

The MJ Achievement Awards 2010: Democratic Services

Teignbridge District Council

Summary

A drive to improve the use of technology has revolutionised Democratic Services at Teignbridge Council.

Members froze allowance raises to fund the work, which has seen them use laptops and custom-built software. A full time post was created to help Members get the most from technology, and the programme culminated in a radical overhaul of Teignbridge's Council Chamber, incorporating a new Audio Visual system to improve efficiency and participation by both Members and the public.

With top quality Democratic Services support, the scheme has helped Members work more effectively, putting democracy first while cutting costs and supporting Teignbridge's green agenda.

Word Count: 100

Submission

Introduction

Teignbridge Council is committed to being a well-managed authority which encourages participation in the democratic process. The commitment is enshrined in its Corporate Vision as one of five Corporate Goals – 'Well Managed'.

As part of this commitment Teignbridge is transparent in its decision-making and encourages participation by local people. Following a dynamic restructuring of senior management nearly three years ago, the scene was set to further help achieve

this Goal by making the best use of the latest technology to aid the democratic process and support Members.

A sweeping programme of modernisation was designed, with plans to take advantage of the latest technological advances to radically improve communications between Members and the people they serve, and to support Members in working more efficiently in their roles. To guide the process and enable Members to make best use of the technology, a dedicated Members' IT Support Officer was appointed to join the Democratic Services team.

The project has seen many triumphs, and was undertaken with value for money and innovation very much in mind. For example, the project was delivered by:

- achieving an ambitious redirection of existing budgets to secure a no cost solution,
- successfully negotiating a part funding of the solution with Members, freezing allowances to three years,
- providing a tailored Members IT System with associated support, located in Democratic Services, not a perceived remote IT department.

It has:

- increased the capacity of Members to undertake their duties,
- directly improved communication channels internally and with the public,
- made Committee meetings clearer and easier for the public to participate in,
- assisted in the delivery of corporate goals.

The first step of the project saw Members starting to use new laptop computers in meetings and at home, helping them keep in touch with constituents, stay up to date with committee papers and news, and reduce the need for paper agendas in meetings. Full training was provided by the Members IT Support Officer, who could also trouble-shoot problems via a remote link.

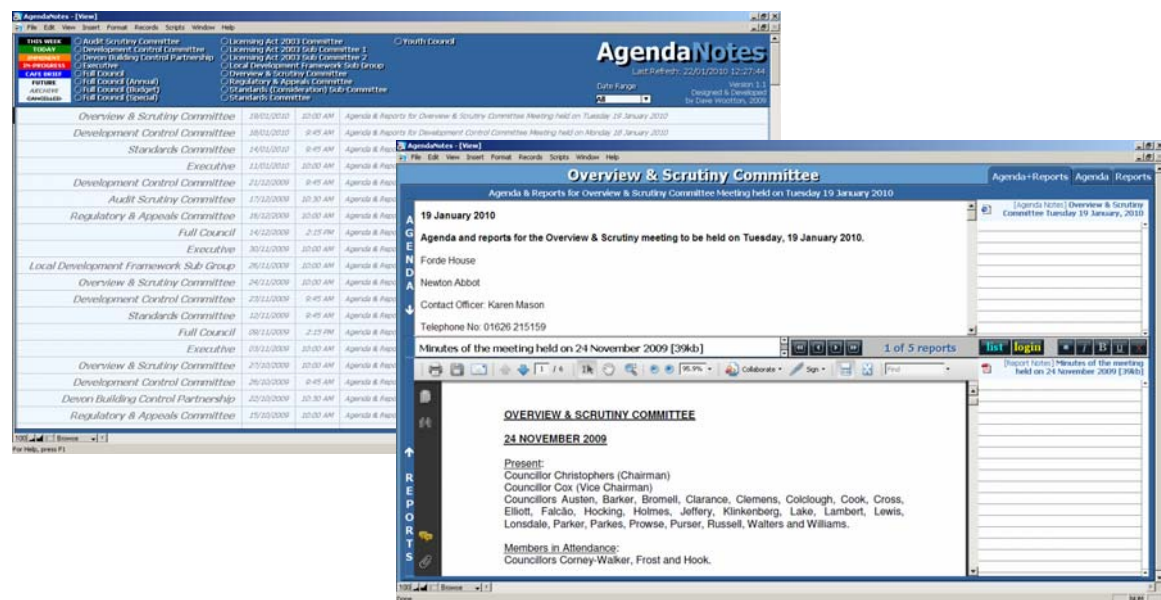
The team continued to innovate, and more developments followed quickly.

