Local Council White Paper
Local Council Websites – Why do they have them who are they for and what must be considered when creating one.

In October 2010, e-mango was invited to judge the website of the year competition for Hampshire Association of Local Council and present the award at the Annual General Meeting, which was held in the Performing Arts Centre at St Swithun’s School, Winchester on Saturday 23rd October.

The top three places in the competition were occupied by local councils who had clearly understood how to create and maintain a dynamic website that would deliver both interesting and essential information to the community in such a way that local citizens would be encouraged to regularly visit the website and interact with it. The local council websites entered by the top three should be regarded by all, as a fine example of how it should be done.

The Internet is the most powerful means of information dissemination ever devised by man. An event that occurs on the other side of the world is instantly relayed around the globe many thousands of times in a few second following the event. However, there is little possibility that the information will be received unless the portal that delivers it encourages frequent visits and the information is easy to access. The news agency websites are a prime example of how to do this well and some lessons for the local council sector can be learnt from them.

Local councils are not alone in the mistakes that they make when they start the process of setting up a website. Most organisations fail to give full consideration to its intended purpose, who the website is for and how the information will be accessed by the website visitor.

Consequently, many local council websites convey a message which suggests that they have been set up purely for the benefit of the local council so that they can say, “we have a website”, that they can meet the requirement to publish their meeting agendas, minutes and planning applications, etc, all in the hope that someone reads it. The design and navigation is generally very poor and little thought has been given to functionality, usability or accessibility. Updates to the information are infrequent, due mainly to the difficulty in updating the content, or finding someone who is willing to do it on a regular basis.

The message that a local council website should be delivering is that it has been set up for the benefit of local citizen so that they can feel involved, interact with the local community via the website and can quickly find the information that they require. The website should, if appropriate, also be able to draw visitors and tourists to the area and to the local attractions and encourage them to spend their hard earned cash with local business, etc., so that the local business community thrives. Information should be current and updated on a daily, weekly and monthly basis so that visitors are encouraged to look at the website every day. The design should be engaging without being overly complicated. Navigation should be simple, with functionality, usability and accessibility of the highest possible standard.

When deciding to create and launch a new website there are many factors to consider, but most local councils have a common starting point which is the price that they are prepared to pay. They will decide on their requirements and try to make these fit with the available money. All too often they have Champagne tastes but only a budget for lemonade and this will be truer that ever throughout this period of austerity. However, all is not lost as with some careful thought, a website can be created that is both engaging, fit for purpose and low cost.
There are many factors to consider, which if not researched properly, will run away with the cost of a new website. These are examined below.

**Key elements of the website to carefully consider:**

- Budget – How much will it cost?
- Design – What will it look like?
- Functionality – How will it work?
- Usability – How do people find information?
- Accessibility – How easy is it to find information?

These elements are best considered in the diagram below.

![Diagram](image)

In the diagram, all elements are equally balanced and are contained within the size of the budget. If any one element takes priority, it can either force a reduction in one or more of the other three, or the size of the budget will have to increase in order not to affect the other elements. The element that is most likely to “steal” more of the available budget, if allowed to, is the design. Even what may seem a small change can be quite expensive to implement.

The next stage in the process, before signing up for a new website with your chosen provider, is to consider the running costs.

**The recurring cost elements to consider are:**

- Registration/renewal of a domain name, e.g., nameofcouncil.gov.uk.
- Cost of annual hosting on a web server
- Cost of ongoing technical and application support.
- Maintenance and updating of content.

The first three elements are usually provided by a third party and attract a fairly low annual cost. However, if the maintenance and updating of content is outsourced, this can be expensive if the desire is to update content on a frequent basis as recommended above. There are website providers who will do it all for you but with budgets under severe threat and there may be more cuts on the way, the annual cost could be prohibitive resulting in less frequent updates and the website failing to serve its intended purpose.
Web technology has made huge strides forward in the last few years. Gone are the days when an expert, usually referred to as a Webmaster, is needed to manage a website and update the content of the web pages, but providers are still living off of the fear that managing a website is both time consuming and difficult.

The majority of us know how to send an email, write a letter using a word processing program, buy online from one of the shopping websites and how to “Google” something that we want to find information about. How many of us are now using online banking? If we can do all of this, then we have the basic skills, with a little product training/familiarisation, to manage a modern website, or to be more precise, a website content management system (CMS).

A website CMS is not difficult or complicated to manage. The website content is created and manipulated with a text editor in the administration area of the website and previewed before publishing on the website pages. An update can take as little as a few minutes. All elements of the content are under the full control of the administrator and updates can be done online, anywhere where there is an internet connection available; in the office, at home, at an internet café or even on a smart phone/tablet PC.

Probably the most important content element is media. A website CMS must allow you to upload documents, images and flash video and create links to these on the web pages. This means that document and forms can be downloaded by visitors and printed locally, if they wish. The newsletter, the meeting agendas, the meeting minutes, the planning applications, etc. should be online so that people can read it online.

The new town council website

Having now created your website, you now have to publicise it and encourage people to visit it on a frequent basis to view the content. The important thing to remember is to regularly update the content with news items and interesting stories, as well as the official documents and reports, etc. It is also important to consider using “supermarket” tactics to promote important messages that you want to deliver to the community by including links to the important content on the pages with news items and interesting stories (supermarkets place promotional items next to the most popular items to create awareness and tempt people to buy). Similarly if content is categorised, a page can display links to related items in the same category (online shopping sites show messages saying “people who bought this also bought this”)

If the new website is going to achieve its full potential, it will have to be “sold” to the community and then it has to deliver what it has sold. The local community should be strong supporters of the website and regard this as an essential source of up-to-date information on what is happening in their area and what local issue may affect them. If they do, they will interact with it and contribute to the content.

Crowd-sourcing may be a fancy new term coined in some technology magazines, but the principle is simple – use a large group of people or community to bring forward solutions to your tasks. There will be enthusiastic amateurs and experienced experts from all walks of life, who may have no desire to actually walk down the corridors of local government, but may instead want to participate in the development of their community. By listening to the crowd, the council gains both first-hand insight on their citizens’ desires and access to a wider range of talent that might be present in their own organisation or the community.

The local council website is the ideal way, to reach out to and engage with the community, but only if all aspects are fully considered.
In summary:

- A local council website should be at the heart of the local community as the most important source of local information.
- The website content must be updated regularly, be relevant and be easy to find, as this will encourage frequent visits.
- The website design should be engaging but not overly complicated.
- The website should make ample provision for access to information by the visually impaired.
- The website should drive interaction between the local citizens and involvement with the local council, its programs and initiatives, both at local and county level.
- The key elements must be balanced in order to deliver the best results within the available budget.
- Self management is the key to an efficient, low cost website. Why create the information and send it to someone else to update your website when you can easily and instantly do it yourself?
- Put your documents online so that people can access them online.
- Publicise and “sell” the new website to the community.
- Encourage participation from your local citizens buy using the website to pull the community together.

A final note:

During this time of austerity, please do not overlook the considerable revenue creating opportunity that a properly manage website can create from advertising local services to your citizens. People generally like to support local business but only if they know about them.