Improving the quality of advice to planning system users

Free resources & content for Local Authority webmasters

The Planning Portal Service
is provided by

Communities
and Local Government

Introduction

At a time of significant resource and budget constraint it is clear that council websites are gaining increasing importance as primary channels for communication and interaction.

For a long time councils have recognised this fact and many examples of excellent practice exist, indeed some authorities are leading the way in the use of social media to connect with their customers.

These factors place an increasing demand on Local Planning Authority website managers to provide content and services that match the best the private sector can provide. This, coupled with increasing expectations of what a council's online presence should deliver, mean it can be time consuming, difficult and costly to maintain a high-quality public service.

In common with any other web service, the long-held maxim that on the internet content is king, has never been truer. This short document aims to assist website managers by providing links to the most commonly requested planning and development content. These links aim to reduce the need to develop and maintain local content on topics that are consistent, regardless of location.

These links are designed to sit alongside local content enriching the user's understanding of the topic, ensuring customers find what they need, when they need it, reducing costly face-to-face and telephone contact significantly.

This guide outlines the benefits that may be achieved by implementing effective links to the Planning Portal's trusted content and includes examples from authorities who have discovered for themselves the benefit of this approach.

The document supports the Killian Pretty Review Recommendation 3A which states "Government, Local Planning Authorities and others should take steps to improve the quality of advice available for all users of the planning system."

Benefits include:

- Content that is constantly updated to reflect changing legislation.
- Simple, user-centred guidance and helpful interactive tools.
- A reduction in the number of avoidable contacts, supporting NI14 commitments.

The Planning Portal is provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government and is a one-stop shop for content and services relating to planning and building control. This includes several award-winning services including The Standard National Planning Application Form suite, 1App.

This document was compiled following extensive research into the information needs of planning customers and provides helpful advice on the variety and implementation of effective links to the Planning Portal's content.

The Planning Portal team is committed to helping Local Planning Authorities meet the demands of 21st Century customers with tools, content and services that support your efforts to deliver world-class planning services.

Chris Kendall, Director, Planning Portal

# The Benefits of Linking to our Content

Save time dealing with Planning enquiries

A website which offers good quality information will reduce the need for users to contact frontline staff. By linking to the Planning Portal directly, users may find the answer they need before contacting your planning staff.

Linking to the Planning Portal can:

- Reduce the number of general enquiries your staff have to respond to

- Increase the percentage of informed questions regarding local policies or constraints your staff receive

