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North Lanarkshire Council improves productivity and resilience with Uniform Cloud

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David Baxter
Business Systems Manager
North Lanarkshire Council

Overview:

Formed in 1996 as a new single-tier authority, North Lanarkshire has a population of 340,000. Located between Glasgow and Edinburgh, the area is one of Scotland's fastest-growing economies, with the number of businesses operating in North Lanarkshire growing by 24% over the past **decade**.

The Council is committed to the digitisation of public services to reduce costs and improve the quality and efficiency of service delivery. In 2008, the Planning and Building Services team built on its long-term usage of Uniform in its collaboration with the Scottish Government's eDevelopment programme to offer online applications for planning permission, building warrants, appeals and a range of other forms to Local Planning Authorities. This resulted in an increase in electronic submissions from 30% in 2008 to 70% in 2016. Today, more than 99% of submissions, including resubmissions, are online.

In 2017, the Council launched a five-year digital transformation plan, with a focus on cloud-first systems architecture to improve system resilience and accessibility. The shift towards hybrid working, accelerated by the pandemic, further underlined the value of any time, anywhere access to key systems, including Planning, Building Services and Estates Management, and the value of the Uniform Cloud hosted and managed platform.

Challenges:

To support North Lanarkshire Council's digital transformation initiative in 2017, the IT team embarked upon the re-design of processes and forms to encourage citizens to interact with services online rather than face-to-face or via the telephone. Planning and Building Services' digital experience and high levels of online submissions had proved the power of digital transformation to the Council. As other departments began their digital journey, the biggest challenge for the IT team was the need to embrace new skills and expertise whilst also managing the existing on-premise infrastructure. For the Planning service, the lack of available IT skills led to inevitable implications for the resilience of the on-premise infrastructure, as well as delays in introducing new functionality, including system updates to support legislative requirements.

David Baxter, Business Systems Manager, North Lanarkshire Council, explains, "As a result of the shortage of IT resources, North Lanarkshire went from a Council that was regularly on the current version of the software to being two years behind, which meant we were in an unsupported version for a long period of time."

The arrival of the global pandemic in 2020, with the immediate need for planning staff to work remotely, further underlined the need for digital transformation, especially secure, effective anytime, anywhere system access. David Baxter says, "The demands on planning staff continued throughout the pandemic. With 110 users of the platform, processing 1,200 planning applications and 2,400 building standards applications every year, the Council quickly discovered that the connectivity,

resilience and limited remote access of the on-premise infrastructure were not good enough. From the delays in accessing the system to repeated downtime, staff experienced frustration and the inevitable impact on productivity."

Solutions:
Once the initial pandemic crisis passed, digital transformation plans were quickly reinvigorated, with a clear focus on improving system resilience and transforming connectivity. North Lanarkshire Council has been using Uniform for almost 30 years and in 2022, made the decision to migrate to Uniform Cloud.

"Moving to the Uniform Cloud hosted and managed service not only transformed the accessibility of Uniform for staff irrespective of location but, critically, removed the pressure on stretched in-house staff to manage the support and maintenance of the system. With a hosted approach, the Council has full confidence that Idox is regularly updating the software, ensuring we are always using an up-to-date and supported version," David Baxter confirms.

Despite the pressure on internal in-house IT resources, especially in the areas of security and communications, the migration to Uniform Cloud progressed smoothly, hitting the required deadline in May 2023. He says, "The Idox cloud hosting team were extremely helpful throughout and continue to be very responsive when it comes to patching and upgrades."

Benefits:
The migration to Uniform Cloud has overcome all the resilience problems created by North Lanarkshire's legacy on-premise infrastructure. High levels of uptime ensure Planning staff are confident in their ability to access the system on demand. Not only has productivity improved throughout Planning and Building Standards but the Council is now able to empower staff to work from their preferred location; in the office, at home or on site.

The adoption of the hosted and managed solution has delivered a number of additional benefits, including access to a dedicated Idox service team. This has both further boosted productivity through swifter support call resolution and ensured North Lanarkshire Council's internal IT resources can be dedicated to ongoing digital transformation projects. The Council is now using the most up-to-date versions of Uniform, providing the chance to explore new functionality and ensuring any legislative changes are supported. For example, the adoption of the Standard Data Transfer Format tool has replaced previously manual GMS updates with daily uploads; and ensuring the planning and building standards data provided to the Scottish Government's **Improvement Service** is provided weekly.

The Council has also been able to refocus its technical resources towards driving additional operational benefits. For example, Uniform Cloud is playing a key role within the 'Invest in North Lanarkshire' development programme, which includes town centre regeneration, by providing constraints mapping and pre-application development information. The addition of road construction information in the future will add further depth to this vital information resource.

The financial benefits are also clear. Not only are IT costs far more transparent to the department but the consultancy costs as well as demands on internal resources associated with updates have been removed.

The future:
Looking ahead, North Lanarkshire Council plans to introduce the Uniform single sign-on solution, which will both improve accessibility and productivity and enhance business continuity by removing the potential bottleneck of working through the Council's internal infrastructure.

David Baxter confirms, "Since the migration to Uniform Cloud, North Lanarkshire Council has achieved continuous productivity improvements throughout Planning, Buildings Standards and Estates Management. Now there are opportunities to build on the depth of data available and electronic processing of applications to drive further efficiencies that will improve the experience for both staff and citizens."

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