CASE STUDY: Powys County Council

Welsh council makes significant savings delivering Call for Sites consultation digitally.

Powys County Council's Planning Policy team ran a Candidate Sites consultation in late 2022 inviting proposals for sites to be considered in the new Powys Replacement Local Development Plan.

Earlier that year Powys procured OpusConsult and OpusMap (the Opus system). They used the Opus system to run their Candidate Sites consultation online. Specifically, the Opus system enabled the public to submit all parts of their candidate site proposal digitally - including site plans - using their preferred web or mobile browser.

Gayle Frewin, Policy Planner at Powys, sets the scene for using the Opus system to run their Candidate Sites consultation.

"We are a small team of 7 officers working in a hybrid set-up. Prior to procuring Opus we had no direct access to a digital constraints map to use in conjunction with our LDP consultations. Previously, candidate sites were supplied on paper or as PDFs and all had to be digitised inhouse which could take several weeks. Also, constraints information relating to proposed site locations had to be collated after the candidate sites had been submitted rather than at the point of submission. This restricted the types of questions we could ask and related information we could request from site proposers. We could see that Opus would provide the functionality we needed to overcome these problems right from the outset. It would make the candidate site submission process more accessible to the public and site data collected more usable, both to the public and to us in the Planning Policy team."

How was this made possible using the Opus system?

OpusConsult and OpusMap are hosted in the cloud and are accessible 24/7 through a standard web browser. Both the public and planners are accessing the same digital platform to use those parts of the software that enable them to fulfil their role in the consultation process. Using a shared digital platform also means that all data is being input, collated, processed and analysed in one system, irrespective of whether that data has been generated by the public or by a planner.

OK. But how were Powys able to create an online form and tailor questions and instructions in that form based on what each proposer was submitting online?

OpusConsult includes a custom form builder that allows planners to design and build their own consultation forms to engage the public online. The Powys Planning Policy team was able to ask the questions they wanted and phrase them how they wanted in their online Candidate Sites submission form. Their ability to customise the form ensured that as much required data as possible could be captured and submitted online by candidate site proposers.

For example, the custom form builder contains a number of customisation tools including a dependency tool. By activating the dependency tool, the Planning Policy team was able to tag certain questions with a dependency. Answers given by proposers to questions with the dependency tag would automatically generate a supplementary question or instruction, such as a request for further information. Being able to ask supplementary questions or request additional information based on answers given to previous questions ensured that all required data could be collected from the site proposer at the point of submission. This eliminated planners having to factor in a subsequent communication and clarification stage with proposers after the consultation had closed.

Use of the dependency tool also extended to the map location of proposed site plans. The Planning Policy team was able to design and build an interactive Constraints Map in OpusMap from their GIS data as an integral part of the online Candidate Sites form. The interactive map served two purposes. Firstly, proposers had to draw their polygon in the online map through their web or mobile browser. This ensured all site data was captured in a consistent digital format and was automatically linked to all the other submission data in the form. Secondly, the dependency tool was also applied to the Constraints Map. If any drawn site intersected with a constraint or was in proximity to a constraint the proposer was asked a dependency question based on their site's location. For example, if all or part of the proposed site was in a flood zone then a supplementary question was asked about how the proposer would mitigate the risk of flooding along with a request for the proposer to upload their flood risk assessment report in the form.

The combination of OpusConsult's custom form builder and OpusMap's interactive map builder allowed Powys to build efficiencies into the Candidate Site process and gain significant time-savings because site proposers were able to complete their site submissions in one go via the online route. All of the data being submitted via the online form and interactive Constraints Map was coming through to the planners in a consistent structure and format even though there were variations in the answers and attachments on each form.

Gayle sets out where and how these benefits were achieved using the Opus system:

"We actively encouraged and promoted the online route for submitting candidate sites. In total we received 303 submissions from 210 unique site proposers. Of the 303 submissions 279, or 92%, were made online via OpusConsult. Just 19 submissions came by email and only 5 were posted to us. Because we had such a high number of online submissions that data was instantly ready for the team to process and analyse. It only took us 2 weeks to convert the remaining email and postal submissions into the Opus system.

The previous Call for Sites had taken us 2-3 months to input all data into a usable format. There was no dedicated constraints map like we have in OpusMap. Previously any sites submitted had to be digitised manually in the GIS as a separate data process and then joined back again with the other submission data. So previously we were always having to move the data in and out of different software. This isn't a practical solution, particularly as we don't all work in one office."