- Increase the quality of questions your frontline staff are asked

This will result in less time spent handling general planning enquiries, freeing up time to focus on other tasks. Our research shows most Local Authorities are inundated with enquiries under the heading "Do I need planning permission". The Planning Portal Interactive House can often answer the question without the need for further interaction.
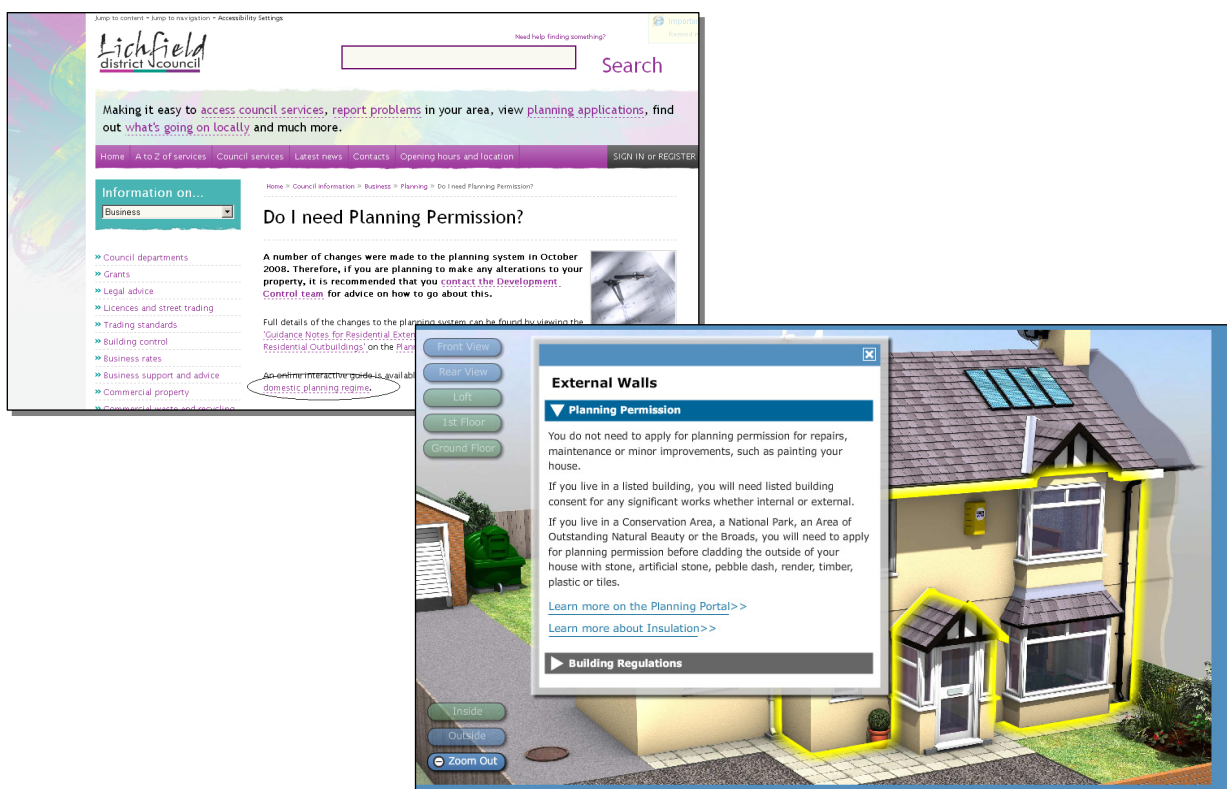
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council has been linking to areas of the Planning Portal from their own website for some time now.

This authority already links to some of the Planning Portal's main areas including those that facilitate and provide guidance on the submission of online applications, whether or not planning permission is needed, local development plans plus links to various Portal pages direct from their FAQ system. Weymouth and Portland consider these links to be very helpful and have found linking to the Portal particularly beneficial in avoiding duplication of information, avoiding the need to produce this information themselves.

This has been recognised as a big saving, particularly in terms of the quality of service now provided which helps the public to self-educate on the planning process and comment on proposals.

Ann Crutwell, Weymouth and Portland Planning Department

Increase the quality of Planning Applications

Enabling your customers to easily access the information available on the Planning Portal website will facilitate a better understanding of how to complete a good quality planning application. The Planning Portal also hosts the electronic application form which is specifically designed to provide support via low-level validation of applications and comprehensive video and help text.
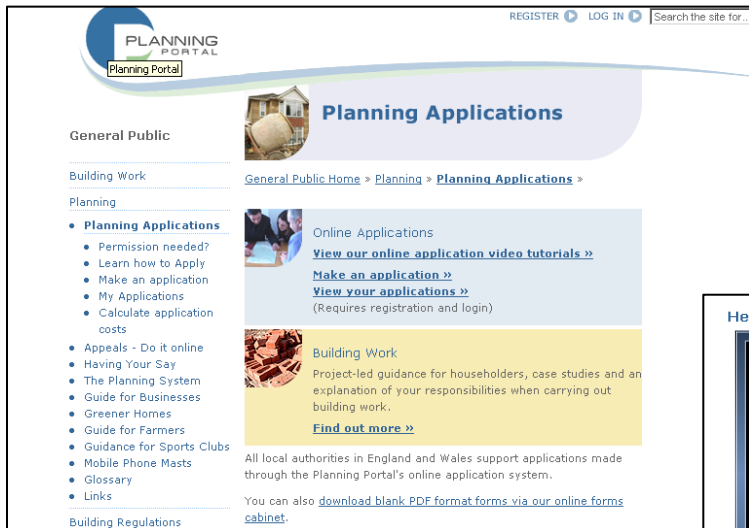
Deep links to these areas of the Planning Portal direct the user to these valuable aids more quickly increasing the quality of the applications you receive.

