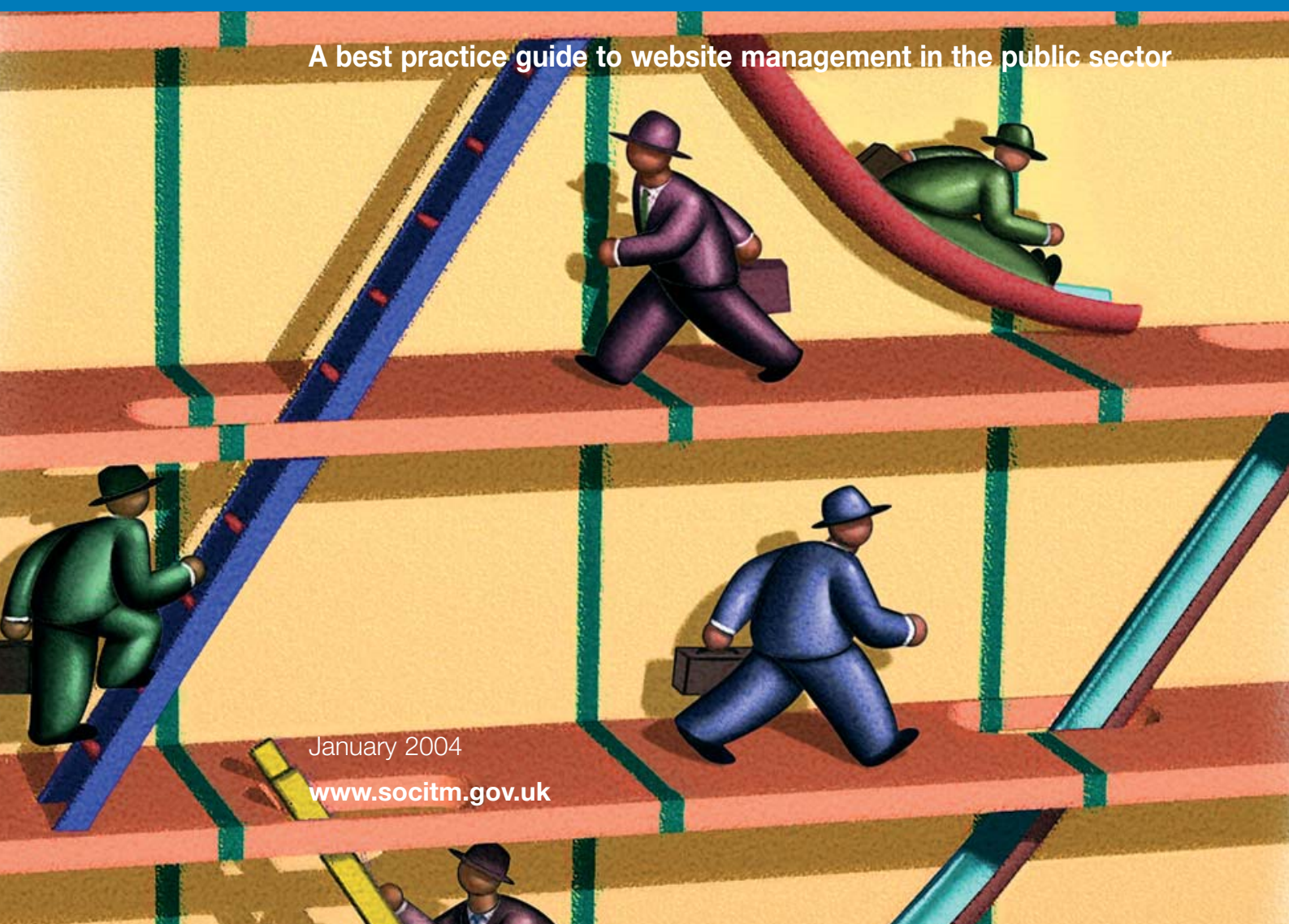


# socitm<sup>insight</sup>

Better connected: building for the future

A best practice guide to website management in the public sector



January 2004

[www.socitm.gov.uk](http://www.socitm.gov.uk)

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# Contents

This is a special report to supplement our annual surveys of all local authority websites. Produced in conjunction with the Local Authority Websites National Project (LAWs), it recognises the need for local authorities and others to move their website management to a different level of operation if they are to sustain websites as a major channel for electronic service delivery beyond 2005.

**Although the report is rooted in local government, the advice applies to all public sector websites.**

## **Part A      Managing the website      7**

Understanding how the website should be managed and organised is critical giving the website a strategic role as a channel of communication with citizens and customers. We provide a model for how local authority websites should be managed in the post 2005 world by drawing on the experience of what happens behind the scenes at our Top 20 websites.

This section is a contribution to the **organisational development** work stream of the LAWs project. **It should be read by all senior managers who are in a position to influence the direction of the website (eg e-champions).**

## **Part B      Engaging with the user      35**

Getting the content right and making the website easy to use are vital for building the long-term relationship with website visitors that will sustain their participation and involvement. We re-assess what is required to make the local authority website useful, usable and used.

This section is a contribution to the **community engagement** work stream of the LAWs project. **It should be read by all those who are developing websites (eg web teams) and also by all senior managers who are in a position to influence the direction of the website (eg e-champions).**

## **Part C      Improving our assessment process      77**

This re-definition of criteria for successful websites is reflected in the way in which we carry out our *Better connected* surveys to help local authorities and other public sector organisations. We set out the implications for the *Better connected* assessment process.

This section provides additional material for Socitm *Insight* subscribers beyond the advice given to the LAWs project. **It should be read by all those who are developing websites (eg web teams).**

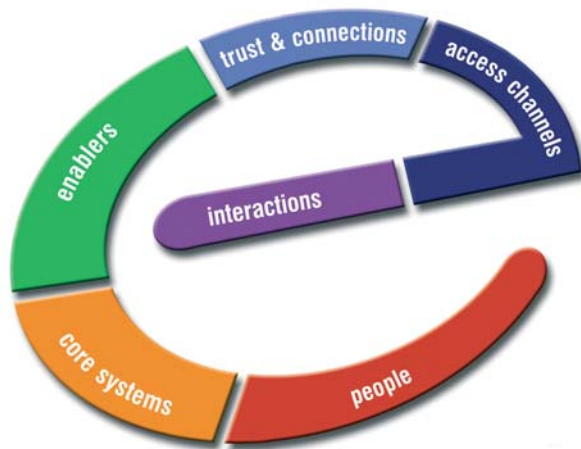
### **Distribution**

Parts A and B will also be available electronically as part of the LAWs project on the public website set up for this purpose ([www.laws-project.org.uk](http://www.laws-project.org.uk)).

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## Foreword



*You are asked to summarise the plans and progress of your local authority according to the six parts of the model for the local e-organisation, as presented in the ODPM's National Strategy for Local e-Government published in November 2002.*

- *Local service websites (tailored to achievement of transactional status for corporate 'gov.uk' website (as defined in Socitm's Better connected 2003)*

Source: *Guidance for Implementing Electronic Government statements* (July 2003)

The latest guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on the IEG3 statements links the Socitm *Better connected* reports directly to the achievement of the 2005 targets for electronic service delivery.

Although this is a very welcome recognition of the contribution that the Socitm *Insight* team has made to the implementation of local e-government, we should, however, look beyond 2005. Access to the Internet continues to grow, albeit gradually. Access to broadband is growing rapidly. Local authority websites are improving. Perhaps more importantly, the awareness is growing of the role of intermediaries such as the Citizens Advice service to support those who have not yet, or never will have, Internet access themselves. All these trends suggest that we should be focussing on the need to build sustainable websites that are an indispensable communications medium with the general public.

With the support of the ODPM via the LAWs project, we believe that now is the time to plan for this future. In so doing, we also need to review the way in which the *Better connected* reports assess websites for local authorities and others. We will be looking to introduce changes to our processes starting with our 2004 survey.

Fahri Zihni, President of Socitm

The diversity of customers, the range of services and the complexity of government in the UK make the goal to develop a fully transactional website a difficult one for a local authority to achieve. How should a local authority manage its website? What are the criteria for success? How do you measure quality? With less than two years before the 2005 deadlines, we identify and answer the key questions to consider for the long-term sustainability of the local authority website.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of report

Our *Better connected* reports have been produced in February of each year for the past five years. Since our last report in February 2003, we have been very conscious of the heightened awareness, interest and profile of our work that have no doubt been stimulated by the approaching 2005 targets for electronic service delivery. One very obvious example of this is the creation by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) of the national project for local authority websites (LAWs), as the development of the Pathfinder projects in the Local Government On-Line (LGOL) programme. The purpose of the LAWs project is to develop a suite of tools that help local authorities build transactional websites and meet the 2005 e-government target. It has led to an invitation to Socitm *Insight* to participate in this project in two areas that complement naturally the work what we have done in recent years.

This new report has been produced as a mid-year planning document between the 2003 and 2004 surveys in response to the changing needs of our subscribers and to the requirements of the LAWs project. It serves three main purposes:

- To capture organisational best practice, including structure and roles and responsibilities, of the top 20 authorities, as defined by the *Insight* report.
- To develop further our own assessment processes (eg firmer criteria for each stage in the ranking scheme).
- To give our subscribers an opportunity to comment on the way in which our assessments will be carried out in the future.

## 1.2 Audience for this report

We intend that this report should be read by all those who are involved in developing, supporting and managing websites in the public sector. A separate executive briefing will be available for elected members, chief executives and others who have some role to play in influencing the direction of their organisation's website.

The report is rooted in local government, but the advice applies across the whole of the public sector.

## 1.3 Structure of report

The relationship with the LAWs project has influenced the structure of this report in that Part A and Part B cover some of the different elements of the LAWs project, whereas Part C deals with the proposed changes to the *Better connected* process. As well as forming an integral part of this new printed publication, Parts A and B are available via the special website for the LAWs project ([www.laws-project.org.uk](http://www.laws-project.org.uk)).





# Part A

## Managing the website

Understanding how the website should be managed and organised is critical giving the website a strategic role as a channel of communication with citizens and customers. We provide a model for how local authority websites should be managed in the post 2005 world by drawing on the experience of what happens behind the scenes at our Top 20 websites.

