

Tandridge District Council: Uses New Technology to Increase Benefits for Built Environment

'Arcus cloud strategy innovates Building, Planning & Development Control and Land Charges'

Setting the Scene

Tandridge District Council (TDC) supports a growing population of around 85,000 residents of Surrey, and incorporates part of the North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Planning and Building Control department is a major part of the Council's structure, and is used by residents and businesses to build, develop and trade property and land. The Land Charges service shares their data, and ICT underpins these services throughout, from the initial engagement and request submissions from the public, to inspections, decision making and communicating final outcomes.

As a District Council, Tandridge delivers a range of property based services which ensure that the local environment, residents and businesses are protected from over-development, which requires effective Planning Control and diligent management by Building Control Standards. TDC also supports transfer of property transactions by feeding Local Land Charges and Search information into the legal framework that protects both purchasers and sellers.

These statutory services are heavily regulated and, with records dating back over 70 years, Local Authorities are deeply reliant on ICT to support management of open Planning and Building Control Standards cases. For over 10 years, the market for ICT systems supporting Planning, Building Control and Land Charges has been dominated by a few large providers of legacy technology.

For almost 7 years Tandridge had been using Headway, a legacy solution which was offering diminishing returns on functionality and usability at increased cost. Due to the changing demands from the public, business and other stakeholders, as well as the new age of austerity, Tandridge needed to find a better way to support its customers.

Tandridge understood that it was time for a new way of working for the Building Control, Planning & Land Charges departments. Among their key objectives were to:

- Find an innovative way to improve the use of in-house resources
- Serve their community better
- Use technology solutions aligned with the Government's Digital Strategy

TDC spent a long time looking at what the UK market had to offer. After a prolonged search, they concluded that a completely new solution was required.

Approach & Solution

The project was led by Tandridge's Stuart Mitchenall, Head of Business Services, and Piers Mason, Chief Planning Officer. Stuart spoke with a number of traditional software vendors in the sector and soon realised that although they offered some good solutions, he was looking for something different. He had heard about the unique approach offered by Arcus Global and brought them in to discuss their proposition.

Stuart Mitchenall says *"For me, there are two major reasons for selecting the Arcus solution: Firstly, we are becoming a data-driven authority, and Arcus's platform allows us to access our own data in any way we want, via open standard APIs, without paying for expensive and needless connectors and interfaces. Secondly the platform is licenced per user, allowing us to scale with the business needs, both up and down on a short term basis if required. Thus we are likely to stay with Arcus because we like the supplier, rather than because we are locked in to the contract. The approach demonstrates that Arcus aims to retain our business through excellent service and continued innovation, as opposed to erecting barriers for our business."*

Arcus Global's work began with the Building Control (BC) team, to fully grasp TDC's needs. Arcus adopted an Agile methodology to ensure a solution based entirely on the desired outcomes and preferred user experience. The Agile approach involves gathering "stories" from users around how the system is used and needs to be used, rather than a list of complex end results or requirements. This ensures that every step is completely customer-focused.

Sue Daly, TDC Building Control Team said, *"My previous experience has been that vendors are focused on selling the solution they already have. When I listened to Arcus's offering, they took a different approach and were more interested in what we wanted out of the system than what they had. They didn't bombard us with technology. As an end-user of our systems, and not an IT technical specialist, I was surprised that they asked so many questions about how we used the system. What worked well, what was difficult? They listened!"*

The user stories were used across several two week sprints (a short development cycle with a well-defined deliverable). During each sprint a working solution was developed, and feedback from the customer was sought. This feedback was incorporated into the following sprint until a full solution was complete and all users were happy. This routine meant that TDC didn't have to wait months to see the results as previously experienced with many other suppliers, nor did they have to risk a large investment (2 weeks of effort at a time) before finding out whether they had what they wanted.

Arcus Global continued to work closely alongside the Building Control team, and came to understand the requirements of a building control solution designed from a user's perspective. This unique approach enabled Arcus Global to develop a full application that fitted in with the needs of both the end users and the District Council's statutory obligations. The Tandridge solution is built on Force.com from Salesforce, a world leading Cloud platform which provides full browser access, mobile apps and front end services. It is also far more secure and offers a faster response time than any alternative available in the UK, allowing a flexible, mobile and secure solution tailored to the user's needs.

Results

It wasn't long before the results achieved within Building Control were noticed by the Planning team. They were so impressed by what had been done that they wanted a similar approach within their department. Piers Mason said, *"I was impressed with Arcus Global's ability to drive the process forward at a fast pace, and their enthusiasm was infectious. Most vendors talk the talk but don't deliver everything promised. Arcus was different; they delivered what they said, and so I did not hesitate to add Planning to the project."*

The Planning department went through a similar experience to Building Control. By using a world leading PaaS (Platform as a Service) as the development platform, changes could be made quickly and additions easily incorporated. *"Arcus re-designed a screen for us on the fly; we had a discussion about it, suggested some changes, and they re-did it straight away, delivering exactly what we wanted. What was astonishing to me was that they delivered it back to us within a few days, a really fast turnaround,"* said Piers

One of the key benefits of the new Arcus application is that it has improved document production and mobile capability. All functions of the system are easily accessible on remote sites, and officers had the opportunity to radically redesign their working pattern to take advantage of this.

During a recent power-cut at Tandridge, an event that would leave most Local Authorities unable to function, the Building Control and Planning teams were still able to work on their mobile devices, so the team remained 100% effective. This level of resilience was achieved at no extra cost.

Ease of use, powerful reporting, an excellent audit trail and mobile access have increased the benefits for all workers:

"Arcus Building Control allows our officers to be truly mobile. We now see how work that used to be restricted to the office can move to a quick and easy mobile solution. Not only does this save us time and money, but vastly improves our service," commented Stuart.

Arcus Global's Land Charges solution has enabled Tandridge to complete its Built Environment Services in ICT, delivering a re-build in full. Furthermore, there are no requirements for long training time-scales. As Sue Daly noted, *"If you can use a browser, you can use the Arcus Built Environment solution."*

Arcus Global's solution has enabled Tandridge District Council's Property Services function to move much closer to a fully digitally enabled work environment; an outcome which, after extensive research, Tandridge found could not be achieved with traditional legacy solutions.

The project has been very successful and Arcus Global now has a rapidly growing Built Environment Solution user community. The collaboration with Tandridge has been recognised by its contemporaries and peers, resulting in Arcus Global being nominated

for and subsequently winning the Society of IT Manager (SOCITM) Supplier of the Year award.

Key Benefits Sidebar

- Improved document production
- Fully mobile access
- Total system security and remote back-up
- System access even without mains power
- Ease of use
- Powerful reporting capability
- Complete audit trail
- No extended training required for users
- Improved end-user experience
- Better public service access

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