in helping other councils understand the merits of sharing data through APIs.

“I’m really looking forward to hearing from Sasi and Jerome, in say six months’ time, to get a sense of how the Program has helped them and their constituents, and to work with them to improve the system further.”