

ePlanning is empowering the Australian Bureau of Statistics with crucial data



The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has started drawing its monthly requirement of NSW planning data directly from the NSW Planning Portal in real time. Thanks to the work of the ePlanning Program, the ABS is able to access the information applicants and councils provide as part of the online planning application process. This means councils will no longer have to provide this information on a monthly basis and the ABS will have a much higher quality and more consistent dataset for matters relating to building approvals across NSW.

Collecting Data the Hard Way

For many years the ABS has collected building approval records from each council in NSW on a monthly basis. The ABS provides this information to the public, as well as using it for the Building Activity Survey conducted every three months.

Prior to the NSW Planning Portal, the data collection process was labour intensive and time consuming for all concerned.

At the beginning of each month, the ABS would contact councils to request the information for the previous month. Council staff would upload the records to the ABS website in a variety of formats.

The data collected would be transferred into the ABS data warehouse for processing. Incomplete or incorrect data was investigated then processed manually.

Only then could the results be published on the ABS website.

Many Sources, Many Problems

Capturing building approval records in a timely manner is a key challenge in NSW, mainly because some private certifiers do not necessarily notify councils when an approval has been certified within the legislated five-day period.

Most councils manually input information about the building approval from paper forms/stamped plans into their IT system, which takes time and can result in some records being supplied to the ABS well-after the determination date.

Some of the file formats provided by council do not align with the ABS format structures and must be transformed before transfer to the data warehouse.

Some fields the ABS require are not always supplied by councils, which means a staff member has to request that information over the phone.

Occasionally, some councils are unable to supply their building approvals file to the ABS, due to staff absences or IT issues.

So What's New?

The Premier's mandate of ePlanning Digital Services ensures that all councils in NSW use the NSW Planning Portal to receive and determine planning applications, such as development applications (DAs) and applications for complying development certificates and construction certificates.

The ePlanning Program worked with the ABS to determine exactly which data fields it requires. It then developed digital tools to feed that data direct into their data warehouse, thereby eliminating the need for councils to provide the data every month and for the ABS to tidy up what was provided. This data now directly informs the Building Approval report and quarterly Building Activity Survey.

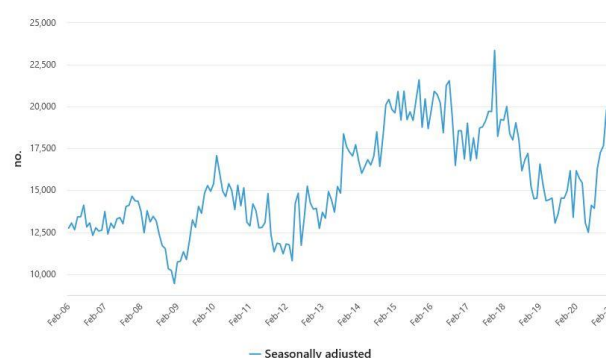
“The NSW Planning Portal has provided an exciting opportunity for the ABS and DPIE to collaborate on a range of common goals. A key outcome ABS is working towards is to source all building-approvals data from the Portal, rather than separately from the 128 councils across NSW. This will make things easier for council staff by removing duplication in reporting requirements, improve data quality and increase access to data across the whole of government.”

Amanda Clark
 Program Manager, Physical Environment Accounts and Statistics
 Australian Bureau of Statistics

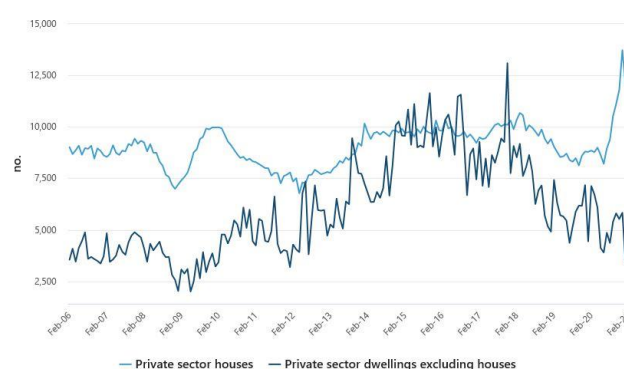
Benefits of Digital Integration

- Reduces the reporting obligations on councils.
- Ensures tighter data control:
 - Since all applications must be submitted and determined through the Portal, there should be very few applications that “slip through the cracks” and not be provided to ABS.
 - Key fields required by ABS are fully populated in the Portal through the use of mandatory fields in the Portal interface.
- Reduces the time needed to collect data as the determination of an application is processed and recorded in the Portal.
- Improves data quality through standardisation, leading to less phone calls from the ABS to councils to clarify the data.
- Increases data user accessibility – the data held by DPIE is not subject to the *Census and Statistics Act 1905* (which prevents further dissemination of the "unit record" data outside the ABS).
- Increases data coherence – the NSW Planning Portal dataset will be the "source of truth" across the whole of government.
- Improves labour efficiencies for the ABS – eliminates the need to transform council files and follow up outstanding data submissions.

Dwelling units approved



Dwellings approved, by building type, seasonally adjusted



Sample Building Approval graphs from the ABS website

Sourcing data through the NSW Planning Portal will reduce the number of data providers in NSW from 128 councils to a single source (DPIE).