

TITLE	Plans to improve the website in response to customer feedback
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 18 October 2021
WARD	Non-Specific
DIRECTOR	Graham Ebers, Resources and Assets

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Access to digital services 24/7 and support for the Council's Equalities Agenda.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) Review the report and support the replacement of the website system as a fundamental part of the strategic direction;
- 2) To seek views on specific planned improvements.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Council's website provides 24/7 online access to its services allowing customers to interact with the Council at a time convenient to them.

The Council's website is ranked 5/40 for Local Authorities using the Gov Metrics customer feedback service. Aspirations are to improve the website further for the community, so it ranks higher.

The Council is also an early adopter of The Local Digital Declaration, a set of best practice principles for local government digital services developed by the Government Digital Service in partnership with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. These principles are used to underpin activity to improve the website.

The website system that provides the Council website is approaching end of life and needs replacing to meet the needs of residents. Customer feedback also shows there are areas for improvement in the design and structure of the website.

This report shows current and planned improvement activity for the website and sets out how the voice of the customer will be used to validate and measure the success of these improvements.

This report also sets out a timeline for the project to replace the Council website system and how this will also address issues raised through customer feedback.

BACKGROUND

The Council's website provides 24/7 online access to its services allowing customers to interact with the Council at a time convenient to them.

The main Council website has 1,500+ pages giving customer's access to transactions and information. The website also signposts to 15 portals providing digital transactions for areas such as School Admissions.

The Council also provides six microsites in addition to the main website. These microsites are:

- Council news and events
- Sustainable travel (My Journey)
- Fostering and adoption
- Dinton Pastures and Country Parks
- SENDIASS
- Children in Care Council

POSITIVES

Usability

The main website is benchmarked 5th for customer satisfaction out of 40 Local Authorities using the Gov Metrics service. This equates to an overall customer satisfaction rate of 57%. The aspirations are to improve this customer satisfaction rate further.

User testing and a recent third-party accessibility audit describe the website as functional. It is utilitarian in design and delivers content and services in a functional way. The most used customer journeys are clear and usable and providing solid foundations to build improvement on.

In general, the website performs well on external search engines such as Google and Bing. This supports 80% of users who choose to enter a specific service area of the website directly from an external search engine rather than starting their journey on the Council website's homepage. For the most searched terms the Council website's internal search is also effective.

Much of the content on the Council's website is written in accordance with the Council's online content guidelines. These are aligned to best practice digital principles. These include advocating the use of plain English and a consistent, friendly tone of voice. They also include instructions on how to make sure content is accessible to all and adheres to W3C Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA level, the government mandated level of accessibility required for public sector websites.

Usage

In 2020 the Council's corporate website had 1.7 million visits with an average journey of 3 pages per visits. These visits were split 50% via mobile devices and 50% via desktop / laptop / tablets.

Analytics show that 35% of the Council website's traffic (137,000 page views per month) accounts for the top 10 customer journeys (see Appendix 1 - "Top 10 website customer journeys 2020). This demonstrates that the website successfully connects customers to the areas of highest customer demand.

In the last 12 months digital take up of online transactional forms on the Council website has increased by 25% overall. For example, online Garden Waste collection registration has already increased by 5000 registrations in 2021. This shows more people are choosing to use the Council's digital services. Increased online transactions also support cost avoidance as the average cost of a digital transaction is less than phone or face to face.

Mobile experience

The operating model for the website has undergone initial redesign to make sure the site renders on mobile devices in response to changes in customer behaviour. This is reflected by usage via mobile devices climbing from 25% in 2015 to 50% in 2020.

AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Usability

Customer feedback from Gov Metrics, user testing and other sources shows navigation to less used customer journeys and services can be improved to make these areas easier to find. Simplified site architecture and navigation would ensure lower usage customer journeys are a good experience.

There are also inconsistencies within the design for forms, buttons and links to third-party portals providing digital services. Providing a consistent design across all areas of the site would create an easier to use experience.

The functional design also lacks the visual appeal of some modern sites. Though this does not impair customer journeys it could improve perception of the website.

There is also feedback that advertising on the Council website are detrimental to the user experience.

Content

The Council's website is copy heavy. Other content types (video, easy read, imagery) could be used in some areas to improve user experience.

Other content types could also help reduce the number of PDFs across the site and help explain areas of service that are complex and may involve technical language and terms.

Mobile experience

As the website's design has aged it has also become dated on mobile devices as their operating systems have modernised. This means the design of the website could be enhanced to provide a better user experience on mobile devices.

Resources

The Council's website system is approaching end of life. The technology underpinning this platform is dated and places constraints on possible improvements. For example, the platform does not support new technology now used to make websites as effective as possible across different mobile devices.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK AND BENCHMARKING

The voice of the customer

Improving the website is part of the ongoing programme to strengthen the voice of customer. This programme aligns with the Council's Customer Experience strategy. The launch of Gov Metrics within this programme has already led to customer focused improvements. Along with BAU improvements Gov Metrics insight has also generated a collaborative project to improve customer journeys for Council Tax services. Gov Metrics insight will be a key consideration in prioritising where to focus resource on future improvements.

Usage and analytics data highlighting customer transaction take is also used to identify areas of opportunity for digital development. For example, improving the online Blue Badge application service has seen digital uptake increase from 151 applications per month before improvement to 255 applications per month.

