

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 September 2012

PUBLIC ACCESS TO DATA AND INFORMATION VIA THE WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL WEBSITE INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP – RECOMMENDATIONS

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN - COUNCILLOR WRIGHT

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RECENT REFERENCES:

OS43 - Update on 2011/12 Informal Scrutiny Groups, Appointment of Batch 3 Informal Scrutiny Groups and Review of the New Overview and Scrutiny procedures – 28 May 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

At its meeting held in June 2011, The Overview and Scrutiny Committee approved the establishment of an Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) to consider public access to data and information on the City Council's website.

The terms of reference established by the Group were designed to look at the availability and accessibility of information on the Winchester City Council website, with a particular focus on Licensing and Planning.

The Group were presented with information about the recent re-development of the Council's website.

The ISG considered, amongst other matters:

- the strengths and weaknesses of Winchester City Council's old website
- the evidence for changing to the new system and layout for the Council's new website

- how planning and licensing information could best be accessed and displayed on the site
- the impact of social media on council communication
- future development for the website to become increasingly transactional

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Committee consider the recommendations of the Public Access to Data and Information on the City Council's Website Informal Scrutiny Group set out below and refer them to Cabinet for implementation:

- i) *Website*
The website should be seen as the primary point of contact for our residents. All departments should actively participate in ensuring the site is customer focused and transactional, with the aim of becoming more efficient and effective and maximising potential savings.
- ii) *Planning Information*
Corporate Communications Team in conjunction with Planning to review and redesign if necessary the functionality behind the Council's planning portal in line with user feedback. This should take place when the new EDRM system is being incorporated.
- iii) *Licensing Information*
Explore resources available to create a Licensing Portal based on the improved functionality of the planning portal, and in line with user feedback.
- iv) *Social Media*
The Council should recognise the importance and potential of social media in democracy, and seek opportunities to increase access and to gather feedback before decisions are made in line with the principles of localism.
- v) *Optimisation*
Using feedback via the in-built moderation centre (within the CMS), customer and staff feedback, and analytics to ensure the A-Z works effectively as a navigational tool, and the search engine is as thorough and comprehensive as possible within the limitations of the tool.
- vi) *Mapping*
Create comprehensive mapping resources with user-friendly interfaces of key facilities in and around the District such as car parks, play sites, community venues and recycling facilities. All data from these maps will be

made available as open, 'mashable' data within the Data Hub. Google maps will be used to start as it is a familiar tool and easy to access on both static and mobile devices.

vii) *Data*

Continue to improve and add relevant data in an open format to the Data hub, building in interactive graphs where required to illustrate data sets making the information more accessible to users.

viii) *Reporting*

Identify the most useful statistical information to create monthly custom reports for the eCommunications team and Web Officers. This will allow for detailed analysis and aid identification of key areas for improvement in terms of transactional and informational content.

ix) *Content Optimisation*

Work with Web Officers to improve and restructure content where necessary to provide users with the information they need in the most efficient way (the information will be gathered from feedback and statistical analysis). Focussing on quality of information over sheer quantity as has been the case in the past.

x) *eForms*

Optimise existing eForms; streamlining and removing unnecessary fields. All personal fields will be moved to the final page before submission to increase completion rates. The eCommunications Team will work with Web Officers to identify where additional eForms would be beneficial. A review of response times to forms coming through the website should be undertaken, and

xi) That the Portfolio Holder be asked to report back to the next meeting on Cabinet's consideration of the above recommendations and report back again in 12 months on their implementation.

THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 September 2012

FINAL REPORT OF THE PUBLIC ACCESS TO DATA AND INFORMATION VIA THE WINCHESTER CITY COUNCIL WEBSITE INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN - COUNCILLOR WRIGHT

DETAIL:

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The establishment of the Public access to data and information via the Winchester City Council website Informal Scrutiny Group (ISG) was agreed at Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 June 2011. Members appointed to the Group were Cllrs Wright, Gemmell, Warwick and Maynard.
- 1.2 The Council's website is a key channel of communication with the District's residents and now receives over 50,000 unique visits a month. It is a key element of our strategy to provide information to customers and also to enable them to transact with the Council through the site. The site is available 24 hours a day and therefore offers a convenient way for customers to engage with the Council, pay for things, send enquiries or make applications.

The site has recently been upgraded following an opportunity to move Test Valley Borough Council and Winchester City Council onto the same development platform to achieve both resilience and joint development benefits. This was timely as the current site was over seven years old and functionality developments were limited. This also presented the opportunity to redesign the way information looks on the site and also re-structure information with the customers in mind, rather than around Council departments.

- 1.3 At its first meeting the group saw a presentation from the Head of Corporate Communications explaining how the website works in the context of other e-communications from the Council, including social media, campaign websites and e-newsletters. The presentation set out the position with the planned re-development of the site and Councillors asked many questions about how we arrived at this point and the justification behind decisions made. Following the presentation and in determining the scope of the ISG, Members agreed that the ISG would look into the following areas:

- Website Development – proof of concept
- Website appearance and content
- Planning and Licensing functionality
- Social Media
- Councillor information and access

1.4 At its final meeting on 27 June 2012, Members drew up a number of recommendations to share with The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with a view to referring them to Cabinet. These can be found in section three of this report.

2. Summary of findings

2.1 Members heard evidence from the Head of Corporate Communications and The e-Communications and Marketing Officer over three sessions and asked detailed questions about public access to data and information via the Winchester City Council website. The Group took the opportunity to scrutinise the development of the new Council website which was mid project at that stage.