The Opus system has not been procured simply to support the Candidate Sites consultation process. It was chosen to help with other aspects of the LDP and planning policy process at Powys. Gayle explains the thinking at Powys about why the Opus system ticked so many boxes for the Planning Policy team.
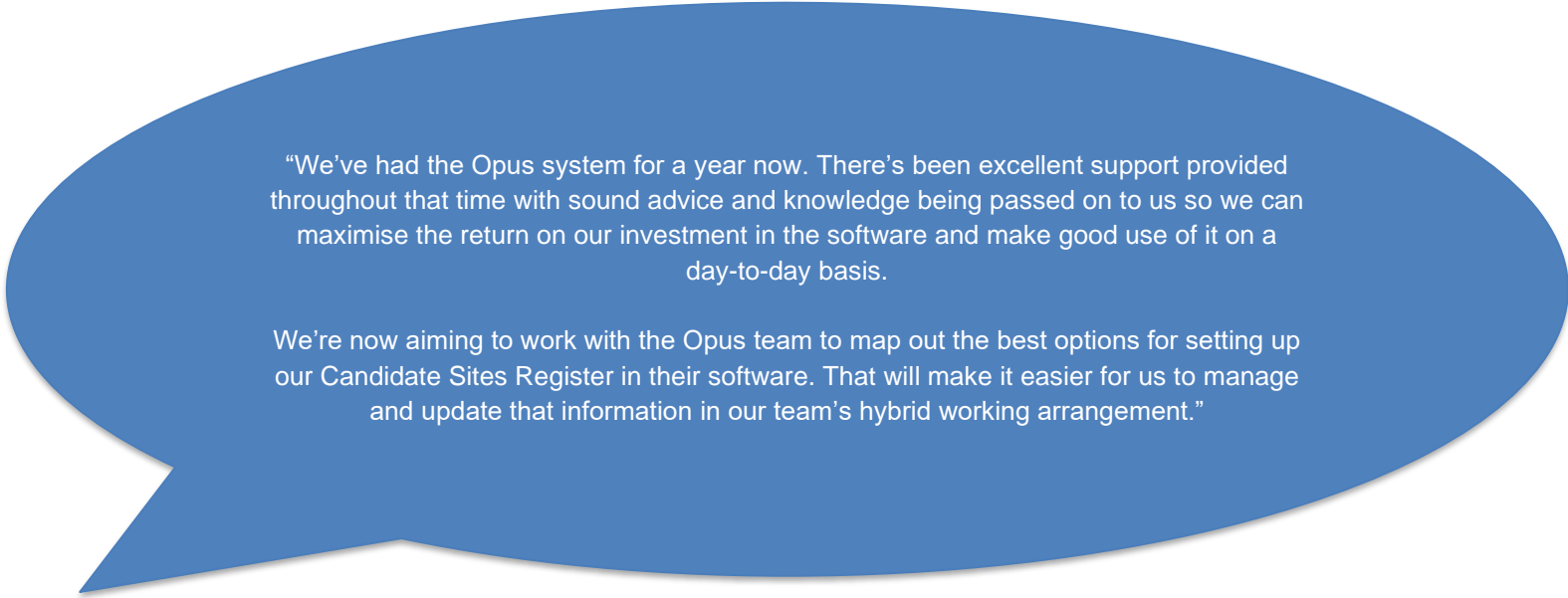
"When OpusConsult and OpusMap were demonstrated to us over TEAMS we could see that the software was up to date and conformed with our in-house ICT requirements. The software included all the functionality we required 'out of the box' to help with digitising different stages of our LDP programme. The ability to add Welsh text was essential as was the need to conform to legislative requirements such as GDPR and Accessibility Regulations. It does all that and more.

As a small team we could also see how we would benefit from the software automating a lot of the processes associated with running LDP consultations and with preparing maps and documents in general. For example, removing the need for manual data entry by our planners and simplifying or eliminating a number of data processing stages meant we had more time to be planners!

Having the ability to create our own maps in OpusMap for internal use as well as for public access is also a great advantage. It speeds up our site assessment process and allows us to extract and report candidate site data easily to present to the LDP working group."

Both JDi Solutions, the developers of OpusConsult, and Blue Fox Technology, the developers of OpusMap, work collaboratively with each other and with Local Council planning teams to meet the current and evolving demands of the Welsh planning system. This collaborative approach ensures their software helps planning teams deliver a quality planning service to the public whilst also helping Councils to realise the cost saving and efficiency benefits of using accessible digital platforms. Against a challenging backdrop of limited budgets and resources with increasing hybrid working in planning teams, the common objective is to empower planners to stay in direct control of their planning data whenever they need access to it.

Powys County Council joins seven other Local Authority Planning teams in Wales using the Opus system in support of their LDP programme, all of whom have been OpusConsult and OpusMap customers for many years. JDi Solutions and Blue Fox Technology, the two businesses behind OpusConsult and OpusMap, provide ongoing support and maintenance to their users. Their own experience of working with other Welsh Councils and their knowledge of the LDP process has already benefited the Planning Policy team at Powys.

"We've had the Opus system for a year now. There's been excellent support provided throughout that time with sound advice and knowledge being passed on to us so we can maximise the return on our investment in the software and make good use of it on a day-to-day basis.

We're now aiming to work with the Opus team to map out the best options for setting up our Candidate Sites Register in their software. That will make it easier for us to manage and update that information in our team's hybrid working arrangement."

Are you ready to do planning differently?

If you'd like to know more about how the Opus system could benefit your LDP programme, please get in touch. We can offer a free tailored demo of OpusConsult via Microsoft Teams - so you can get a better idea of how our digital solution would suit your specific needs.