Digital Services also work in partnership with the voluntary sector and community groups to gather insight for how to improve the website and its services. For example, engaging with SEND voices to improve the Special Educational Needs Local Offer information / provision and working on the digital donation project to promote the digital inclusion in response to COVID19.

Benchmarking

Gov Metrics ranks the website as 5/40 for customer satisfaction amongst Local Authorities that use the Gov Metrics service.

The Council was an early adopter of the Local Digital Declaration. This is an initiative created in July 2018 by the Government Digital Service in partnership with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. It benchmarked a set of best practice guiding principles for local government to use to deliver user-centred digital services.

The Local Digital Declaration principles underpinning website development are:

- Redesign digital services around the needs of the people using them

- Use technology that is re-usable and joins up effectively to other technologies where possible
- Design safe, secure, and useful ways of sharing information to build trust among residents and partners

These principles are used to underpin the Council's emerging Digital and Technology Strategy overall and the aspirations within that strategy to improve the website.

To continue measuring the effectiveness of improvement the following methods will be used to continually benchmark the website:

- Gov Metrics overall customer satisfaction rate
- Digital take up of online services (overall and granularly)
- General website usage analytics (for example, drop-out rates for pages that are not the end of customer journeys)
- Continuous user testing

IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

2020-2021

During 2020-2021 activity delivered to improve the website included:

- Rebuilding high volume Customer Delivery services including waste collection and Blue Badge ordering to make them easier to use
- Providing a digital gateway to COVID19 information and services
- Supporting the launch of new council services and initiatives such as the early payment services for suppliers with online signposting and information
- Working in partnership with the voluntary sector to establish a digital donation scheme providing repurposed devices and skills training for digital disenfranchised residents

2021-2022

Projects underway in 2021-2022 are designed to build on the impact of COVID19 in terms of digital demand and 24 / 7 service delivery. They include:

- Engaging, through choice, a specialist third-party to provide an audit of accessibility on the website leading to an ongoing accessibility improvement project
- General user experience improvement within the current website design to provide a more consistent user experience
- Voice of Customer continuous improvement (responding directly to customer feedback for BAU improvements)
- Council Tax online provision improvement (a key area for improvement highlighted by customer feedback)
- Options appraisal for a new website platform to replace the current end of life system

2022-2023

A Capital bid has been made to fund costs for a project to replace the current end of life website system. This is included in the Capital bids being presented to Overview and Scrutiny as part of the MTFP process. If funding is approved this project will begin in April 2022.

Activity to replace the website will include:

- Analysing key areas for improvement based on voice of the customer
- Auditing the current website and content against usage analytics to see where information can be cleansed and streamlined
- Updating the Council's online content guidelines to unify tone of voice further with the Customer Experience strategy
- Identifying emerging longer-term customer digital needs through data and usage analytics
- Validating best practice from other websites (Local Authority and other sector's)
- Auditing the current website and content against Local Digital Declaration digital principles
- Collecting internal stakeholder needs for digital service provision including how to support the Council's commercialisation platform

If the funding bid is successful, the first stage will be a pilot phase to launch a section of the website as quickly as possible in new beta design.

This will focus on a new customer-led design and address areas of improvement identified including:

- Modernised look and feel focusing on mobile use
- Simple navigation to optimise mobile use
- Consistent and intuitive signposting
- Reduced and simplified copy
- Increased use of different content types such as imagery and video
- Less reliance on PDFs
- Easy to use and intuitive transactional forms

The beta version will then be refined and improved through user testing, Gov Metrics customer feedback and engagement with customer groups.

Once updated the refined design will then be used to rebuild the whole Council website. This rebuild is estimated to take 18-24 months.

A phased rollout will be used to relaunch the website. This will mean iterative releases following the principles of development in the Local Digital Declaration. The most used areas of the website will be rebuilt and launched first, making sure the benefits are delivered as soon as possible to the most customers. Less used areas of the website will be simplified and streamlined incorporating customer feedback from previously launched iterations. This will ensure the rebuilt website launches underpinned by an ethos of continuous improvement based on customer needs.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the Covid-19 crisis. It is, therefore, imperative that Council resources are focussed on the vulnerable and its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	0	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£200,000 MTFP bid	Subject to approval	Capital
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£100,000 MTFP bid £70,000 growth bid	Subject to approval	Capital - £100,000 Revenue - £70,000

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None.

Cross-Council Implications
The website improvement project is part of Modernise agenda and will have significant impact on all services across the Council.

Public Sector Equality Duty
<p>The Council’s online content guidelines align with best practice digital accessibility guidelines and include instructions on how to ensure Council websites adhere to W3C WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) 2.1 AA standard benchmarking for digital accessibility. They also contain guidance for providing content and terminology that is easy to understand for all users.</p> <p>Accessibility improvement project is underway following the recent third-party accessibility audit. These focus on the areas of Council websites that currently do not conform to W3C WCAG 2.1 AA guidance.</p> <p>Procurement guidelines for technology with a digital front end have also been updated to make sure supplier’s provide solutions that conform to W3C WCAG 2.1 AA guidance.</p> <p>The Digital Services Team also engage with relevant Community Groups such as the SEND Voices and Tenants groups to make sure their feedback and needs are also being considered to make services more accessible.</p>

For the project to replace the website system an Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken to make sure the process is robust in terms of the Council's Equalities Agenda.

List of Background Papers

Overview and Scrutiny website Improvement Report Appendix 1 - Top 10 customer journeys and top 10 search terms

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