## 2 Context for this study

This section is a contribution to the organisational development work stream of the LAWs project. It should be read by all senior managers who are in a position to influence the direction of the website (eg e-champions).

### 2.1 Website development trends

It is five years since the *Better connected* surveys started. The state of local authority websites across the UK in Nov/Dec 1998 (the 1999 report) compared with Nov/Dec 2002 (the 2003 report) is quite stark:

|                                | 1999 report |     | 2003 report |      |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-----|-------------|------|
| Local authorities with website | 343         | 75% | 467         | 100% |
| No sites                       | 124         | 25% | None        | 0%   |
| Promotional websites           | 221         | 51% | 93          | 20%  |
| Content sites                  | 98          | 21% | 234         | 50%  |
| Content plus sites             | 24          | 5%  | 130         | 28%  |
| Transactional websites         | None        | 0%  | 10          | 2%   |

Chart 1 Website development trends

This shows how websites have developed over time:

- One in four councils in the first survey had no website. Now all have a site.
- Two in three councils with websites had promotional sites. That has reduced to one in five.
- One in two councils have content sites compared with one in four.
- The number of content plus sites has increased by over fivefold.
- We now have some transactional sites.

Back in 1998, websites were generally promotional sites, often grown out of the enthusiasm and commitment of an individual in a service area such as libraries or tourism. Even good sites at the time were unbalanced in the sense that they covered some areas well but completely ignored others. This unevenness reflected the lack of any corporate commitment to website development or any senior management awareness of the role of the website as a strategic communication medium.

This is, of course, a generalisation. Some websites back in 1998 were well developed by the standards of the average in 2002 whereas others in 2002 are still not at the stage reached by the average in 1998.

In developing advice about the organisational arrangements, we should remember that different stages may require different approaches and that different councils will be at different stages in their website development. In particular, this will have an effect on the overall system for managing content. In order to understand what represents today's good practice we invited to a special workshop on 23 May 2003 the representatives of all our Top 20 sites in 2003 (plus those who appeared in our Top 20 sites in 2001 and 2002, but did not in 2003). They were also invited to complete a pre-workshop survey so that the results might be discussed at the workshop. Appendix 1 documents the questionnaire used.

To provide the background about current practice, we have selected replies to some questions in the form of charts and tables. A full set of responses to this survey is available in the subscriber-only area of the Socitm website [www.socitm.gov.uk/public/insight/subscribers.htm](http://www.socitm.gov.uk/public/insight/subscribers.htm)

## 2.2 Size of websites

We need to understand the different scale of local authority websites. They range from 1,000 pages to several hundred thousand pages. One third of our sample has over 10,000 pages. This reflects not just obvious differences in size between types of council, but there is much variation between councils of the same type, as chart 1 below shows.

For example, one London borough has 50,000 pages, whilst another that has already reached transactional status has 5,000 pages.

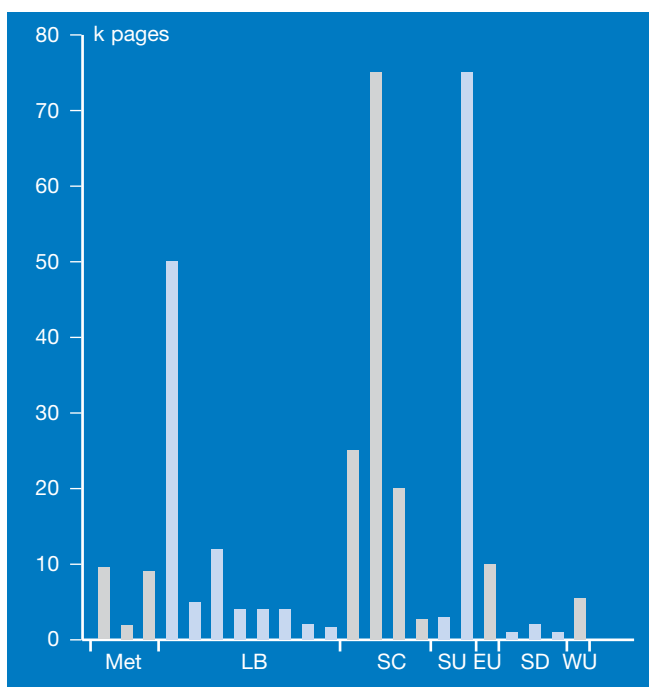


Chart 2 Size of websites (Top 20 websites)

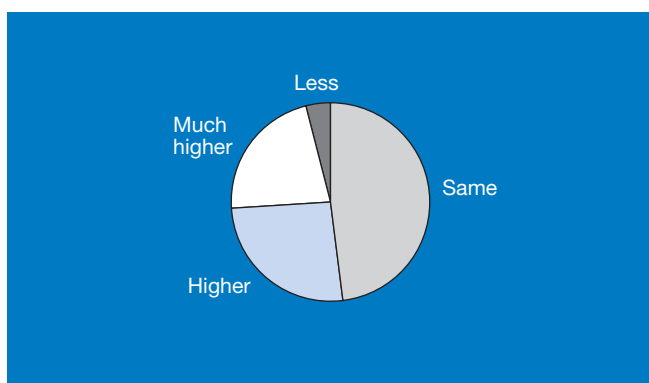


Chart 5 Changes in resources over past 12 months (Top 20 sites)

## 2.3 Specialist resources in supporting websites

If we look at the resources in terms of full-time equivalents (FTEs) to support and develop the website, then we see an interesting profile as set out in Chart 3 below.

| FTEs     | Type of council        |
|----------|------------------------|
| 6 to 8   | Shire counties         |
| 1.5 to 3 | Shire districts        |
| 2 to 7.5 | London boroughs        |
| 5 to 6   | Metropolitan districts |
| 2.5 to 6 | Unitaries (E,S and W)  |
| 4.8      | Average per council    |

Chart 3 Resources to support websites (Top 20 websites)

There is little correlation between size of website and size of web team. This should be no surprise because of the different approaches to managing websites and e-government plans, especially where there is much devolution of content. For example, one large council that is well advanced in its approach has the following profile of specialists working in this area.

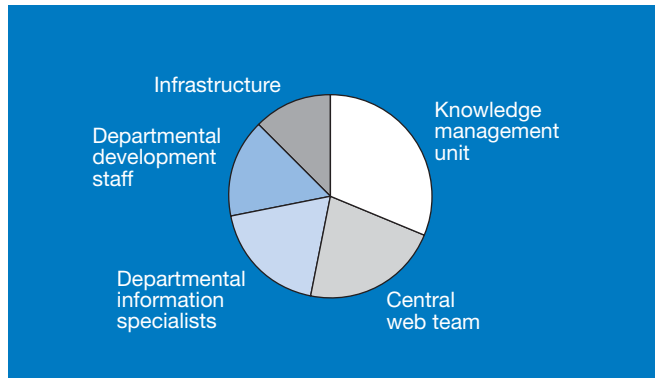


Chart 4 One council's profile of specialists

This contrasts quite clearly with shire districts, all of whom are operating with no more than three people, often less, (and part-time at that) and the same is true of one or two of the smaller unitaries in our sample.

One other useful piece of information concerns changes in resources in the past 12 months. Here we see that eleven (out of 23) have more resources, another eleven have seen no change and just one has less resources.

2.4 Other resources in supplying content

If the level of resource for the central web team is not easy to define, it is even more difficult to establish the level of resources used in supplying content to the central web team. The chart below shows numbers from tens to hundreds, a clearly sizeable resource and one that is likely to grow as content grows with the development of facilities.

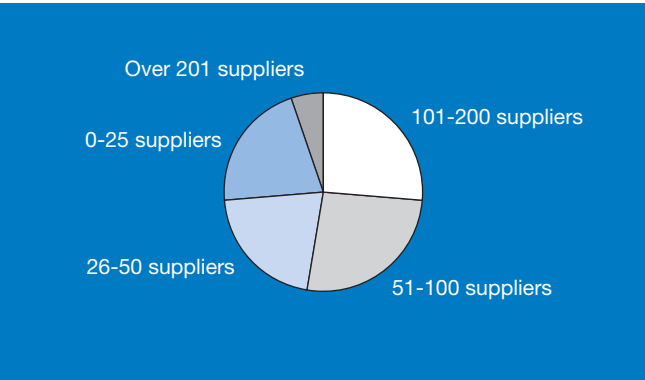


Chart 6 Suppliers of content (Top 20 websites)

*This will grow as we move to towards the implementation of the service directory, where front line service staff will be responsible for the creation and updating of content about their service. There will be a growing number of external suppliers, eg community organisations, LSP partners, other agencies such as NHS, Domestic Violence Forum, etc as we continuously develop the site as a portal site. When we develop communities of interest as sub-sets of the site, this will grow into hundreds.*

*We also provide links to content provided in other relevant official websites eg UKOnline Life Events and other community websites where the website is approved by the Head of E-government, E-government Programmes Support Officer, or the Web Manager as being appropriate. (We offer all staff and web users the opportunity to 'suggest a site' which they think will be the public interest and consider it accordingly).*

Metropolitan district council

This chart shows the scale of the content management task for all councils, whatever their size. The truth is that at the minimum all service managers should be seen as suppliers of content. In larger councils, this can easily run into 100 and more. The quotation with the chart also illustrates the potential growth in the next year or two that will almost certainly affect all web managers in local government.

### 3 A watershed in development?

#### 3.1 Critical success factors

The year 2003 probably marks a watershed in the development of local authority websites, one that is marked by the start of the national project for local authority websites (LAWs). The analysis of trends in website development in the previous section confirms that much improvement has taken place in the last five years. Although they would be the first to recognise how much more they still have to do, some strong role models in the form of individual councils have emerged. Many more are working hard to achieve transactional status. This makes it an opportune time to review the lessons learnt in developing websites and also analysed in the *Better connected* surveys. This point is re-enforced by an analysis of the first set of results of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in England published in December 2002

The Socitm *Insight* report entitled *Making a difference* that explores the link between CPA results and ICT performance suggests that the state of the website is a true test of corporate management and, therefore, a very useful indicator for CPA. The website is not only a window on the world, but a window into the organisation, especially in a diverse and complex one such as a local authority. The better the website, the more it will reflect the organisation — warts and all. For example, departmental ‘silos’ are quickly visible, making the site and the authority much less customer-centred than those that have a corporate approach. Ultimately, the chief executive and management team are responsible for the way their authority presents itself to the outside world. They should ensure that the management responsibilities are clearly set out and understood.

