



Northamptonshire
County Council

Parity helps the council drive citizens online

Northamptonshire County Council looks after the 650,000 residents of the county 'at the heart of England'. They decided to create a new web infrastructure to better support the delivery of their online services.

The council commissioned Parity, a provider of Collaborative Information Management solutions, to build a combined Intranet / Internet platform and new portal using Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 (MOSS).

The council has now launched a new website, www.northamptonshire.gov.uk, to improve usability for staff and citizens alike, and to make better use of public money. The new site will act as a single point of reference for local services, and is part of a new drive to encourage customers to seek information and advice online. It will improve productivity, efficiency and standards of customer service delivered across the council.

In conjunction with this project, Northamptonshire County Council has also launched a new intranet to improve

efficiency and increase productivity across its many locations.

Technology used:

- Microsoft Office SharePoint 2007
- SQL Server 2005
- Windows Server 2003
- C#
- NET 2.5
- Parity Accelerator product

MOSS 2007 was chosen over upgrading Microsoft Content Management Server because it would have a longer shelf-life, making it a sound investment for the council.

Phase 1: The intranet – improving services for staff

First, Parity built a new intranet that makes it much easier for council staff to access, find and view content. All information has been updated and presentation streamlined, while the overall structure has been improved to ease the administrative burden.

“Staff is much happier with the new system than they were with the original one” said Richard Beards, Web Team Leader at Northamptonshire County Council.

The problem: legacy intranet not ready for future growth

The Council's IT department felt it had to invest in a new system after staff reported a number of failings with the original portal. The old intranet had been in place for over five years and was struggling to support the volume of information it was required to hold. Used by the majority of council staff, the system contained out-of-date content and the inconsistent design and layout made it confusing for viewers to access and search for relevant information.

However, the problems with functionality were not the only trigger: the Council wanted to be able to develop and extend their service over the next few years. In order to do this, the legacy system would need to be replaced by one with greater capabilities.

The solution: Parity implements MOSS to provide a collaborative intranet to support Council staff

The Council signed a contract with Parity to build a new intranet using Microsoft Office SharePoint 2007. Parity was selected for its experience in working with local government.

Parity then spent the next twelve months building a new system to support the council's corporate news, training and HR information, finance, procurement and IT advice.

The project was signed off and went live six months later, once staff had been trained in how to navigate their way around and add content. Four months on, there is a noticeable improvement in productivity in tasks using the intranet.

The benefits: easy updates + streamlined information = greater efficiency and improved communication

“Staff is much happier with the new system than they were with the original one,” said Richard Beards, Web Team Leader at Northamptonshire County Council. “Updating the intranet allowed us to filter through all the information held on the site and dispose of anything irrelevant or out-of-date. Now everything on there is current – including staff contact details, corporate branding and HR documents - and everything is displayed in such a way that makes it easy for users to find. It is far easier to add or amend information, which is now the domain of the web team. This means that we can update staff across all of our sites on company news or training initiatives. It has improved communication across the organisation and really brought us into the 21st Century.”

Having successfully implemented the intranet, Northamptonshire County Council then began to work with Parity on further plans to exploit the benefits of their new SharePoint platform.

Phase 2: The website www.northamptonshire.gov.uk

The problem: website complexity made surfing hard for local citizens

Northamptonshire County Council's previous website was struggling to cope with the volume of information it was required to hold and visitors were finding it difficult to use, as navigation around the site was inconsistent. The multiple click-throughs needed to find the information made it hard to reach out to multiple stakeholder groups, and promote social inclusion through the website populated by BAT staff in 40 end-markets

The council's web team wanted to implement the lessons they had learnt over the last 2-3 years about what makes a good website, incorporating feedback from staff and local residents about improvements they could make. The council also wanted to reduce costs associated with having to answer resident's queries over the phone, when the information was actually on the website. Making the information easily accessible online would cut the number of calls to the council and reduce the need for more expensive customer service support. The website could also be the main port of call for customer services staff, too, providing one version of the 'truth' and helping them access information quickly when answering calls. Based on the success of the new website there will be a big drive at Northamptonshire County Council to push as many customers to the web as possible over the next two years.

"To enable this push, we needed an excellent website, with up-to-date information – making it as easy as possible for our customers to complete the tasks they are looking to do with us," said Richard Beards, Web Team Leader at Northamptonshire County Council.

The solution: Using MOSS to improve the look and feel, making efficiencies

Parity worked with the Council to build a new website based on MOSS, following its investment in the platform. The new website was designed to the new portal, which went live at the end of January, now makes it much easier for residents and staff to access, find and view content on the website, <http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk>. Information owners in each service area at the Council have audited every page of content, meaning everything on the new website is current. Going forward, the new content management system will ease the administrative burden. Staff are being trained to look after their own content, and given ownership of the information – which is crucial for making the site excellent and keeping all areas up-to-date.

The benefits: improved design saves time and money

"The new website is already saving us time and money," said Richard. "Now all data is current and the layout is structured to be customer-centric, so users can find information quickly and easily. The navigation is simpler – when you click through to a section, you only see information related to that service, with all related information and useful external websites grouped together on the right of the page."

"And it looks fantastic – the new branding looks more professional, information is easier to find and read and is always up-to-date. We're confident that our customers are going to find it much more user-friendly than the previous version."

The homepage provides the latest news, which attracts a lot of click-throughs, as well as a banner to promote the latest initiative the council is trying to push.

Beards commented: “The new home page is absolutely superb. We have done a lot of work over the last 12 months to identify the top tasks that people come to our website to perform. We have incorporated the top 15 of these - which make up about 80 per cent of the site’s usage – into the homepage, so people can get to them very quickly.”

The website has also been designed to emphasise the wide range of services Northamptonshire County Council provides, from country parks to libraries, as well as the standard ones people associate with a council such as education and social care. The ‘Do it Online’ section of the website enables citizens to transact online with the Council, providing the ability to complete tasks such as paying parking fines, applying for adult education courses or reporting pot holes via the website.

Building for the future

“With budgets under increasing scrutiny, it’s more important than ever for local governments to operate efficiently,” said Terry Blow, managing director of Parity Systems. “This project is a great example of the way in which technology can be used to increase productivity within an organisation, but also improve the level of service delivered to the public. The website will reduce costs in the short term, while providing a long-term framework for information management, both internally and externally.”

Going forward, the Council will continue to build on its MOSS Platform with projects to support citizens and staff in their use of online resources about services in the area. With Parity’s support, they have created a basis from which to support their long-term strategy for serving local residents, complementing the government’s strategy for using the Internet to improve citizen engagement in public services.