An essential resource for LPA frontline staff

The information available on the Planning Portal website can also benefit your front desk staff when dealing with enquiries. Whether it is to provide a link to the information for the customer to research at home or simply providing the advisor with a reference point, the Planning Portal can help.

Improving the quality of information available to staff improves the level of customer service they can offer leading to better informed customers. Some local authorities build training on using The Planning Portal into their customer service team inductions.

"The application submission area has been a great success and the number of users is increasing all the time. The permitted development advice is very useful and has meant that we do not have to create our own guidance for permitted development. Users particularly like the Useful Tools section – something we could never produce on our own".
"In addition, our own staff use the Portal as a reference tool. While they still refer to in-house documents, the technical areas of the Portal provide a lot of information that used to be difficult to find".

Chris Dowell, Coventry's Planning Department

Save time updating your website

Maintaining direct links to planning advice on to the Planning Portal means information does not need to be updated on your own website. Content on the Planning Portal is maintained by a dedicated team who have the resources and skills to keep it up to date.

Our links with central policy teams mean we are able to react to changing policy as it happens. Feedback from citizens and planning professionals helps us develop new tools and services that once deployed can become immediately available to you, ensuring your customers benefit from our investment.

The links contained within this document are static and will not change even as the Planning Portal goes through its upcoming redesign.

Customise the links to meet your local need

There are more than 20,000 pages of content on The Planning Portal covering every topic and ranging from entry level advice to technical documents.

In addition the Portals content is written to meet the differing needs of both citizens and planning professionals allowing you to tailor your choice of links to your needs.

How much does this cost?

Nothing! The Planning Portal is centrally funded and provides this service as part of its continuing remit to improve the planning process.

Getting Started

It's simple – help yourself.

If you're a planner just ask your web team to add the links contained in this guide to your authority's website at the appropriate points. By placing the links in all the relevant pages of the site, you will be maximising the information you are offering to your users.

The more information that is made available, the less they will need to contact you for general planning enquiries, which in turn will save your authority time and money.

If you are a webmaster then you already know what to do, but it will work best if you co-ordinate the exercise with your planning team.

Perhaps the place to start is with an audit of your current content.

Whatever your approach we are happy to help.

The Links

The following links represent a tiny fraction of the content available to you and your customers. We've selected a few we regard as essential and made other suggestions, however you are free to consider linking to any relevant content.

The Planning Portal recommends the following links as essential for local planning pages:

These links have been chosen because they are either:

- Fundamental to the planning process and the submission of planning applications
- Were rated as highly valuable by LPAs in previous research undertaken
- Found to be beneficial by the sample of LPAs that provided the case studies for this project

The Portal therefore would encourage all LPAs to link to these pages as a minimum and suggest text to accompany the link.

Please note that these links are to content for England, we shall be working closely with the Welsh Assembly to improve the content for Welsh LPAs and a package of work is currently being planned.

The Essential links

Title	Address & Description	What is this link?
Make a planning application	www.planningportal.gov.uk/apply Apply here to make an online planning application.	The direct link to the electronic version of the National Standard Application Forms.
Building Work	www.planningportal.gov.uk/guide Find planning and building regulations guidance including case studies on many common projects in the home here.	Links to Planning and Building Regulations guidance.
Visual guide for householders Interactive House/Terrace House	www.planningportal.gov.uk/house Explore the interactive house for guidance on many common householder projects. Explore the interactive terrace for guidance relating to flats, shops and basements as well as many common householder projects, in England.	The Portal's Interactive Houses offer the most user friendly way into Planning and Building information.
Greener Homes & Micro-generation	www.planningportal.gov.uk/greenerhomes Guidance for householders; providing advice on planning and building regulation matters for green energy projects and energy saving.	A direct link to an increasingly topical subject.
Building Regulations	www.planningportal.gov.uk/buildingregulations A wide range of Building Regulation information and advice on how to apply for various types of common building work.	Direct link into the Building Regulations and downloadable Approved Documents
Guidance on Appeals	www.planningportal.gov.uk/appeal Submit a new appeal, search for an existing appeal and to comment on it.	How to use the electronic appeal system – including the new Householder Appeals Service
Site Plan Creator	www.planningportal.gov.uk/buyamap You can buy maps here to support your planning application.	Now a wide range of suppliers and map types to purchase online.