In short, we should reflect on the factors that are critical to successful websites. The evidence points to four such factors:

##### Critical factor 1 Commitment

The local authority should be committed to the core strategic role of the website as a channel of communication with the general public.

##### Critical factor 2 Ownership

The website should be fully owned by the whole council at all levels and across all services, but with responsibility clearly vested in one senior manager.

##### Critical factor 3 Quality

The website should strive to achieve clear criteria of standards demonstrating the quality of the product.

##### Critical factor 4 Take-up

The improvement of the website should aim to stimulate take-up as well as improve the product.

These are clear statements of intention, but they need to be analysed in some depth in order to be helpful to organisations that want to improve their websites. The rest of this report is focused on such an analysis.

The factors of **commitment** and **organisation** are focused on getting right the management arrangements for the website. They are explored in depth as part of the **organisational development** work strand of the LAWs project (in the rest of Part A of this report). This strand will produce guideline documentation enabling local authorities to understand the roles, responsibilities and skills needed to operate the LAWs products. It will also produce a change management framework that will guide local authorities through the process of the organisation transformation necessary to achieve 100% transactional capability.

The factors of **quality** and **take-up** are focused on the development of the website. They are explored in depth as part of the **community engagement** work stream of the LAWs project (Part B of this report).

## 3.2 Principles of managing websites

### **Critical factor 1    Commitment**

The local authority should be committed to the core strategic role of the website as a channel of communication with the general public.

It is easy to state that commitment is the key to success without defining what this means in practice. We have set down below some principles of website management that indicate what commitment should involve.

#### **1 The website is a core strategic information and communications medium.**

An increasing number of people and businesses are depending on the Internet for information and services. The better-developed local authority websites are able to show rapidly increasing levels of usage. The website is as much a face of local government as the physical buildings and the people who work within them. Availability to the whole world and access by the whole world make it a uniquely powerful channel of communication.

#### **2 The improvement plan for the website should be at the heart of website management.**

The reason for this is there can be no standing still in websites — rapid changes in both the technology and in visitor expectations make this inevitable. The scale of change in new versions of the website may vary from plan to plan, as it will not be feasible to launch a completely new design with every plan. However, improvements should be a well-managed process — hence the need for a plan to drive it that will contain agreed priorities.

#### **3 Every employee is potentially a content provider.**

The breadth and depth of information that should now be considered for adding to the website touches every part of local authority activity. All those who communicate with the outside world by letter, phone or meeting will now have a role to communicate via the website. The website has arrived as a communications medium and everyone should be encouraged to make full use of it within the framework of standards and guidelines.

This potential will not be realised overnight. It requires strong management commitment and realistic levels of training to support the change. Over time, recruitment of younger staff comfortable in using the technology and training initiatives such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) will gradually encourage ownership. The inclusion of tasks associated with the website in job descriptions will also support this trend. Ideally, employees will rely on the same systems that support the website to carry out their own daily work.

#### **4 The management of websites should be integrated with intranets and extranets.**

Web technology and information management not only drive the public websites, but also intranets and extranets. Although they may have developed from separate parts of the organisation, the management of websites should be integrated with the management of other access channels to ensure that the same information is used across them all.

#### **5 The website, intranet and extranets should all complement other forms of communication with the public and employees.**

Web technology provides an additional method of communication outside and inside the organisation. It is essential that the content and style of presentation complements more traditional forms of communication such as the printed document. Those responsible for public relations, marketing and communications in general should have a clear voice in the strategic and operational management of the website.

## 6 Each website should draw on a wide range of skills and expertise.

Developing websites requires access to specialists in ICT, public relations, marketing, graphics design, librarianship and the law. Web teams will need some specialists as part of the core team and will need to bring in others at critical times (eg designs of new versions, authentication issues linked with new stages of development).

## 7 All management arrangements should be kept under regular review.

The website is certainly no static phenomenon. Just as it needs to be continually updated and improved, so do the management arrangements need to be regularly reviewed to ensure that they reflect changing requirements (eg in making the transition to transactional sites). In particular, the move to a transactional site may require new management processes.

### 3.3 Roles and responsibilities

#### Critical factor 2 Ownership

The website should be fully owned by the whole council at all levels and across all services, but with responsibility vested in one senior manager.

Ownership, too, is much easier to proclaim than to demonstrate in practice. Here we analyse the roles and responsibilities of the many different stakeholders in a website. If the website is a test of corporate management, this implies that there are many interests to balance and many stakeholders. We can identify a large number and group them in two ways:

- those who should influence the direction of website developments
- those who should contribute directly to its support and management

#### Overview

##### Direction of website

- Ensure appropriate governance
- Ensure improvement plan for website
- Ensure appropriate budgets and resources
- Ensure integration with other information management processes (eg contact centres, intranets)
- Review overall management arrangements

##### Management of website

- Manage the improvement plan
- Define resources and skills
- Obtain resources and skills
- Identify training required
- Develop style guide for website
- Develop standards and guidelines for updating content
- Introduce content management system
- Manage ICT infrastructure required
- Ensure website reflects communications policies of the council
- Edit the content supplied
- Approve content
- Provide content
- Review content



### **Influence on direction**

- **Elected member e-champion**

This person should have the ultimate responsibility for the shape of the website, and its contribution to service improvement and local democratic practices.

- **Officer e-champion**

This person should be the officer who is the focal point for operational decisions about the development of the website. Working closely with the elected member e-champion, this person should ensure that the plans and policies for the website are fully integrated with the council's broader e-government agenda. .

- **Chief executive**

If not the personally the officer e-champion, the chief executive should at least ensure that the management arrangements are appropriate for implementing the guiding principles set out above and for engaging appropriately with all the other stakeholders (eg the top-level management team is committed to the website's development).

- **Chief officers and other senior managers**

All other senior managers at first, second or third tier level should be sufficiently committed to the development of the website. This should be strong enough to encourage their managers and the workforce in all their service areas to make best use of the website for improving their services as well as playing their role in providing content.

### **Direct contribution**

- **Service managers**

Those responsible for specific services have a prime role in encouraging their teams to think of the website as a way of improving information, services and communications with the general public. If required, they should be ready to commit to training their workforce to develop and support the website.

- **Website manager**

The role of the website manager is to have day-to-day operational responsibility for managing the website, ensuring that all the different skills are brought together to keep the website up-to-date and continually improving.

- **Website editor**

The website editor's role is to assure the overall quality of the content and style in line with the organisation's requirements.

- **Webmaster**

The webmaster should be the guardian of the website's technical integrity, ensuring that it is resilient as a technical product (eg that it performs quickly in loading key pages, it does not suffer from broken links and that it complies with all the appropriate technical standards).

- **Web team**

There may well be other members of the website team who may have a variety of backgrounds (eg ICT, marketing, public relations, information specialists etc). Their job is to provide the right mix of specialist skills required to support the website and implement new facilities. They may be full-time members of the core team, or brought in part-time or for specific assignments.

- **Employees**

Ultimately, it is the individual employee whose task it is to keep the website up-to-date and to make the best use of the opportunities that the website offers.

### Who has overall editorial responsibility for content?

The question of who has editorial control is an interesting one to explore, as illustrated by the chart opposite. It shows a range of approaches and, in some cases, some blurring of responsibilities, suggesting that it is quite difficult to be absolutely clear about editorial responsibility in a mixed environment.

This mixture of responses listed opposite veers between teams and individuals and between strategic and operational managers. Eight councils refer directly to their web teams, another eight to their website manager and the rest to some looser arrangement of different individuals. There may be no right answer, but we suggest that at least:

- One person should have final responsibility (as with a newspaper).
- There should be a mixture of viewpoints represented in advising that person (eg public relations).
- Much responsibility can be devolved to the website manager, and to individual service managers.
- Given the potential for confusion in a dynamic activity, there should be some simple guidelines for all to follow.

- The corporate website team
- Responsibility devolved to service units
- The web team
- Loose affiliation between e-services manager, web team and departmental representatives
- Corporate web manager (plus directorate web/information managers)
- Steering group
- The web management team, working with the web management group, and corporate communications
- Corporate web team
- Knowledge manager
- Communications team under the overall responsibility of Head of ICT
- Software development manager
- This is ultimately held by Press & PR, although implemented by the Internet editor who is a member of the Internet and media team.
- Web manager and PR
- It is devolved to departments and line managers — with a steer given from the public relations officer
- Web editor
- Head of e-government
- Webmaster
- Directorates/service areas are responsible for the content but they are guided by Plain English guidelines etc. Protocols are in place for this.
- Technically, the head of communications but effectively control is delegated to web services manager and content owners. Service directors are ultimately responsible for the accuracy and veracity of their departmental content.
- Web management team
- Information and communication manager has overall responsibility for content.
- The web team.
- The web manager, with some input from communications.
- Web development team.

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

Chart 7 Editorial responsibility (Top 20 websites)

### 3.4 Commitment and ownership

Commitment and ownership are very closely related. The one should be driven from the top of the organisation and the other reflected across the organisation. We have explained that they should be translated into a firm set of principles and a clear understanding about roles and responsibilities, but that does not explain what might result from this in terms of practical actions. The rest of Part A aims to show what commitment and ownership might lead to in practice by:

- Developing models for managing websites  
(see section 4)
- Defining the key documents (see section 5)

## 4 Models for managing websites

### 4.1 Centralised or decentralised?

The principles, roles and responsibilities set out in the previous section all point to the need for devolving content down and across the organisation within the framework of a strong central approach to standards and guidelines — in other words, neither fully decentralised nor fully centralised, but a mixed regime. This is, in fact, how two thirds of our sites describe the way in which their content is managed (see Chart 8). Half of those (ie one third of the total) have been operating such a system for at least three years.

