

ePlanning: Delivering on Cessnock City Council's commitment to customers



Cessnock City Council has delivered on a commitment to improve their applicant's experience in lodging development applications, moving all development applications and associated certificates online through the NSW Planning Portal from 1 January 2020. This made planning simpler, information more accessible, reduced assessment times and provided more transparency for applicants and the community.

Journey to ePlanning

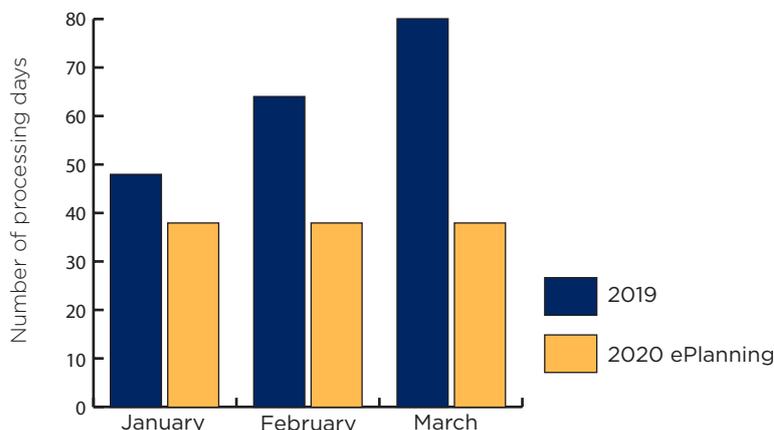
In 2014, Council asked stakeholders if they were interested in pursuing an online lodgement tool – the feedback was overwhelming with 77% of respondents expressing their interest. Council began exploring the path to digitisation immediately, and in July 2019 undertook a trial of the NSW Planning Portal with key stakeholders, allowing development applications to be lodged electronically. The NSW Planning Portal is a digital space where community, industry and government work together to provide an online experience that supports effective planning and decision making.

For the next six months Council worked with and promoted the NSW Planning Portal to the development industry, encouraging and educating users on the tools provided and benefits, and on 1 January 2020, went live with ePlanning, mandating all applications associated with development to be lodged online via the portal.

“Cessnock City Council is committed to improving customer experience, and the NSW Planning Portal provides us with a tool to deliver on the feedback we've received asking for digital lodgement options.”

Gareth Curtis, Director of Planning and Environment, Cessnock City Council.

Development Application processing times



80 processing days down to 38

A win for Council and customers

*March 2019 compared to March 2020

Crisis compatible

The benefits of ePlanning have been highlighted during the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. Council has been able to ensure development applications and building certification services are being lodged and processed through the NSW Planning Portal, with minimal disruption, negating the need for physical visits to the Council's premises.

Big benefits for all

- Applicants are no longer required to visit Council premises. Development applications can be submitted online, anywhere, at a time convenient to the applicant.
- Significant time and money saved on document and plan printing for both applicants and Council.
- Applicants are kept informed of the progress and status of their application, receiving automated notifications during the assessment process, and improving transparency of the application process.
- ePlanning uses standardised application forms, providing consistency for applicants who are dealing with developments across multiple councils

Cessnock City Council ensured success through these key measures:

- Prior to launching, Council reviewed their internal processes associated with pre-lodgement, administration and assessment of applications. Optimising these processes in line with the *Development Application Best Practice Guide* from the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment prior to ePlanning implementation was crucial, with the outcome being a fully digital assessment process.
- Integration of the NSW Planning Portal and the Council's operating systems, including CM9 and Authority Application Register, via a middleware solution developed that supported API integration.
- Proactive promotion and engagement of the development industry, to encourage and educate players on the NSW Planning Portal and the benefits offered by it. This included 1:1 training provided onsite at applicant's place of business, facilitated by Council staff.
- Introduction of a dedicated pre-lodgement Business Support Officer to assist key stakeholders and customers with ePlanning
- Press releases and Facebook updates, keeping the Cessnock community up-to-date