



# COUNCILS COMBINE TO CUT APPROVALS RED TAPE

Victorian councils are aiming to make life much easier for businesses seeking regulatory approvals by simplifying and harmonising the application processes. By **Paula Giles**

**Governments are** on a journey to make it easier for their citizens – whether they are small business owners or individuals to access and complete transactions using the internet. Known as e-government, this pursuit is often accompanied by a regulatory reform agenda of seeking to reduce the overall burden of regulation on business.

These shared agendas of reducing the regulatory impost and making these transactions simpler to perform, have the capacity to improve business (and government) productivity.

While these goals have far reaching impacts and benefits, the financial and personal investment necessary to initiate and sustain these transformational programs is significant. E-government is in effect, a customer channel management strategy, as it is about providing a low cost, information rich, accessible portal to supplement existing over the counter or contact centre options. As a result, e-government is as much about citizen or small business ease of use choice and access as it is about the way government does business.

The EasyBiz project enables a business owner to experience all aspects of the e-government objective. The business owner can gain information, interact and complete a regulatory transaction any time, anywhere. The owner can access these transactions by logging on to a Business Victoria website (where they may already have a user id, or through the council website. If they are completing a regulatory transaction (eg registering a food business) at one of the EasyBiz councils, their experience will have a similar 'look and feel' as the forms involved have been harmonised.

## Cutting red tape

EasyBiz was one of several funded by AusIndustry as part of the Regulation Reduction Incentive Fund (RRIF). Thirty Victorian councils, led by Whittlesea City Council, undertook this project during 2006 – 2007 to develop streamlined local government regulatory processes.

The full suite of transactions have been developed and installed on the Business Victoria website, and the 22 EasyBiz forms and step-by-step guides are now being loaded on to participating councils' websites for use by customers. The project streamlined common local government regulatory processes used by small businesses,

including: planning and building applications and permits; land management transactions; health permits; and other business-related permits.

It has been estimated small and home-based businesses using the online transactions with their local councils will collectively save around \$10 million per year through the availability of more efficient and time-saving council processes. Councils are expected to save an hour of time for each form submitted using the online system when compared with receiving the forms manually in hard copy.

A number of councils have already made the EasyBiz transactions available on their websites, while other councils participating in the project are planning to add the EasyBiz facilities to their websites during 2008.

## The EasyBiz vision

The project phases funded by AusIndustry were completed in August 2007, and it is now in its Installation phase. The Municipal Association of Victoria has taken over the management of the 'EasyBiz' project from the City of Whittlesea, which led a consortium. A business case to assess the costs and benefits of extending EasyBiz to remaining Victorian councils has been prepared. While the objectives of the RRIF program were to make regulatory transactions easier for business, it also had the significant potential of improving productivity and efficiency for councils.

### The EasyBiz services phase one vision was simply:

- 1) To make doing business easier for small and home-based businesses in Victoria.
- 2) To make permit, licence and registration application processes more efficient and effective for Victorian councils

Accordingly, the EasyBiz project focused on 22 high frequency regulatory transactions typically used by small business to meet their local government permit, licence and registration requirements. These included: applying for a building permit; registering an animal; submitting plans for approval for a food business and, applying for a planning permit to extend a business premises.

The project also harmonised the forms and terminology used for these transactions amongst the participating



councils to create a common 'look and feel' thereby making the experience for businesses interacting with different municipalities, similar. In many cases it is only the council logo that is different.

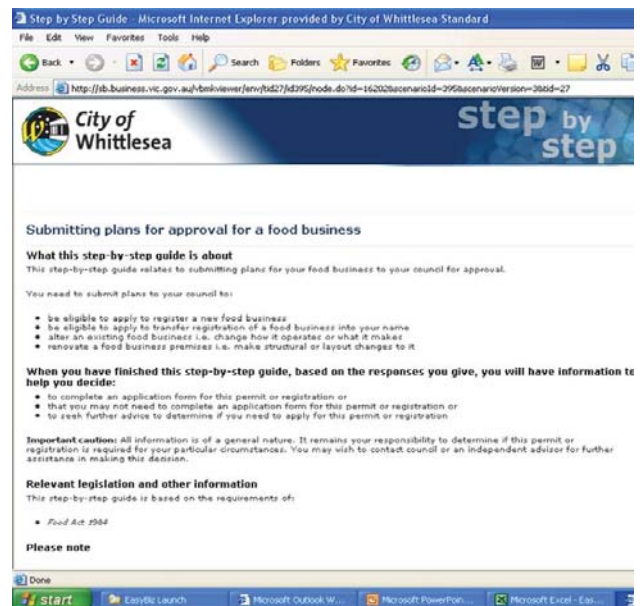
**For small business owners this enables them to:**

- Go online to a council's website or through the Business Victoria portal managed by Victorian State Government and use a step by step guide to assess whether a council permit, licence or registration is required for a specific activity
- Use an electronic 'smart' form permit, licence and registration application to complete applications for required council permits, licences or registrations. (While these forms are online, a form can be printed if delivery to council by post, fax or in person is preferred)
- Lodge a completed application forms along with any required payment online using integration software that enables the contents of the form to be transmitted to council back-end systems with any payment.
- Use a form and set of transactions that has a similar 'look and feel' which is particularly helpful for those businesses that need to interact with several municipalities. In many cases it is only the council logo that is different.