The system for managing content is critical to the management responsibilities. In this context, the system is not just the software that enables the website to be updated, but covers the roles and responsibilities of all those who might:

- supply original content and who might check or edit that content
- provide the framework of supporting standards and guidelines into which the content will be added.

In essence, the issue is whether a centralised or decentralised approach works best, or whether some kind of mixed approach is the answer. The selection of the approach will depend on the size and culture of the organisation and also on the stage reached in website development. It is important not to be too prescriptive about what should work.

Management of website content should be linked to that of any corporate intranet or extranet and all of these operate within the wider context of corporate information management.

We now explore what this might look like in terms of specific structures. As size of council is a major factor that determines structure, we have looked at two levels of local authority, ie the larger council (ie single tier or shire county) and the shire district.

### How is content managed?

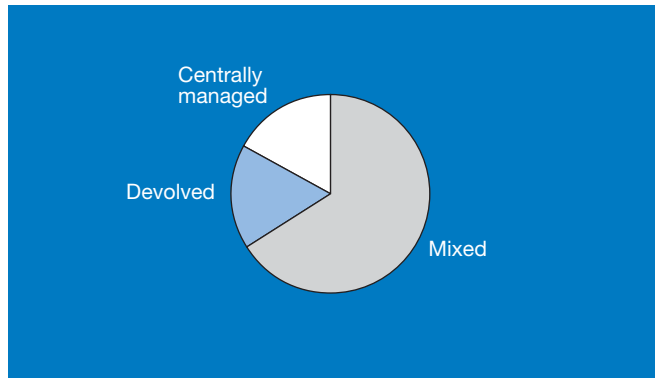


Chart 8 Management of content (Top 20 sites)

Almost all respondents indicated that individual services are responsible for providing the content, but we have selected below five of the fuller answers that help to describe current thinking.

**Who is responsible for 'populating' the website?**

- 1 There are a number of approaches, working with dept representatives for corporate information, and through individual department projects required for e-government.
- 2 Information management group — a forum for departmental information representatives, run by knowledge management unit. They promote, plan and co-ordinate content creation in departments.
- 3 Each service unit has an e-champion responsible for content in their area, but for the most part this relies on their enthusiasm. Other content is commissioned by the web editor.
- 4 Currently, half and half. We have moved from being corporately commissioned – ie it was an 'edict' when first website set up that each department supply x paragraphs of words describing their service, in 1998 and which the then webmaster put into the site himself. This moved on to the creation/nomination of several web authors in each department who were responsible for populating their service area. Now e-service champions and business units are raising suggestions for new content areas, to the e-government team, who are receiving increasing number of unsolicited requests for the creation of 'sites' or areas of the site where teams/units within service directorates or who are working on cross directorate/cross agency initiatives can have a location for their content.

There remains, and will continue to do so, a need for a degree of corporate commissioning, ie on corporate, city wide issues, thematic issues, etc which are not the responsibility of one particular service area.

Note: Each numbered point indicates response from one council.

Chart 9 Supply of content (Top 20 websites)

## 4.2 Larger council

There are a number of dimensions to the model for organising the management of the website:

- Direction from senior management
- Work of the web team itself
- Link across to all departments or services
- Link to ICT unit (for transactional work)

### Direction from senior management

While clearly the central web team is in the pivotal position of managing the website, any model for website management should start with the direction required from the top level of management. In earlier *Better connected* reports we have stressed that the state of the website is a test of corporate management. With the publication of the first round of Comprehensive Performance Assessment reports (CPA) we have taken this further by suggesting that it is a very useful indicator for that process as there is a link between the two (see Socitm *Insight* report *Making a difference — an analysis of the ICT contribution to CPA*)

The recognition that the website is of core strategic importance and that it has to balance interests of a number of key stakeholders should itself indicate the need for a high-level steering group to shape its direction. Such a steering group's remit should also cover intranet and extranet management and, depending on how the topic is managed, may well also include information and knowledge management. The group may be drawn from different sources but should at least include:

- E-government champion (to ensure that the site develops in line with e-government plans)
- Senior manager representing front-line services
- Senior managers representing the ICT and PR functions
- Senior manager representing the role of information management

The contribution of such a group is primarily twofold:

- To ensure that some website strategy is agreed that reflects the council's needs and those of its customers.
- To ensure that the web team works to an agreed rolling improvement plan.

There may be other tasks that relate to the implementation of these documents (eg securing resources, monitoring progress, agreeing dates).

### Work of the web team itself

Central to any model are, of course, the role and responsibilities of the web team. Outlines of individual roles have been given already. The work of the team as a whole will encompass:

- commissioning and associated project management of new functionality, and in some cases, implementation too
- developing detailed standards and protocols to maintain the quality and integrity of the site, under the direction of the steering group
- monitoring the site to ensure that standards are being met by all contributors
- implementing national standards and guidelines such as *UK Guidelines for Government Websites*, e-GIF etc
- providing a central drive to improve consistency of content across different areas of the website
- working with service managers to develop ideas for new content and functionality
- identifying and potentially supplying training needs of contributors
- managing content of 'corporate' areas of the site, such as the home page, navigation and top levels of the site hierarchy
- collating, feeding back and where appropriate acting upon performance and visitor statistics
- keeping abreast of new developments and technologies and assessing how they might impact the site
- reporting to and feeding ideas into the steering group.

### Link across to all departments or services

As most of the content providers will come from across the rest of the organisation, even in a small shire district, it is equally important that the central web team has appropriate links to all other services. This may not require a separate group or groups, although some from our sample have web forums where new ideas can be put forward and tested. It is, however, critical to have effective communications with the right contacts at the right level in other departments and services to ensure that the website is fully owned, and that above all information is kept up to date. Service managers and their employees are critical to keeping information up-to-date

### Link to ICT unit

The responsibility for the website is often located in the ICT unit, although it need not be. Whatever has been the ICT contribution in the recent past, the desired goal of transactional status makes it imperative that the link between the central web team and the ICT unit becomes close.

#### Example Hertfordshire CC

- Director of community information (with corporate responsibility for ICT)
- Customer service centre manager
- Head of corporate information systems
- E-champion
- Web development manager
- Head of corporate communications
- Assistant director of adult care services (representing service departments)

This group includes people with backgrounds from PR, e-government, web development, ICT and information management.

#### Example

#### City of Sunderland

- Head of e-government (officer e-champion)
- E-government programmes support officer
- E-services integration programme manager
- E-neighbourhoods programme manager
- Webmaster
- Communities of interest project officer

*We believe that the group is very effective. It provides a dedicated and focussed forum for intensive and challenging discussion within a trusted environment, resulting in the development of number of test builds on the development server and test designs commissioned from the web designer. The group discussions and actions are minuted and progress reported at the next meeting. The meeting is facilitated by the e-services integration programme manager, who is an experienced facilitator.*

*Ideas are then taken out by the e-government support officer, for user testing through our Electronic Village Hall network, and with Age Concern and with two blind advisors who test for user friendliness, range of content, navigability, accessibility etc. The development versions are also made available to the Web Forum members — over 70 officers from different service departments, who act as authors of web content for their service area. They are invited to comment on any aspect of the proposed site.*

*In addition 'technical tests' are run to check compliance with national technical standards and guidelines for public sector websites.*

*Feedback from these sessions comes back into the Internet Futures Group, with a view to deciding how/whether it can be accommodated, and actions are agreed.*



Some of the roles in this group are very interesting. For example:

- The head of e-government looks at the website in terms of strategic context; regional and national context, contribution to e-govt targets, etc.
- The e-neighbourhoods programme manager's perspective is the locality and community based point of view and also represents the learning that she has from her constant dialogue with local community organisations, etc.
- The webmaster tends to contribute technical know-how such as navigation; impact on resolution, speed, templates, etc.

This group called the Internet Futures Group meets quarterly and more often when a full-scale site review is under way (eg in the run-up to the release of a new version, there have been 10 meetings over six months in order to scope and progress the new version)

One interesting point is that, unlike many of our Top 20 sites, this group does not have any direct responsibility for achieving BVPI157 targets, but that resides with one person — the head of e-government.

### 4.3 Shire district

The model outlined above will inevitably have to be modified according to the size of the organisation and the skills and interests of key individuals. While most shire districts will struggle to have the management structure of a larger council, they should at least ask questions about how they are going to secure a contribution from the different stakeholders we have listed. For example, the three roles of web manager, website editor and webmaster in the central web team may all reside in one person who will be unlikely to have all the skills. The question to ask is 'what help does that person need from someone with a different set of skills that are required?'

Smaller councils respond to the requirement in different ways where larger councils can more easily resource work themselves. For example, they may require a greater reliance on external agencies to fill the gap (such as web design, programming and hosting companies). Alternatively, they may depend more on the enthusiasm and commitment from staff whose formal roles do not yet include responsibility for the website. In the absence of a dedicated web editor, the communications unit may shoulder overall responsibility for site content, ideally with some training in preparing content especially for the web that can then be cascaded to site contributors. Where an authority lacks ICT skills for the website, it may opt for an off-the-shelf content management system, hosted externally, and employ an administrator with editorial and information management skills to manage content. With proper support from senior management, a judicious use of training and external support will help plug the gaps.

In some areas district and county council website staff meet regularly to discuss ways of working together to the benefit of all and sharing best practice. Such arrangements even offer scope for specialist skills to be shared or 'borrowed'.

**Example****Stroud DC**

- Director of corporate services
- Public relations officer
- PC development team leader
- Business support officer
- Web editor

As one might expect with a shire district, this is a smaller group with fewer senior managers, but it still represents a mixture of perspectives, and, in particular, includes a PR contribution.

#### 4.4 Managing transactional services

Driven by the 2005 online service delivery targets and rising customer expectations, councils are striving to take a more systematic approach to developing and managing transactional services. This requires the development or purchase of a suite of applications or 'tools' that can be re-used and drawn upon by different areas of the organisation to deliver online services. They may include a dedicated package for online forms, an e-payments system, an online booking facility, an e-mail alert system, discussion forum software and so on. It may also involve the use of 'middleware' to enable an interface between the public site and back office systems.

