

# How well are planning services presented on local authority websites?

This year's *Better connected* survey of all local authority websites tested how easy it was for site users to find answers to questions about a range of council services. In the area of planning, the survey focussed on **objecting to a planning application**.

The survey found that significant difficulties would be encountered by people using council websites for this purpose. Apart from the inconvenience, failed web enquiries also cause councils unnecessary cost. The reason for this is that frustrated web users will turn to the council's phone or face-to-face facilities to answer their enquiries, and these cost the council significantly more to support than their website.

**Comments from reviewers of the *Better connected* team** about their experience of objecting to a planning application using the council's website were as follows:

## **Reviewer #1**

I was surprised by the number of sites that now use Public Access with the mandatory registration feature switched on! No site forewarned me that I couldn't comment online, unless I registered or explained how this would benefit the customer. I am really shocked that this is so poorly managed.

## **Reviewer #2**

Need to explain on the landing page that comments can be made on current applications and that these can be found by searching the system. Found very few who offered guidance along with the comment form or an e-mail invitation to comment.

## **Reviewer #3**

No guidance provided at the point of commenting. Many required registration before commenting but few had any useful explanation of why this was so.

## **Reviewer #4**

Signposting needs to be improved. In many cases search and comment were the same link and the information about commenting was just tagged on to the 'Introduction' page to the planning system. It was much clearer when the content was on its own page.

## **Reviewer #5**

We are largely assessing how well third party software is integrated. Huge variations, but what we are asking is not that hard to achieve. Help files within third party software are poor and merely technical. Clearer, easier to use and more customisable help pages from within the task are needed.

## **Reviewer #6**

I was shocked by the number of councils which did not have information on how to object to a planning application and what are the grounds I can object on. Some used jargon e.g. "Material Considerations" so I did not realize this was a document to advise me on how to comment. This is an area which can be easily improved with some thought and a few links. Hardly any had links to Current Applications.

## **Reviewer #7**

I was surprised by the number of councils who have 'task-based' home pages but from the Planning and Environment landing page I would still have to click 'Development Control' to get to the planning applications.

### Reviewer #8

Very few councils do this well. Many don't make it clear when you can comment and how. Some don't mention registration until you're in the planning system. Many use planning terminology. The best councils gave a clear link for viewing undecided/current applications, with many you had to give validated a date range.

### Reviewer #9

Generally very poor. Not helped by weak (or missing) content about how to actually comment. Given that a large percentage of commenters may be 'first-timers', this really isn't acceptable. The application search functions ranged from average to awful, often requiring advanced knowledge of how planning works to really get anywhere. I simply don't understand why councils fail to provide guidance on permitted grounds for objection a) in a logical place on a user journey and/or b) at all.

### Reviewer #10

This task started with a home page link. There were a couple of occasions when this route completely failed to give me guidance on how to comment or permitted grounds, it was straight into the planning register and thence to an application and a comment form (with no useful titbits offered at any point).

### Reviewer #11

Once again, many councils were providing very good signposting but, once you got to the task, the information was poor and you are often faced with a log-in at the last hurdle. This is a very good example about the importance of testing the whole customer journey and not just providing signposting for top tasks and thinking the job is done. I found it hard to list the current applications on many sites.

### The survey questions:

There were 19 questions about objecting to a planning application covering things like: 'Does the planning landing page link me directly to this task?', 'Does the site provide comprehensive information about commenting on a planning application?', 'When viewing a current application, am I informed that I can comment on it?', 'Is it clear that any comments I submit will be published, along with my name, and available for inspection by any interested party?' and 'Can I sign up to receive an e-mail alert when new applications are made in my area?'

The survey also explored how easy it was to access the service using a Google search, or by using search and navigation tools, like the A-Z, within individual council sites.

Reviewers were asked to assess whether relevant pieces of information and pages for the 'objecting to a planning application' task linked together to make a smooth, coherent journey, how effectively the task was promoted within the site, and whether any sites might be recommended to other councils as examples of good practice.

### More about *Better connected 2013*

*Better connected* is the annual survey of all 433 UK local authority websites, now in its 15th year. The survey is published by the Society of IT Management (Socitm), the professional association for IT and digital managers working in local public service organisations. The main survey is carried out by a team of reviewers using a structured survey with 225 questions.

The *Better connected* report for 2013 will be published on 1 March on Socitm's website, and can be accessed free of charge by any employee of a council that subscribes to Socitm *Insight*. More than 75% of councils subscribe to Socitm *Insight*, you can access a list of subscribers at [http://www.socitm.net/info/214/socitm\\_insight/91/](http://www.socitm.net/info/214/socitm_insight/91/). Non-subscribers can buy a copy of the printed report, available from [https://www.socitm.net/forms/form/83/better\\_connected\\_2013\\_snapshot\\_of\\_local\\_authority\\_websites](https://www.socitm.net/forms/form/83/better_connected_2013_snapshot_of_local_authority_websites).

Socitm provides a range of services to help local authorities improve their websites. See <http://www.socitm.net/info/165/services/31/> for further information.