EasyBiz is not a website or a 'public' brand. It is not marketed directly to consumers. It is simply the name given to a project to build a 'virtual' presence – a suite of online transactions hosted on the Business Victoria platform, as the diagram shows.

**Benefits to businesses by using EasyBiz services include:**

- **Increased certainty** – EasyBiz offers precise information on the need for a permit, licence and registration making council requirements clear to business. This is expected to also result in increased compliance with council requirements.
- **Increase efficiency** – EasyBiz offers a streamlined application and lodgement process that is easy to follow, only seeks information pertinent to the user and validates information provided to check that it is in the right format. This will not only make applications easier to complete but will reduce the need for councils to request corrections or additional information from applicants
- **Greater flexibility** – EasyBiz offers businesses the option of applying for local government permits, licences and registrations when it suits them; 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Applications can be saved and completed as time permits.
- **Greater consistency** – businesses that conduct activities in many council jurisdictions will now complete the same process for all EasyBiz councils. The harmonised nature of EasyBiz assists them to understand



and comply with their local government permit, licence and registration requirements in all participating councils

The financial benefits to councils largely accrue from a reduction in time spent by staff doing activities that users will now undertake themselves on EasyBiz or will be removed from council by the verification processes included in the 'smart' form .data management processes.

**These include:**

- **Improved productivity** – council staff time is saved by answering fewer queries on the need for a permit or on the application process
- **Improved processes** – EasyBiz necessitates review of internal procedures, policies and processes , which can lead to improved internal capabilities
- **Increase staff engagement and retention** – council staff are relieved of some repetitive and basic duties freeing them to undertake more skilled tasks.
- **Improved reputation** – by focussing on the processing applications councils will be seen to be more efficient
- **Improved Delivery from internal systems** – EasyBiz has created a common data standard that may become a standard for Council operations enabling councils to more easily change system vendors to meet operational needs.

**The benefits to councils are realised through:**

- **Increase staff engagement and retention** – council staff are relieved of some repetitive and basic duties freeing them to undertake more skilled tasks.
- **Improved reputation** – by focussing on the processing applications councils will be seen to be more efficient

• **Improved delivery from internal systems** –

EasyBiz has created a common data standard that may become a standard for Council operations enabling councils to more easily change system vendors to meet operational needs.

Despite these direct and intangible benefits, the effort to change the way government does business should not be underestimated. Just as any business or council needs to think about how it should be structured and organised to deliver their products or services, creating a e-enabled customer channel (the way you go to ‘market’) is no different.

If there is one lesson learned it is to recognise that improving council processes and making them align and support the e-channel is a significant challenge. Councils generally don’t have sufficient internal resources to achieve significant transformation in service delivery.

The EasyBiz project has required councils to look at their internal processes and question standard practices. It requires councils to:-

- 1) **Engage in cross departmental collaboration** – to deliver online services in a more harmonised approach
- 2) **Review internal processes and procedures that relate to the handling of applications** – For example, for several councils, the introduction EasyBiz provided the impetus for councils to review the need for signatures on documents. In many cases councils determined that signatures were not legally required for a number of applications. The removal of the need for a signature enables electronic processing of application reducing the time required to manage the application process. Even with manual processing there is one less requirement to check.
- 3) **Learn from other councils** – reviewing online Step-by-Step Guides and EasyBiz Forms allows EasyBiz councils to see what pre-application lodgement information and processes are used by other councils. By comparing practices, councils can critically analyse their own practices, and change them to take on the good features of other council practices.
- 4) **Adopt standard IT strategies** – To provide the full EasyBiz service including the ability to receive and send data via the EasyBiz web services hub, standardised IT practices and data standards will reduce the cost of implementing systems such as EasyBiz. The more consistent the IT environment the cheaper a program such as EasyBiz would be to implement.

In addition, the journey of e-government requires collaborating with other councils and relevant state government bodies to better meet the needs of constituents. EasyBiz functionality has the potential to

• **Increase the capacity** to implement whole-of-local-government initiatives that require the exchange of data between different tiers of government. EasyBiz provides a mechanism for the State Government to manage the introduction of these types of initiatives in a way that will be more effectively implemented by local government.

The key to much of this improvement will be the development of consistent data structures. Consistent data is at the core of the delivery of service improvement as it facilitates sharing and removes barriers to entry.

• **Be extended to other states and territories** – the integration software developed for EasyBiz is equally relevant to other states and territories.

Clearly, such an encompassing and ambitious project is a team effort and one that takes persistence, a focus on the higher order objectives and preparedness to ‘have a go’ . The contribution of all involved in the project should be acknowledged as without them, the journey to e-government would never have got started.



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