E-Government in Erlangen 2001–2011 – A Municipal Success Story

The development of e-government in the city of Erlangen between 2001 and 2011 can quite legitimately be described as a remarkable success story. The decisive factor was not simply the aim of putting as many individual administrative services as possible online. Rather, the real achievement was to understand e-government strategically, organizationally, and economically as an integral part of comprehensive public-sector modernization.

1. From MEDIA@Komm to an Independent E-Government Strategy

An important starting point was the nationwide MEDIA@Komm competition. In 1999, the municipal network of Nuremberg–Fürth–Erlangen–Schwabach–Bayreuth was one of the three winners of the competition; the other winners were Bremen and Esslingen. Substantial federal funding was made available for implementation, supplemented by contributions from the participating municipalities and corporate partners.

Erlangen, however, did not use this opportunity merely for individual technical projects. In 2001, the city deliberately developed its own strategic master plan. Following a Europe-wide tender, the city council commissioned Accenture to develop a strategic concept for the “virtual city hall.”

At the time, this was a highly progressive approach. Of approximately 150 potential areas of activity, around 60 specific applications were prioritized. At the same time, organizational issues, staff training, data protection, data security, and economic efficiency were incorporated into the planning from the outset.

E-government was therefore not understood as a purely IT project, but as an instrument for modernizing the administration as a whole.

2. E-Government Was Permanently Institutionalized

A major step was the establishment of the eGovernment Center in 2002. It was placed directly within the organizational responsibility of the Lord Mayor and was therefore able to operate across departmental boundaries.

Starting with six employees, the unit had grown to 14 employees by 2011. This organizational anchoring was of considerable importance: e-government was thus not treated as a temporary, externally funded project, but as a permanent task of administrative modernization.

The broad participation process in developing the master plan was also noteworthy. Political and administrative leaders, the staff council, data protection officials, the Equal Opportunities Office, and employees were involved in the process. The objective was to implement digitalization not against the administration, but together with its employees.

3. The Vision of the “Virtual City Hall” Became Reality

By 2011, the approximately 60 areas of activity originally prioritized had resulted in more than 100 specific online services and projects. Surveys showed that the people of Erlangen viewed the city’s online services positively.

Underlying this development was a simple but, at the time, forward-looking principle:

“The data should move, not the citizens.”

The objective was to eliminate unnecessary visits to public authorities, provide information around the clock, and make administrative procedures easier and faster for citizens.

E-government was therefore not regarded as an end in itself. What mattered was the tangible benefit for citizens and the efficiency of the administration.

4. Digitalization Also Meant Modernizing the Administration Internally

Erlangen did not limit itself to putting information online or providing electronic forms. At the same time, internal administrative processes were modernized and increasingly supported digitally.

These measures included, among others:

- document management and electronic processing of administrative procedures,
- geographic information systems,
- centralized content management systems,
- an employee portal and intranet,
- electronic support for specialist administrative procedures,
- digital council information and documentation,
- electronic vehicle registration,
- digital processing of treasury and municipal finance procedures, and
- data protection and data security concepts.

The combination of digital services for citizens and the optimization of internal processes was a particularly important factor in the strategy’s success. The “virtual city hall” was not merely intended to move the front door of government administration onto the Internet; it was also intended to change the way the administration itself worked.

5. Economic Efficiency Was Measured

Another notable feature was the systematic evaluation of economic efficiency.

The city did not simply assume that digitalization would automatically reduce costs. Its economic impact was scientifically assessed. A study conducted by the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg had already confirmed a positive economic effect by 2006. The subsequent evaluation in 2011 confirmed this positive development.

By the end of 2011, a cumulative net benefit of more than €200,000 was expected, taking into account the costs of e-government.

Particularly interesting was the finding of the 2006 interim evaluation that several objectives had been achieved earlier and at lower cost than originally planned.

This reflected a principle that remains crucial for modern public administration: digitalization must not only work technically; it must also generate demonstrable benefits.

6. Cooperation Instead of Going It Alone

Erlangen recognized at an early stage that a city of around 100,000 inhabitants could not finance and operate every technological development on its own. Intermunicipal cooperation therefore played an important role.

The original MEDIA@Komm cooperation did not result in the jointly operated technical platform initially envisaged in all areas. Erlangen responded pragmatically, however, and continued to develop cooperation in other forms.

An important result was the establishment of KommunalBIT together with Fürth and Schwabach in 2010. This made it possible to pool IT services, exploit synergies, and achieve economies of scale.

This also illustrates one of the fundamental principles of Erlangen's strategy: innovation did not mean developing everything in-house, but finding the most appropriate solution for each task.

7. What Made Erlangen Successful Compared with Other Cities?

In retrospect, five factors in particular stand out:

First: an early start.
Erlangen was able to build on earlier work. As early as 1992, the city had developed its own concept for technology-supported information processing.

Second: a strategic approach.
The 2001 master plan established e-government not as a collection of individual projects, but as a long-term overall strategy.

Third: strong political leadership.
The direct organizational assignment of the eGovernment Center to the Lord Mayor facilitated implementation across departmental boundaries.

Fourth: a focus on measurable results.
The achievement of objectives, economic efficiency, and benefits for citizens were regularly evaluated. The assessment carried out after ten years confirmed that the key elements of the original strategy had been implemented and remained viable.

Fifth: the combination of innovation and pragmatism.
Erlangen did not dogmatically adhere to particular technological solutions. Where joint platform solutions failed to deliver the desired results, commercially available or in-house solutions were used instead. At the same time, the city adopted new developments at an early stage. One example was the Erlangen App, which was launched as early as May 2011.

Overall Assessment

The development between 2001 and 2011 demonstrates that Erlangen pursued its own path in municipal e-government at an early stage. The key achievement was not a single spectacular application, but the combination of **strategy, organization, digital services, internal process modernization, economic evaluation, and intermunicipal cooperation**.

Within a decade, the vision of a “virtual city hall” had developed into a sustainable system of digital administrative services.

For this reason, e-government can be regarded as an example of how Erlangen, as early as the beginning of the 2000s, sought not merely to keep pace with technological change but to actively use it to improve **citizen services, administrative modernization, and the city’s economic and technological profile**.

What is particularly noteworthy is the long-term validation of the original strategy: the focus was not on the technology of the moment, but on the question of how technological opportunities could be used sustainably to create a **better, more efficient, and more citizen-oriented administration**.

E-government is therefore undoubtedly one of the examples that most clearly illustrate Erlangen’s commitment to modernization during this period.