Software solutions

Discussions between the Democratic Services team and Members revealed that, although agenda and their corresponding reports were electronically published on the Council's website, Members found it difficult to keep track of both documents on the same screen and make notes about the documents which were easily retrievable at meetings – for many it wasn't a suitable substitute for making notes on a paper agenda.

As a result the Members IT Support Officer, in collaboration with the Democratic Services team, developed a unique, custom-programmed software system called 'AgendaNotes'.

A totally bespoke in-house application, AgendaNotes pulls together agenda, reports and note-taking on a single split-screen. It keeps track of all meetings and is colour-coded to indicate when meetings are imminent, helping Members stay organised and most importantly enabling them to work more efficiently in meetings.



The software is updated centrally by Democratic Services and sent to Members' laptops over wi-fi, so that information is always up-to-date. Any notes regarding the agenda or individual reports are linked to the respective documents and are available to read alongside those documents.

AgendaNotes has been revised twice, and a third revision is planned to offer further enhancements such as a catch-up facility, whereby Members in the Council Chamber can press an on-screen button and AgendaNotes will advance to the page of the report that the Chairman is viewing – quite literally keeping everyone ‘on the same page’.

The team has also developed a system to provide remote help to solve problems, install new software, or update Members’ laptops. Members can click ‘Teignbridge Calling Card’ on their laptop, fill-in their name, a brief description of the problem and how urgently they need it rectifying. When they submit this, a warning sounds on the Support Officer’s monitoring computer and work can be undertaken remotely.

Staying in touch – the web 2.0 way

Another innovation of the scheme was the creation of Members’ blogs. More than half of Teignbridge councillors have taken up the offer to set up blogs, and many clearly enjoy keeping people informed and involved online.

Typically, Members introduce themselves, explain who they are and what they do and add some personal information. They include information about visits they have made, events they have attended, plus other news relevant to their Ward.

People are able to respond to blog posts using ‘Tell Teignbridge’. They are invited to comment on posts and are actively encouraged to contact the Member with questions.

Members can also use their blogs to conduct polls to seek public opinion about a particular project. An example of this can be found at



<http://cllr-sylvia-russell.blogspot.com>.

Such is the success of the scheme that Teignbridge has now reached out to local councils, with similar blogs being offered to Parish and Town Council clerks. An example of forward thinking partnership work can be found at <http://coffinswell.blogspot.com>.

Meanwhile, a 'Members-Connect' Google-based application has been developed by the team to give Members a place where they can work in either single or collaborative mode, with tools at their fingertips to help them run their busy lives. The 'YourTDC' domain is a web-based scheme, so as long as Members have access to an internet connection, they can work at any machine, anywhere in the world, and have access to their calendar, email, contacts and documents.

Instant messaging along with collaborative working on shared documents gives Members new capabilities to work together even when they're apart, while an enhanced contact list gives them an easier way to manage group mails and access map facilities linked to Google.

The site provides Members with a homepage to view a notice board. A shared events calendar is displayed along with the Members' personal calendars, and a couple of mouse clicks transfers appointments from the shared to the personal calendar. The system also enables Members' to receive appointment reminders via text message.

A number of news-gathering items on the homepage are configured to bring in data from local government specific sites and local news agencies, ensuring Members have up-to-the-second news.

Importantly, in the spirit of partnership and improving communication across local government tiers, a similar service is being developed for Parish Council Clerks, known as Clerks-Connect.

The final step – modernising Teignbridge’s Chamber

In 2009, with Members better supported than ever thanks to the innovative application of technology, attention turned to a radical modernisation of Teignbridge’s Council Chamber with a view to making Committee meetings more accessible and engaging to members of the public.