The discussions focused on:

- evidence and best practice for website development
- the ease of use of the technology in relation to the display and interrogation of information on planning and licensing
- ways that the website should continue to be developed following its launch and how to maximise the transactional opportunities available to customers.
- how the Council was using social media and how Councillors could make best use of the technology available.

2.1.1 **Development of the new Council website – evidence and best practice**

The previous website's layout had been based on the Government's recommended navigation list and was seven years old. The website appeared dated; concentrating on providing static information and had little in the way of transactions (making payments), or social media.

The website was well used carrying traffic in the range of 65 to 70 thousand hits per month, with 40 to 45 thousand of these being unique URLs. A recent spike in usage had occurred from those seeking information on bin collection at 60,000, which suggested that there was at least an additional 20,000 potential regular users to the website. A study undertaken in 2008 had found that 81% of the District's residents had Internet access, and of these 80% had a connection with broadband either through home, work or another access point.

Aside from the corporate website, the Council had also undertaken specific campaign websites, for example those for the Winchester District Strategic Partnership, the Guildhall and Blueprint. These campaigns had their own "brand, look and feel", which did not follow the corporate brand, and had received a high number of hits, with blueprint receiving 5 to 8 thousand visits in its key months.

Feedback from customers was important and featured throughout the re-development. Thorough analysis of data was undertaken, and work with the

Customer Service Centre took place to find areas where the greatest number of public enquiries were taking occurring. The website was then developed to include information to answer customers' questions therefore reducing the need to call the offices.

The site would also be compatible with smart phones as research had indicated that 23 per cent of adults had these devices and 45 per cent of 15 to 24 year olds.

2.1.2 **Planning and Licensing**

Work had been undertaken on the area of the website dealing with Planning. In-house development of the Planning Portal had enhanced its appearance to a degree, but it was accepted that the Planning website was process driven rather than being user friendly, being text heavy and having barriers to usage, such as requirement to agree to an access agreement.

The Planning information has now been migrated to match the new look and feel of the website and this has improved some of the usability. It was recognised that further work needs to be carried out on the planning information to make it more straightforward to use, in particular with regard to the ability to search on maps. The addition of a 'quick view' planning application search on the homepage of the new site was welcomed and the group felt that the new 'hub' approach was a much better navigational system. It was felt that further guidance should be made available on how to apply and the acceptable reasons for comments and objections.

The Planning information will shortly be hosted using a new index system which should enable an improved application search system to be integrated into the site.

Members felt that the Licensing information on the website would also benefit from a display similar to that of Planning, where the application status and all the associated documents for a case could be viewed in one place.

2.1.3 **Social Media**

The use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, had grown in popularity, with over 3200 followers of the City Council on Twitter and 364 on Facebook on the corporate accounts. Certain other departments including Tourism, Housing and Museums are also using social media but this is monitored through the Communications Team to ensure standards and procedures were maintained. At present, factual information, such as news, events and Romanse traffic information are provided, as well as an additional way for people to contact the Council or ask questions. In future, it was proposed to develop social media to build a community hub, where partner organisations could place discussion items to increase community engagement. The most common users of Twitter were those of over 40 years of age, with a younger age profile group using Facebook. This was most

probably due to there being less of a requirement for social exposure through Twitter. The group felt that a lot of work was being done in this area and that it was important that we maintained a high level of contact with the community through it.

The group considered how best Councillors could make use of this new technology and communications channel and felt that perhaps training needed to be provided. It was discussed that it should be Councillors' responsibility to look at these channels to see what was happening locally and to participate themselves if they were comfortable doing so through their own accounts. It was noted that social media has the potential to promote democracy and involvement in localism.

2.1.4 **Continued development work for the website**

The group discussed a variety of quick wins that have been integrated upfront as part of the website re-development project following feedback from the wider councillor group, and user testing, which proved very helpful.

Further areas for development focused on the improved use of mapping across the site, whether that be GIS or Google map based, as this was becoming increasingly important for users. Ensuring the site becomes more transactional is a priority when considering developments and responding to customer feedback and comments.

2.2 **Concluding comments from the Chair**

A static website is about information, a dynamic website is two way information and interaction between people. The Winchester City website should be seen as a 'live tool' to improve the way Winchester City carries out its business.

To do this the site will need to:

- be updated regularly with latest information and in some instances putting reports on view for comment before decision are made.
- promote Winchester with up to date information on facilities and events.
- do business electronically e.g. dealing with requests for information, dealing with complaints, but action must be seen to be done, for example emails replied to in reasonable time.
- have helpful information to allow the public to ask the right question of the right people e.g. are we responsible or another authority, with direct links on the page to the relevant people.
- feature planning and licensing information with help on how to support/oppose applications with guidance on what is relevant.

Winchester City's web site should be seen as a tool to greater efficiency in both a business sense and democracy (localism), this will require support and ideas from members and officers.

3 Recommendations

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OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

4 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND CHANGE PLANS
(RELEVANCE TO):

Community strategy outcome of 'An efficient and effective Council'.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

5.1 The resource implications would mainly be officer time from the Communications Team as part of their forthcoming programme of work. Some development costs may be incurred with certain aspects which require additional work from our web developers but this would not exceed £2000.

5.2 Key areas with financial implications would be the possible redevelopment of the Planning and Licensing areas, however these would need to be properly scoped and a business case approved in order to accurately ascertain costs and to request funding.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

www.winchester.gov.uk

APPENDICES

None