The LAWs project will provide local authorities with an 'out of the box' transactional website framework solution (aligned with IDeA's ESD toolkit). As it is being developed in modules, authorities can implement all or part of the product suite. Products include e-forms with XML schemas for high volume transactions, templated content relevant to each authority type, and a middleware solution. More information is available on the LAWs website ([www.laws-project.org.uk](http://www.laws-project.org.uk)).

Prior to and alongside the development of these tools, the organisation must identify and prioritise transactions that lend themselves to delivery online and that will offer the most benefit to the customer and to the organisation. Those responsible for delivering e-government will be natural drivers for this process, but it is likely that the web team will have a central role in managing and delivering these services owing to their sophistication.

It is important not to view transactions through the website as being a separate task from providing transactions via other delivery channels such as systems implemented to support contact and call centres. For example, one might happily book a bulky waste collection online, but if the council does not turn up, the customer is far more likely to complain by telephone than through the initial contact mechanism. In general, transactions offered through the website need to be provided seamlessly with those offered through other channels, or else the potential cost savings from self service are negated. Unless this can be done, organisations ought to think very carefully about whether to provide transactions at all through the medium of the website because it can bring into disrepute all of the other information that is provided through this channel.

### Are transactional services managed differently from 'information only' content?

- Yes, mainly owing to being in different systems technically.
- Yes, transactional services are championed by the Gateway User Group, senior officer from each department with responsibility for delivering the IEG promises for its department. Also on the group are e-champion, customer service centre manager, knowledge manager and web development manager.
- Yes, managed by the Internet developers in liaison with service units/web editor.
- Yes, until recently — as we have adopted a rolling programme of implementing e-modules, the content population by authors in service areas — in the current site — has been restricted largely to information and contact details.
- As the ICT unit has developed/acquired/rolled out the booking engine/payment/consultation engine/FAQs components etc these aspects of the service have been managed/added by the ICT unit. This was done originally as a 'centralised' offering eg online payments in the 'Online Services' section of the site, consultation about the service in the 'My Views' section. Having said that, service department web authors could link 'information only' content, direct to application forms, key documents databases, etc.
- More recently, the payment/consultation facility has been linked direct to the content pages for individual services by the e-government team. This ensures a consistency of location for these functions within the content.
- Under the new site and the new Service Directory facility, web authors and increasingly front line service staff (duly trained) will be creating content, reflecting all the transactional elements of the service, in addition to information, at the point of authoring.
- No
- Yes
- Yes. These are primarily developed and managed more actively by the web development team rather than devolved to the individual business units given the complexities involved.

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

This sets out responses from seven out of the ten sites that have achieved transactional status, confirming that in all but one case transactions are managed differently from pure information. The fuller answers all imply some stronger central control over the process, both at a strategic and an operational level.

Chart 10 Managing transactions (Top 20 sites)

### How are you managing the process of moving from being an information-based website to a transactional website?

*The priority is to develop the technology for which there is a proven need, eg cash management, library renewals. We are also looking at a number of processes to identify those with high volumes, in conjunction with identifying those services whose users are more likely to adopt this method of access, eg planning. We are also finding that the transactional aspects attract a different client group. For example, the library service found that the first people to apply to join the library using the online application form were young men in the 20-35 age group, one of their target groups, and a group notoriously hard to attract to libraries.*

West Berkshire Council

*The web team has implemented various transactional web applications, on basis of:*

- *applications supported by the web content management system (eg personalisation, dynamic news/councillor listings, etc)*
- *bespoke web interfaces to back office systems (eg web planning applications, publications schema)*
- *web applications developed in partnership with outsourced providers (eg Academy online payments portal, Vertex job vacancies)*
- *deployment of third party web interfaces to existing systems (eg web map is ESRI ArcIMS boxed Web GIS product and online library system from GEAC).*

*Future transactional applications will largely be driven by the council's Customer Service initiative (CSi), one of the biggest change programmes it has ever undertaken. This outsourced programme involves:*

- *implementation of a new ICT enabling infrastructure based on Oracle 11I (corporate CRM, HR, EDMS Financials, Oracle Portal, etc)*
- *re-engineering all council processes to improve customer service quality and efficiency, through use of this infrastructure.*

*From its launch in November 2003, this will deliver online access to service requests and transactional applications for all council services which are being delivered through the CSi. During the phased migration of services to the CSi (min 10 yrs) there will be an ongoing requirement to develop small web applications outside the CSi.*

Westminster City Council

## What new roles have emerged in delivering services online?

The responses to this question illustrate how roles are developing as online services are developed.

- Service delivery needs are currently managed as ICT projects. A need has been identified for roles to manage procedures to improve coordination from the business side.
- Editorial skills are now as important as technical skills.
- BPR — Business analysis
- Information management
- Improved project management
- Devolved site administrators
- Corporate editorial function
- Software developer joined steering group
- The need for an E-Government Unit, requirement for a Contact Centre and One Stop Shops management, (Customer Services) need for co-ordinated information management, need for co-ordinated e-government and web management.
- No really new roles – has increased the importance of the online service roles in the organisation.
- Technical: Central development team, lead transaction development standards and architecture, and support departmental development teams.
- Finance: Reconciliation of online payment and refunds.
- Customer Service Centre offer services by telephone.
- A change management team is proposed.
- Knowledge management team, setting standards, coordinating content creation in departments.
- News management on the web.
- E-government member panel to monitor activity.
- Centrally we have taken on staff with specific internet related development and design skills. We have also taken on staff with editorial and knowledge management skills. Within the business groups there is a need for information workers who understand their business and how to communicate it.
- The e-champion role — officers volunteered/were volunteered from each service unit in the council to perform this role in addition to their normal workload. Similarly many small duties have been added to other officers job roles associated with the website and online transactions, on an ad-hoc basis.

- *Currently* — web manager; web authors, web editors and web endorsers; e-government. programmes support officer (part role); web programmers.  
*Imminent*: web content development manager; service directory authors.
- The focus is more about reducing human intervention so we will be looking at ways in moving resource to the front-office.
- New ICT consultant role to assist in driving forward online services and an application developer.
- Haven't really identified any new roles yet — the main issues have been in ensuring that the back office and on-line functions join seamlessly. This has involved services in a certain amount of business process re-engineering. A big element of this has been provided by our strategic partners, which is one of the reasons for entering into that partnership because they were able to provide a range of skills that we did not have in house at the time.
- Such roles as business improvement consultants, business change managers, information managers and various others, yet to be defined.
- We have identified a need to extend the role of 'gatekeepers' so that they take on more information management responsibility. This is required not only for website publication but also from FOI and EDMS projects.
- None currently, all online services are delivered utilising existing officers and adapting/expanding their roles where necessary with appropriate training.

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

Chart 11 New roles for managing online services (Top 20 sites)

The new roles, skills and responsibilities that are emerging as websites become transactional is a feature being researched within the LAWs Organisational Development work strand. This will lead to guidelines and sample structures being made available by the project.

## 5 The key documents

### 5.1 Website strategy

The council should have a clear sense of direction for its website and a view about the important aspects of policy that might underpin this. At the current time Government targets are strongly focused on transactional services. Although this is important, it is also important to ensure that the website reflects local priorities and a broad view about its contribution (eg ensuring that it has news value). Encouraging take-up and usage is equally, if not more important than, adding new ever more sophisticated facilities. One view of the contents of a website strategy from the Office of the e-Envoy is provided overleaf.

*The key to effective website management is the development and implementation of a strategy designed to ensure that it remains focused on what the organisation is there to deliver as well as on what information and services the target audiences expect to be able to access.'*

*For the website to be effective, anyone in the organisation should be able to access the policy documents. These should contain clear strategy aims:*

- a description of what the website will deliver
- publishing and business procedures
- policy on achieving online transaction targets
- policy on how the web, call centres and other communication and service channels will support each other
- corporate design and editorial style guides
- guidelines on website navigation
- advice on how pages, content and links are to be owned and updated
- guidelines on when to use .pdf files
- advice on when and how to meet the needs of people who need content in languages other than English
- policy on meeting the terms of the Freedom of Information Act
- policy on data protection and privacy
- policy on disabled access to the site and meeting WAI recommendations
- plans for user testing, and the ongoing results of those tests
- plans to develop the website in line with the results of user tests.

Source: *Guidelines for UK government websites*  
(Office of the e-Envoy)

The strategy should also cover the management system, ie:

- defining clear roles and responsibilities for managing content
- nominating managers as owners of specific sets of information
- making them responsible for creating and updating content
- agreeing and implementing procedures for updating and validating content.

## 5.2 Improvement plan

Another message that we have always stressed in the *Better connected* reports is that nothing should stand still with websites. Technology trends, new ideas, visitor feedback and, in general, rising expectations all contribute to the need to seek continuous improvement — new facilities, new content, new ways of attracting visitors.

The most useful mechanism for this is the improvement plan, because it should be a way of engaging with stakeholders about their needs, of establishing priorities and agreeing how they will be implemented. It should flow out of the strategy and needs to be reviewed and updated regularly.

To illustrate the importance of the improvement process we provide a snapshot of what our Top 20 sites have both achieved and learnt from the process.

### What are the most important top three improvements you have made in the past year?

We have analysed responses to this question by category of improvement in order to show the range of improvements that our Top 20 websites completed in the past 12 months.

#### Content management

Four councils (out of 24) have implemented a new content management system. Other improvements include:

- Some use of APLAWS category lists
- Initial implementation of catalogue of services improving access to services
- Currency of services (ensuring we have this)
- Review of Internet processes
- Paying attention to keeping other useful parts of the site current: diary of events, green events, sports events, green spaces, trading standards

It is interesting to note that two councils stress currency of information as an improvement objective, because this is probably the hardest task in supporting a well-developed website, yet the one the easiest to underestimate.

