

POLICY DEVELOPMENT & REVIEW PANEL 2
REVIEW OF THE BRECKLAND COUNCIL WEBSITE

MAY 2007

1 Introduction

1.1 The Council undertook a major overhaul of its website, in conjunction with its partners Amaze, at the end of 2005.

1.2 Aware of shortcomings in terms of performance and accessibility, the Overview & Scrutiny Commission agreed in early 2006 to place a review of the website on its work programme, deferred for a period of time in order to enable tweaks to be made to iron out the initial teething problems.

1.3 In November 2006, the OSC agreed a scoping document for the review (shown at Appendix 1) and charged Policy Development & Review Panel 2 to undertake the Review and report back to the OSC with recommendations as appropriate in spring/summer 2007.

2. Context

2.1 The development of digital communications networks over the last decade has impacted significantly on both private and public organisations and how they interface with their customers and residents. The mass spread of internet availability in both private homes as well as publicly in libraries and internet cafes has firmly established websites as an increasingly important portal for information exchange.

2.2 Local authorities increasingly need to make use of these new forms of communication to engage with residents and stakeholders. The terms of reference for the review were to: thoroughly examine all aspects of the Breckland Council website, including the accuracy of information, ease of access and efficiency of navigation, use of jargon and attractiveness (content, layout and use of graphics). The anticipated outcome from the review was to ensure an optimised website in all respects.

3. Practicalities

3.1 The Panel had a session accessing the website to fully appraise its usability on 15 January 2007. The Council's Web Officer and ICT Manager were in attendance at this session.

3.2 It was apparent that the ability to successfully search for committee documents such as agenda and minutes was significantly constrained, with extremely long download times and difficulty in using the search engine. The Web Officer reported an error on the system however irrespective of this it was felt that the search facility for retrieval of committee documents was very poor. It was noted that a new application to manage committee documents

would be up and running shortly, which should result in much improved operation.

3.3 The layout of the homepage was not very clear or user friendly. It was felt that there was too much information on the homepage, the font was too small and the wording in the right hand columns sounded contrived and badly written.

3.4 It was considered that the website would benefit by having links from the homepage for all the service areas, e.g. Planning. A member gave an example of a website he had used that had adopted a “four click” approach whereby the website guaranteed anything a user wanted to find on the site in just four clicks of the mouse. This was recognised as good practice and would be beneficial if applied to the Council website.

3.5 The specific area of Planning was examined and it was felt that any information on this area was very hard to find. It was suggested that once a Development Control agenda was on the website the user should be able to click on the planning application number which would link directly, for example, to the application form, any letters from objectors and a map of the area. This information was held by the Planning Department and if it was made available on the website it would make the website much more comprehensive.

3.6 The “What’s New” on the intranet had nothing new listed and the “Latest News” was out of date. It was considered that as soon as something was out of date it should be removed, to ensure that the site remained fresh. Information on the “What’s New” and “Latest News” should link, where applicable, to website which would give residents more information on the subject.

3.7 The Panel thought that it would be beneficial to have a direct link to the Eastern Daily Press Events Page.

3.8 Concerns were raised at the slow download times of images and so suggested that they be limited in size in order to ensure a quick download time. An image was accessed of a Best Value Performance Indicator report which took five minutes to download and froze the system. It was felt that from the point of view of residents that this would lead to frustration with use of the system.

3.9 It was thought important that safeguards be put in place to ensure accuracy of information, having noted a few typographical errors on certain viewed pages.

4. Documentary Evidence

4.1 Two sources of documentary evidence rating the website were considered by the Panel at their meeting on 13 April 2007. Witnesses attending this meeting were the Council’s ICT Project Manager and Web Officer. The first

was Sitemorse, which is a mechanistic approach that can measure the technical veracity of the web site. The second was “Better Connected” by Socitm, which uses an approach of adopting a “mystery shopper” and follows a script of questions and topics to be explored.

4.2 The latest assessment by Sitemorse was conducted on 5 March 2007 and showed that Breckland Council achieved a score of 6.53 and a nationwide ranking of 116th. Within the context of Norfolk local authorities, Breckland sits mid placed, with Great Yarmouth Borough Council placed 49th, North Norfolk DC placed 40th and South Norfolk DC in 2nd. Breckland’s scoring assessment represented an improvement from autumn 2006 when a score of only 2.91 was achieved.

4.3 The scoring is based on five different criteria – function, accessibility, code quality, performance and E-GMS Metadata. Breckland scored 5/10 on the first two criteria, and 8/10, 9/10 and 10/10 on the others respectively.

4.4 The “Better Connected” report provides detailed descriptions of the assessment methods used, also identifying examples of good and poor practice. This publication doesn’t arrange local authorities into a ranking but instead classifies them as Standard, Transactional or Excellent. The ICT Project Manager explained that the natural aspiration is for authorities to improve by migrating from Standard to Transactional and on to Excellent status. Assessments are undertaken annually in November with the report being published in the following March.

4.5 Members agreed that the overall appearance of the website is very good. However it was noted that on occasions certain content is hard to locate, and in particular it was difficult to find information about planning applications. Members also recognised that the web editors consider which information the public actually require rather than the information which they actually make available.

4.6 Acknowledging that the Council was aiming for an interactive website, members were interested to know how this was progressing. In response the ICT Project Manager explained that this work would be completed in the next few months and indicated that the Council’s site should be transactional by late summer 2007. In making the website more transactional, it was hoped that the public would be empowered more to utilise the Council’s services at their own convenience rather than necessarily in office hours. The more queries handled through the website would be expected to reduce the number of calls into the office thereby leading to better use of back office resources.

4.7 Members expressed concern that there appeared to have been little progress on updating the content since the revamped website was launched in early 2006. A significant amount of work needed to be undertaken on the website to improve the content and accessibility of information. It was felt that a new section of “frequently asked questions” should be added to the homepage and that this list be updated in response to the information being requested through both the website and the customer contact centre.

4.8 The issue of updating by web editors was also highlighted. The ICT Project Manager informed the Panel that the web editor role was not built into the web editors' job descriptions and in some services, other work commitments had taken priority. Some designated editors had a very limited role whereas others had several dozen pages to keep up to date.

4.9 The Socitm report had shown that neighbouring South Norfolk Council had the best website in the entire country and the Panel enquired whether Breckland was in discussion with South Norfolk to develop best practice. The ICT Project Manager confirmed that a representative from the communications team had met with officers from South Norfolk bringing back best practice ideas which would be shared with web editors in due course.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The layout of the home page be reconsidered to ensure that it was not overburdened with information whilst at the same time it is user friendly and clear for users.

5.2 The website should adopt a "four click" approach to ensure that information can be found quickly and easily.

5.3 Information on the planning process should be bolstered on the website enabling the public to access pending planning applications and associated maps and forms etc.

5.4 A link is established with the Eastern Daily Press Events Page and action be taken to ensure that news items on the website are removed promptly once they are now longer current.

5.5 Images are limited in size to obviate long download times, especially for dial-up users.

5.6 A link to "Frequently Asked Questions" is installed on the home page and this be updated on a regular basis to ensure freshness.

5.7 The role of web editors needs to be defined and clarified, in relation to their general work commitments and job descriptions should be updated accordingly to take account of the role of web editors as this has such an impact on the site content being kept up to date.

5.8 The Council continue to work with external organisations in order to ensure best practice is followed to ensure that the design and operational usefulness of the website is maximised.

5.9 The Panel be charged with assessing the website improvement plan at regular intervals through 2007 and beyond as necessary.