The seed for the project was first planted by a review of the Council’s Development Control function, after which it became clear that members of the public found it difficult to engage with meetings as they were unable to follow all that was going on. To overcome this criticism, a planning delivery grant was sought from the Government to fund new equipment.

In the meantime, Teignbridge began an extensive search to discover the most cost-effective and appropriate method.

The main purpose of the new equipment was for people in the public gallery of the Council Chamber to know which Member is speaking, have a better understanding of the debate and follow the decision-making process. Because of this, a camera tracking system and screens in the public area were of paramount importance.

The accepted £80k tender included:

- A visualizer for viewing paper documents, newspapers, slides and 3D objects with magnification,
- Wi-fi microphone connectivity controlled through laptops,
- 50 wi-fi microphones with integral voting facility,
- 2 projectors with plasma screens situated on the floor of the Council Chamber and a central larger plasma screen,
- 1 projector and 2 plasma screens in the public gallery,
- 3 CCTV-style cameras.

This total overhaul meant that everyone, from councillors to members of the public, are better able to see, hear, and participate in meetings. The system has a variety of uses but has predominately been designed for use during committee meetings. Whoever



is speaking can be seen on-screen and heard through the audio system. The system also supports picture-in-picture, so if a video or slideshow presentation is in progress, the speaker can be shown in a small image in the corner of the screen. Other innovative uses include showing film footage of sites for planning applications, helping everyone see what is being discussed and drastically reducing the need for site visits by Members.

Every Member has their own wireless microphone unit, which is also configured to control the cameras in the Chamber. Therefore when a Member presses the microphone button to speak, the camera zooms to that microphone automatically.

Never one to rest on its laurels, Teignbridge continues to plan improvements for the system, and work is now being undertaken for the name of the person speaking to be displayed on-screen as part of a secure login system which registers Members prior to a meeting.

The new Chamber includes an interactive voting system, enabling the results of votes to be shown on screen. It also offers an audio alert when a vote takes place, so at the press of a button the Committee Chairman can draw attention to the start of a vote. The tally of votes cast and their values are also available in graph form for Members to view.

A wi-fi control unit selects which input displays on the plasma screens at any time, choosing from the cameras, a DVD player, a PC or the visualizer. Members can also

give presentations from their wi-fi enabled laptops without having to leave their seats.

The system also has facilities for remote meetings, saving travelling time and expense. One recent example of this was a tender presentation by a company based in London, saving expensive journeys by either party and helping make business more efficient. More remote



capabilities are currently being investigated, particularly for those Members with national roles, such as for the Local Government Association, to enable them to reduce their travelling time and expenses.

The new system is also inclusive, with special consideration at the design stage given to cater for Members and those attending meetings who have hearing difficulties. This included consultation with the independent hearing specialists to ensure the system was top-notch.

In keeping with the high-tech revamp, the Council Chamber was fitted with a secure wi-fi connection, with more work undertaken to install wi-fi in other locations around Teignbridge's campus, including its Grade 1 Listed Old Forde House facility, located next to the main Forde House headquarters. This 400 year old building houses some of the Council's conference facilities, and had to be wi-fi enabled in a manner which is sympathetic to its listed status without compromising on performance. A vital outcome of this is that it allows the streaming of audio and video from the Council Chamber to other venues.

This has proved invaluable in providing extra capacity when a large number of people wish to attend Committee meetings. A perfect example arose in August 2009, when a meeting of Teignbridge's Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee heard an application for open air concerts by global rock-gods Muse, a band originally from

the seaside town of Teignmouth who wanted to launch their long-awaited new album and world tour with a pair of concerts on Teignmouth Den, a popular local green. Hundreds of Muse fans and campaigners wanted to attend the meeting, which was attended by bassist Chris Wolstenholme. To help keep everyone up-to-date and involved, those who couldn't fit in the Chamber were able to watch and listen via monitors in Old Forde House.

This is just one example of the way in which the application of new technology is actively benefiting Members and local people, supporting democracy and engaging everyone in the democratic process. Crucially, the project has not solely relied on technology, but on the support, guidance and expertise of a committed Democratic Services team to help Members and local people get the most from it.

Word Count: 1984