#### Navigation/search

- Improved and revised navigation
- New search facilities
- Continuing to develop the About Your Area section
- Improved mapping information
- Improvements to accessibility and navigation via homepage
- Increased awareness in council of usability and accessibility issues, including introducing idea of usability testing
- Improved accessibility
- Clear links to online services/life episodes
- 'Look and feel' with navigation
- Backend changes to achieve the RNIB 'See it right' award which forced a great number of changes on design, presentation and use of underlying technologies, eg Javascript
- Clearer navigation
- Much more accessible and easy to navigate site
- Navigation
- Site search
- Establishing an information architecture which allows a better navigation and search facility
- Accessibility — WAI & RNIB 'See It right' accreditation



### Online transactions

- Online forms
- Online payments for various council bills
- Adding online payments
- More transactions
- Ability to take payments online
- Development of a number of online transactions
- Transactions — payments
- Review of applications forms online
- Enablement of 100% of services
- Increased online transactions
- Parking fine payments online
- Transactional facilities — providing wide range of services and facilities online

### Design

- New front page
- More thematic approach (including life events)
- Continual changes for accessibility
- Changing our home page design
- Improved structure for involving contributors and editors in issues of redesign
- Service directory (currently shown as 'find council services')
- Removal of frames, template for e-forms (enforced look and feel)
- Using the front page more effectively — faster moving information — using advertising initiatives, etc
- Publishing the style guidelines and cementing protocols
- Complete site redesign — more public /user focused
- Customer focused content and approach

### Database or maps

- Events database
- Addition of webcam
- Improving our database capability
- Web maps
- Where's my nearest?
- Personalisation via post codes
- FAQ database
- Personalisation
- Online mapping

### Service content

- Improved Council Tax information
- Members web
- Members contactable by e-mail
- Impartial online advice about important real life issues (life episodes) and local issues affecting the community
- Lots more additional content, incorporated into an extensive search facility
- Filling in gaps in content where services were not covered
- Private councillors area
- Improved content — people still want the information

### Other

- E-mail alert
- E-mail notification
- Minimum download time
- Improved technology infrastructure
- Targeting site as island portal rather than local government

Chart 12 Improvements in past 12 months (Top 20 sites)

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

### What lessons would you pass on to others that they might consider applying?

- Speak to as many authorities as possible before choosing a system
- Do user consultation on system
- Spend a lot of time in user acceptance testing
- Allow web team to keep tight control over editorial and design standards
- Be prepared to take risks, it is usually easier to get forgiveness rather than permission
- Long haul
- Think of end-user
- Build cross-directorate implementation teams
- Information structure is navigation key
- Need high-level commitment and significant resources
- Keep navigation simple, have a good search engine, update the summary fields in word and pdf files so that search engine does not just put out a lot of rubbish about the document.
- To ensure full council backing for web development
- To put in place adequate resources (staffing and finance)
- To plan not only for the short term but for long term
- Don't try to apply quality control procedures without a decent content management system to back them up. (We have, for several years, and it's a nightmare.)
- Devolve responsibility for web content as close to the 'front line' as possible — again, proper content management systems are needed for this, otherwise content ends up in the hands of the department's resident amateur web-designer.
- Educate your contributors on the purpose of the website.
- Remember that providing information is an important transaction in itself. Always bear in mind that some people just want to use the web to find an answer to a question, or to find a phone number so they can call someone up — and they're entitled to do so.
- Support from members (cross party), chief executive, it helps to bring pressure if required.
- Content management has been very successful for us. We have a single information base that drives call centre, website, intranet, iDTV.

- Content creation is devolved, but co-ordinated by the specialist Knowledge Management Unit.
- Web image library, web illustrator. We employed a young designer who helped us establish an image library, which also recorded keywords, copyright, DPA permissions etc. This livened up the site considerably.
- Three-tier architecture for transactions. Still early days, but we think this will improve our ability to deliver services via iDTV.
- Co-ordinate transaction development across the authority if your IS development is devolved to departments. The aim is to avoid duplicating similar transactions.
- Keep an eye on other websites. Pinch their ideas.
- Ensuring content is current and relevant
- What works for us is that quality is managed centrally, that we have a single internet site that complies with best practice and wherever possible we have introduced single corporate solutions to shared business group problems. Having the Internet site seen as a single corporate resource right from the start was a big advantage.
- Produce a site — look at other portal sites if you don't know how to produce a website — enlist the help of a web producer. Make site map on paper and follow it through. Be creative, have vision and passion.
- Design it well — design is about usability, navigability and ease of use — not just the latest in vogue lozenges...
- User test — get people's honest opinions and act on them
- Treat the council as a client — that way you give them what they want and your customers too without going round and round in circles.
- Look to practical solutions — not a solution because it uses your favourite technology
- Hard work but stick with it — bring its own awards
- Educate employees about the value of e-services
- Get rid of red tape empower members and officers to 'just do it'
- Make sure you have management commitment from the top down in order to succeed and ensure you are properly resourced.
- In-house resources give greater flexibility and more control over your website.

- You need 'buy-in' from all areas and service units of the council.
- Have an enthusiastic network of e-champions who are committed to the website and are willing to help
- User testing — out in the community — throws up some real 'beauts'! How we think about services, language etc is not mirrored by community — ask them, develop it, ask them again if it works 'for them'.
- Make accessibility testing a priority.
- Also, need to get forum to speak direct to web authors editors etc.
- Think big, start small, keep going
- Get your structures and protocols working and other things will fall into place.
- Don't underestimate time taken to re-develop a site for CMS
- As a small authority with limited resources our philosophy has been to use simple, easily developed solutions which use the technology we already have in house such as asp, php and Notes/Domino
- Needs to be seen as part of the job, not as an add-on. Should be viewed as a way of improving delivery for the customer, not just as something need to do to tick a box.
- Need commitment and support from above, and it helps if there are senior managers who are enthusiastic and can see the potential of website to improve delivery.
- Ensuring support and funding from top
- Ensuring all areas aware of 'big picture'
- Consider delivering the facilities which are the most commonly used, and can be delivered either equally or more efficiently through the website.
- It's also useful to prioritise deliverables that provide the biggest impact with the least effort

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

Chart 13 Lessons learnt in past 12 months (Top 20 sites)

### What pitfalls have you experienced?

- Occasional frustrations with using external suppliers.
- Difficulties in getting service units to supply and update their web pages
- None as yet
- Departmentalism
- Difficulty in achieving culture change
- Misunderstanding of how web is linked to wider access strategy
- Lack of joined up thinking
- How to engage directorates
- Difficulty in getting right people in right place at right time
- Great difficulty in analysing statistics and what they really mean.
- Generic transaction development. We tried to create a variety of transactions that could be configured to meet different needs. However, business managers were not prepared to fit in to this approach, they wanted more control and the software became over complex and unwieldy. Instead we try to develop reusable modules, eg online payment, client form.
- Business process re-engineering is the hardest part. We often fail to make business managers understand the need to keep the user experience simple. Transactions can work very well and we have some big successes.

- Public as users. IS development staff in local authorities build systems for staff, never for use by the public — until e-government.
- Never underestimate the ability of the public to fail to read, or understand, what you put in front of them, they will ignore it.
- The public will not behave as you expect them to, you must cater for the unexpected, eg. some of our forms have timed out after the person left it for 30 minutes, which caused some data to be lost, took us ages to work out what had happened.
- Converting content from one design to another over a long time causes version control problems
- Content providers not keeping up-to-date
- There is still a requirement to give more ability for business groups to directly input their own information.
- There have been some issues with respect to getting content from some business groups.
- Data maintenance has resourcing and responsibility issues
- No one is perfect – we have had difficulties passing Bobby since launching the e-content
- PR — Sorry, they have one vision, the customer has another!!!
- Winning the members on side — we now have 70% of them passionate about IEG

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

Chart 14 Pitfalls experienced in past 12 months (Top 20 sites)

### 5.3 Standards and guidelines

While some parts of the role of the central website team may vary according to the organisation, there can be little doubt that one key function is the management of website standards.

Standards apply in four areas as illustrated by Chart 15 below.

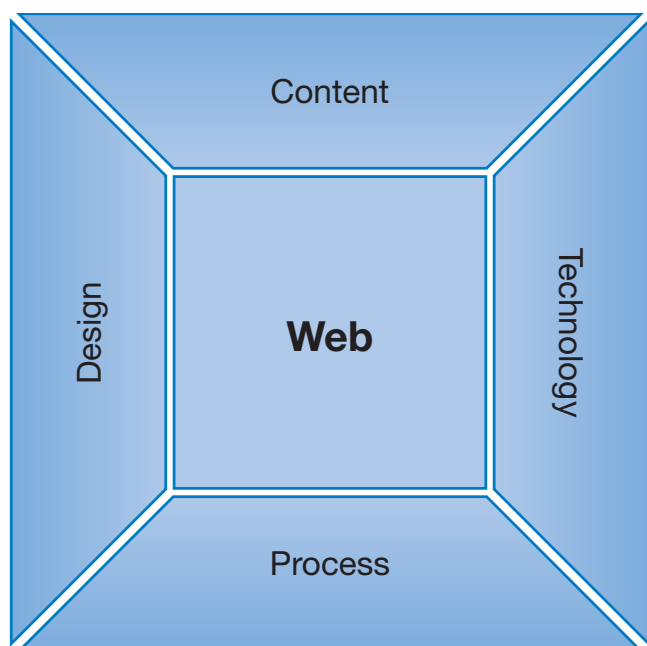


Chart 15 Standards for website

#### Design standards

- Coverage**
- The layout and structure of the site, its home page, the navigation around the site, the conventions to use in moving about the site and accessibility standards.
- Responsibility**
- Typically, the web designer will carry out this role.
- Support from**
- *Guidelines for UK government websites* (Office of the e-Envoy)
  - Specialist web design companies

#### ICT standards

- Coverage**
- The issues that affect the performance of the site such as size of files to download, the way links are used, the use of graphics, security issues and the sizing of the site so that it can deal with peak volumes and the linking with back office

function. The more transactional the site becomes, the more important these issues become.