The Planning Portal recommends the following links as extremely useful for local planning pages:

These links have been found to be helpful and may significantly reduce the number of simple yet time consuming queries received by your staff and officers.

Please note that these links are to content for England, we shall be working closely with the Welsh Assembly to improve the content for Welsh LPAs and a package of work is currently being planned.

The Recommended links

Title	Address & Description	What is this link?
Useful Tools	www.planningportal.gov.uk/tools Access our full range of useful tools including the Fee Calculator and Volume Calculator.	The online tools are useful for staff as well as members of the public.
Local information including development plans	www.planningportal.gov.uk/plans Identify local planning information for a development site.	The Portal's direct link to your Local Development Framework documents.
Planning guide for small businesses	www.planningportal.gov.uk/smallbusiness A basic guide for small businesses to the procedures of the planning system and how to apply for planning permission.	In light of future PD changes the Small Business leaflet will no longer be available. Access to the Planning Portal is recommended for the most up to date changes.
F.A.Q's	www.planningportal.gov.uk/faq Access the Planning Portal's FAQ page here which provides free, easily accessible advice available to users.	Got a technical problem – check here first! Continuously updated by our help desk team.

A sample of other links

Outbuildings	www.planningportal.gov.uk/outbuildings	Direct link to this topic for both Planning and Building Regulation enquiries on these specific topics
Conservatories	www.planningportal.gov.uk/conservatories	
Porches	www.planningportal.gov.uk/porch	
Loft Conversion	www.planningportal.gov.uk/loftconversion	
Extensions	www.planningportal.gov.uk/extension	
Patios & Driveways	www.planningportal.gov.uk/patioanddrive	
Garage Conversion	www.planningportal.gov.uk/garageconversion	
Wind Turbine	www.planningportal.gov.uk/windturbine	
Windows	www.planningportal.gov.uk/windows	

Best practice guidance on linking

As always with external linking the advice is that links should be clearly signposted so that the user is aware of what they will be linking to.

Our research with LPAs who already use Portal content has indicated a number of ways in which this can be achieved:

Use the Planning Portal logo: Including the Planning Portal logo helps make it clear to the user that they are navigating from a local planning authority site to the Planning Portal. Adding a brief explanation about the Portal provides even more clarity.

We would recommend something like the following from the Lichfield D.C website:

Dedicated links area: Locating the links in a side menu or other prominent place has proved to be effective and is clear to the user.

Specific links in relevant text also work well when referring to specific information. For example, if you are making reference to satellite dishes then you could provide a link to the Planning Portal's 'Satellite Dish Locator' by adding a link on the text 'Satellite Dish'. The usefulness of direct links has proved very effective because the user relates to the link instantly.

Avoid too many links in one place. Excessive linking will make text difficult to read and can make a page look cluttered and confusing.

Avoid the **overuse of icons**. Links to the Planning Portal home pages and other main sections may warrant an icon. However, overuse of icons, particularly within text, can obliterate information and the free flow of text.

Whatever method is chosen for hyperlinks it is important to maintain a consistent presentation. Hyperlinks should look like hyperlinks and appear distinct from the remainder of the text. This can be achieved by publishing links in a different colour to the main text, underlining them or making the text bold.

Contacts

IT Support

If you encounter any problems downloading any of the links, please contact the support team at 0117 372 8200.

Marketing Support

For any marketing support, please contact Cheralyn Dark in the Marketing Team on 0117 372 8614.