- Responsibility**
- Typically, the webmaster will carry out this role.
- Support from**
- *Guidelines for UK government websites* (Office of the e-Envoy)
  - E-GIF standards
  - Specialist ICT consultancies

#### Content standards

- Coverage**
- The messages conveyed by the site, its overall impression and the detailed wording used. Ultimately, this is what is experienced by the website visitor... what does the website communicate?
- Responsibility**
- Typically, the web editor will carry out this role
- Support from**
- House style guide for communications
  - In house PR and communications specialists
  - Plain English campaign

#### Process standards

- Coverage**
- The tasks involved in implementing new versions of the website at all levels of change (eg from major versions to minor changes on individual pages), plus the roles and responsibilities of various contributors. In particular it should advise on all types of testing, including user testing. The scope of this work is in effect, a guide that describes how the content management system should be used. The more complex the site, the more important become the guidelines and support to ensure a smooth operational service.
- Responsibility**
- Typically, the web editor will carry out this role.
- Support from**
- Content management system (see Chart 17 opposite)

This chart shows what a typical process might look like. This will vary from organisation to organisation depending on size, type of content and nature of content management system.

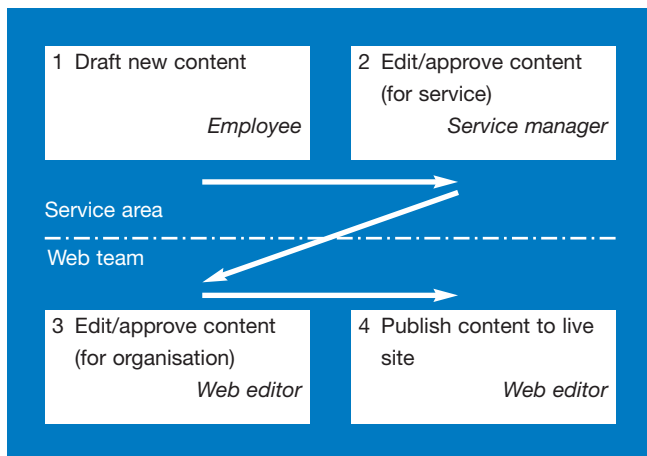


Chart 16 Typical process for publishing new content

#### What process is used to upload new information to the live website?

- Content is created by authors on the system in draft. They then submit it via the system to an editor, who checks it and submits it to a final approver who checks and publishes it. If there are any problems or queries at any stage it can be returned to draft or review.
- Under the control of authorised editors
- Upload direct from standard staff desktop with authorised Directorate 'gate-keeper' approval. Physically uploaded via central programme.
- Authorised gate-keepers can publish to the Intranet (editors from each department), for the Internet the Web Management Team publish
- Many authorised gatekeepers. Two main processes: use of FTP file transfer, and use of 'Transit Central', process which automatically converts MS Office documents to HTML pages and uploads them to the web server.
- Content creation is devolved to authorised staff. Editors add and maintain content through the browser. Workflow allows content to be added and viewed, but must be signed off before becoming live. Review date is added.
- Content can also be added automatically through Content Integrator, in batch mode.
- Central web development team will upload information
- Authorised publishers can update once initial vetting is done
- Predominantly by the central team although there are a small number of departmental 'gate keepers' although these would be able to publish they would not be able to approve content
- Central web team plus information line managers
- Devolved — to individuals and line managers to authorise
- Mixture — e-champions can add/edit certain info (FAQs, e-mail alerts), rest is added by Internet developers/web editor. Members of the public can also add info regarding events and add their listing to the Business Directory, however this is all subject to the web editor's authorisation before going to the live website.
- New site goes live in June and the development of the Service Directory tool over the next 3 months means that business users/front line staff in the service areas contributing to the Directory will be able to do so dynamically by March 04.

- Central web team
- Directorate based web reps pass updates requests to a central team using a word updates form, which is emailed. Pages are also passed via FTP to a central offline repository. Updates have to be channelled through directorate based Information and Knowledge Managers. Pages are passed to an internal server checked for version control/style and access requirements and integration with other pages (News/A to Z/other relevant site pages) is dealt with here. Checked pages are then passed from internal server than passed to live server by IT support.
- New pages can normally only be created by the web team. Updates to content can be authorised by editors.
- Certain controls are built into the Lotus Notes applications to regulate when content will be published on site. Once information is in system and meets publishing criteria it is uploaded automatically at pre-defined times.
- Done by each of the web representatives
- Gatekeepers can only copy to the nursery site, the web team only transfer to the live site when a satisfactory Compliance Report is achieved
- This is done by the central web development team through the content management system in the vast majority of cases. There are a few exceptions where trusted authors (eg libraries) are allowed to publish directly.
- The web development team publishes all content

Note: Each bulleted point indicates response from one council.

Chart 17 Process for changing content (Top 20 sites)

#### Sample checklist: amending pages

- Always download the latest version of the page.
- Spell check the page after you have amended it.
- If the page is the home page of its section, make sure you change the <noframes> content in the frame document (index.html).
- Check the change by browsing the page after you have uploaded it to the site.

#### Sample checklist: making new pages live

- Check spelling.
- Remove tag: <meta name="robots" content="noindex,nofollow">.
- Check all appropriate metadata is included.
- Test text only link.
- Test that page is picked up by search.
- Create link(s) to the page from existing page(s) in the section.
- Consider if there should be a link from the home page and / or in the 'What's New' section.
- Notify owner and anyone whose e-mail address is contained in the page that the page is now live.
- Add any e-mail addresses to the list of e-mail addresses published on the site.
- Consider if the new pages are worthy of a press release/mention in council magazine or any other publicity.
- Replace contact addresses with link to the A to Z entry if appropriate. If there is no A to Z entry, should there be one?
- Ensure that new pages are reflected in the site map.

Whatever the topics of the standards and guidelines, the roles here are common, covering the development, agreement, promotion and policing of standards. It is vital to ensure that once agreed standards are followed. The best way of reducing risk of non-adherence is to involve those who are to use them in their development, but they should be supported by training and induction sessions for new employees.



# Part B

## Engaging with the user

Getting the content right and making the website easy to use are vital for building a long-term relationship with website visitors. We re-assess what is required to improve the content and ease of use of a local authority website in order to engage with users and sustain their participation and involvement.

## 6 Useful, usable and used

This section is a contribution to the community engagement work stream of the LAWs project. It should be read by all those who are developing websites (eg web teams) and also by all senior managers who are in a position to influence the direction of the website (eg e-champions).

### **Critical factor 3    Quality**

The website should strive to achieve clear criteria of standards demonstrating the quality of the product.

### **Critical factor 4    Take-up**

The improvement of the website should aim to stimulate take-up as well as improve the product.

The *Better connected* reports have always stressed that what matters for users of local authority websites is whether they can find the information or service they are looking for with the minimum of effort. This seems to be a simple objective, but, of course, is in practice much more complicated because local authorities are complex organisations providing hundreds of services to a large number of quite different audiences. In addition to providing services, they have a unique role as instruments of local democracy, community leaders and law and regulation enforcers within a defined geographical area.

Those developing, supporting and managing websites have to cope with this complexity using a technology that is still relatively new and complicated to apply.

We have reached a stage in the maturity of public sector websites that we are no longer simply wanting to view their existence or the existence of basic content, but now need to adopt a more sophisticated approach like the Which? consumer reviews, ie the real value to the public. Recognising this plateau that we have reached is an opportunity to re-evaluate what is required for a successful website if it is to truly engage with users. We have done this by providing a new perspective on the two elements of useful content and usability that help users find the information or service they need with a minimum of effort.

In this Part B we suggest the key questions that web teams need to address and explore how these questions should be answered, providing clear criteria for success and ways of measuring them.

### **Changing role of websites**

Increasingly, local authorities are using the web to support a range of access channels such as contact centres, and to deliver a consistent service across them all. In this respect, the website has become a subset of wider e-government activity. Furthermore, many councils are participating in the development of portals which are intended to provide a much broader and more intuitive gateway into a range of council websites as well as websites belonging to other public sector agencies in the local area. Although these are important trends that will change the role of websites within the council, the website is still a major building block and is still the mechanism by which the general public finds information and services. For these reasons this part of the report focuses on the website.

Portals are likely to be the subject of a separate *Better connected* study in 2004.

### **Transactional status**

The *Implementing Electronic Government* guidance for 2003 (IEG3) issued to all local authorities in England refers to the objective that they should aim to achieve the status of transactional (T) sites by the end of 2005 as measured by our survey. For this reason we advise readers to focus on the achievement of the criteria for T sites contained in the framework for quality set out in the following sections of this report. However, as most local authorities are currently well short of achieving these criteria, we have included the criteria for all stages in our ranking system (promotional, content and content plus) as a reminder that they understand what has to be done to achieve transactional status.

The definitions in our ranking system are given in section 10 (Part C) of this document.

| <b>Useful content</b> | <b>Does the website have the information that people are looking for?</b>                 | <b>Usability</b>   | <b>How easy is the information to find and use on the website?</b>                   |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------|--|
| Information           | Do people find answers to their questions?  | Ease of finding    | Can people find the site easily?   |
| Currency              | Can people rely on the site being up-to-date?   | Use of A to Z list | Can people find their way easily to a specific topic?                                |
| Links elsewhere       | Are people referred to another organisation if the council does not have the information? | Use of word search | Does a specific word or phrase point people to the information people want?          |
| News value            | Does the content capture people's attention by its newsworthiness?                        | Use of location    | Can people find information easily by using a map or postcode?                       |
| E-mail                | Can people do business by e-mail with the council?  | Navigation         | Can people rely on a totally clear and consistent style in finding their way around? |
| Forms                 | Can people complete council forms online?   | Accessibility      | Can people use the site if they have a disability?                                   |
| Services              | Can people do specific business with the council?   | Readability        | Can people understand what the site says?  |
| Participation         | Can people influence council decisions?   | Resilience         | Can people rely on the site to work in the way that they would expect?               |

**Used                      How well used is the website?**

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Measurement | Are visitor numbers and interactions increasing?  |
| Feedback    | What do we know about visitors' experiences?  |
| Promotion   | Are websites being fully marketed to key audiences?   |
| Access      | Do people have easy free access to the Internet? (not forgetting access through intermediaries) |

## 7 Does the website have the information that people are looking for?

### 7.1 Information

*Can people find answers to their questions?*

#### Overview

The hardest part in sustaining a successful web presence long term is to keep information accurate and, above all, up to date. It affects every part of the website, and concerns everyone inside the local authority who might contribute information to the website. It is a test of the corporate management and culture of the organisation as well as commitment to its web presence.

#### What makes the web unique

The website can hold an almost infinite breadth and depth of relevant information in one place, readily available to an almost limitless number of people simultaneously at their own convenience.

#### Background

**Remember the diversity of audience for local authority websites...**

- Parents
- Tourists
- Residents
- Local businesses
- Multinational companies
- Potential employers
- Library users
- Council Tax payers
- Recipients of benefits
- Students
- Retired persons
- Researchers into family history
- Former residents
- Young people
- Ethnic minority groups
- Etc etc

**...and don't forget other important stakeholders**

- Intermediaries on behalf of those without access or who need help
- Employees
- Councillors

Notes:

This list is far from exhaustive and does not do justice to the full coverage of a local authority website.

Any one site visitor might have multiple reasons for visiting (eg as parent, library user, local employer etc).

#### Key questions

- How many more types of customer have you with different information needs?
- How well do you meet those information needs?

### Evidence of success

It is virtually impossible to list all the information that a local authority website should be providing, but at a high level it should:

- provide information about the **democratic processes**, (eg councillors, meetings, elections, participation etc)
- provide information about **all council services** and how the public may use them
- provide information to meet the **needs of the many different groups of users**
- encourage community groups and individuals to **comment on issues and services**
- provide information about the content of **all public documents**, including the facility to search and download the full documents and/or parts of them
- **provide links** to extend information at appropriate levels to **other agencies delivering services in or on behalf of the local public and voluntary sector** (eg as part of local strategic partnerships)
- **provide links** to extend information at appropriate levels to **national agencies** that complement and support local government (eg central government, single issue websites)
- provide information in **response to frequently-asked questions**

### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - May cover some services, but in little depth.
- C** Content sites
  - Should cover all services, some in some depth.
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Should cover all services, most in some depth.

### T Transactional sites

- Should cover all services in some depth.

Note:

The potential breadth and depth of information make it very difficult to define the criteria more precisely.

## 7.2 Currency

### *Can people rely on the site being up-to-date?*

#### Overview

The usefulness of the site is limited if the content is not up to date. Often a user may not know if a piece of information is accurate and up-to-date. It becomes a matter of trust and confidence in the service provider if websites do not look as if they are maintained properly. A very good way of encouraging this is to make sure that the site has the feel of being up-to-date, and, in particular, makes sure that time-dependent facilities are always up-dated. These facilities include specific sections such as What's On, What's New, press releases, job vacancies and council meetings as well as more general features such as the news value and liveliness of home pages.

#### What makes the web unique

The website updates immediately and at very low cost all the information that it holds, whenever it changes, in a way that is impossible with printed documents. It can become the place where all people who access it know they will find the most up-to-date information.

#### Evidence of success

- **What's On** should display a list of forthcoming events at least over the next month if not longer. It should not display events that have taken place, except very recent ones (say, in the past two weeks).
- **What's New** should have a list of items in reverse date sequence of changes made to the site in the past three months.
- **Press releases** should have list of items in reverse date sequence, should indicate if related documents are elsewhere on the site, and if so, should provide links to where they can be downloaded.
- **All council-managed services** should be kept up to date, such as council and committee meetings, consultation processes and operational activities (eg planning applications and decisions, service performance). This includes agendas and minutes as well as the events themselves.
- **All council decisions** should be up to date and published as soon as the minutes are available.
- **All legislative changes**, proposed or recently enacted, that affect council activity (eg Freedom of Information, changes in electoral registration, etc) should be announced promptly.
- **Major new initiatives** involving communications with citizens should always be promoted (eg service improvements).
- **Obviously old and out of date information** (eg past press releases, closed consultations) should not be visible, except through mechanisms of formal archiving and retrieval.
- **Links to other sites** are up to date as well as relevant (eg change of name of central government departments).
- **Community databases** managed by third parties are up to date.

#### **Better connected ranking**

##### **P** Promotional sites

- Will fall well short of the evidence for success (eg little changing information).

##### **C** Content sites

- Should be able to show most of the evidence of success (eg What's On, What's New, press releases etc).

##### **C+** Content plus sites

- Should be able to show all the evidence for success (eg What's On, What's New, press releases etc).

##### **T** Transactional sites

- Should be able to show all the evidence for success (eg What's On, What's New, press releases etc).



### 7.3 Links elsewhere

#### **Are people referred to another organisation if the council does not have the information?**

##### **Overview**

Government in the UK is complicated to understand for the average person.

Finding public sector information should not require prior knowledge of the organisations that deliver local services. Only web technology can deliver such joined up government. Local authorities have a pivotal role in making sense of this in the way in which their websites are designed.

##### **What makes the web unique**

The website can link together sets of information of common interest or logical flow that straddle several organisations so that the visitor sees the information as just one set, irrespective of any gaps between organisations.

##### **Background**

Most people live, work, go to school and undertake leisure activities in their local area. This may well be across local and adjacent districts, but they do not expect to have to go from website to website in their local region for information about their community, school, local council.

It is easy to mix up the roles of local, regional and national government. There are many other related parts of the public sector such as police and fire services. Central government, itself, is complex with several government departments linking with local government and with a plethora of non-departmental government agencies. In many parts of the country what many see as public services are delivered by trusts and companies of one sort or another (eg in the social housing sector).

The Office of the e-Envoy has published the following advice for local authorities:

##### **Join up with the rest of government**

*Local government websites should join up with the websites of central government, local government and other public sector agencies. Regardless of who is actually responsible for providing a service, users should be able to find the local service they are looking for. Your website may be more helpful if it links to services on the sites of other levels of government.*

*A link into [www.ukonline.gov.uk](http://www.ukonline.gov.uk) will enable users to move from local government information to central government information.*

*Local government websites should aim to exchange information and share content. A content management system that adheres to the standards in the e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF) and the e-Government Metadata Standard will make the joining up of information much easier. Content management systems (CMS) can be very helpful in distributing responsibility for authorship and updating amongst local partners.*

*For authorities without a content management system, web pages should, where appropriate, provide relevant links to other agencies. Linking to actual services or documents is better than linking to homepages, which leaves users having to navigate their own way to the resource. However such 'deep linking' requires that you plan and have the resources to check the ongoing integrity of these links.*

Source: *Framework for local government*  
(Office of the e-Envoy, June 2003)

## Evidence of success

### Scope of links

Evidence from *Better connected* surveys suggests that links should be included, or at least considered, for the following sites:

#### Should link with other local agencies:

- Neighbouring local authorities (eg physically adjacent, in same county or sub-region).
- Local parts of National Health Service (strategic health authorities, primary care trusts, hospitals, GPs and pharmacists).
- Emergency services (police, fire and rescue and ambulance services).

#### Should link with local community:

- Social housing agencies and associations.
- Parish councils and local community and support groups.
- Voluntary sector agencies (eg Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Age Concern).
- All schools in the area.
- Further and higher education and careers services (including individual colleges).
- Business links and local businesses.
- Local transport agencies (bus, train and plane).

#### Should link with national levels of government:

- Central government (especially ODPM, DTI, DfES, DoH, Home Office plus numerous agencies such as JobCentre Plus).
- Regional assemblies, chambers and development agencies in England.
- National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Executive or the Assembly of Northern Ireland (as appropriate).
- National transport agencies (bus, train and plane).
- UKOnline.

Note that the boundary between the public and private sectors may be blurred on some of these topics (eg transport). It is best to err on the side of what the public perception is likely to be.

### Quality of linking

- Should have deep links directly to that part of the website that helps build comprehensive information for a specific subject (see note below).
- Should have links that are relevant and carefully chosen.
- Should indicate what information will be available before the link is made.
- Should ensure common terminology across closely related websites.
- Should ensure navigational devices (eg search engines and A to Z lists) cover all local authorities in a defined area and clearly explain what they cover.
- Should have robust, consistent approach to linking with and leaving external sites.
- Should have no broken links.

Note: Whilst desirable in terms of ease of access to information, deep linking can be difficult for those trying to ensure that information and links remain current and accurate. A policy of deep links is probably one to be avoided if there is a risk of information moving about and resulting in a poor quality website across organisation boundaries.

#### **Better connected ranking**

**P**

Promotional sites

- Might have small range of links to external home pages (eg neighbouring local authorities).

**C**

Content sites

- Should have broader range of links to external home pages, at least some explained in context.

**C+**

Content plus sites

- Should have links to external home pages of most organisations listed.
- Should be able to demonstrate most features of quality of linking (eg evidence of full consideration and planning as to which links are needed to provide comprehensive information).

**T**

Transactional sites

- Should have links to external home pages of all organisations listed.
- Should be able to demonstrate all features of quality of linking (eg evidence of full consideration and planning as to which links are needed to provide comprehensive information).

## 7.4 News value

### *Does the content capture people's attention by its newsworthiness?*

#### Overview

The evidence suggests that what encourages visitors to websites are items of current local news value that engage the local community. The whole site, especially around the home page, should seem lively, engaging and very much in touch with local events. The perception of usefulness is impaired if the council website lacks information about topical local issues. As community leaders, councils should be aiming to make their website the definitive and best reference site for information and news about what is happening in the local area, when it happens.

#### What makes the web unique

The website can be used as an authoritative source of local news, especially at times of crisis, with the capability of added depth for specific stories, (eg impact of local emergencies on local services) and thereby helping to build community engagement and knowledge.

#### Evidence of success

- Should present council decisions, events, activities and projects as a news service.
- Should support consultations about local issues and give the results of recent ones with news about decisions taken as a result of the consultation.
- Should promote news value with a lively, dynamic home page (eg links to current press releases).
- Should build on the sense of the local community with local news stories accessible from the home page.
- Should link up with important local events (eg arts events, charity runs) even if they are only loosely connected with the local authority.
- Should be the key authoritative source of up-to-date information in local emergencies such as flooding or other severe weather.
- Should have strong links with **local printed news** (including any council newsletter or newspaper).

#### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - Unlikely to show much evidence of news value.
- C** Content sites
  - Should show some features of news value (eg local events, press releases, council minutes).
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Should demonstrate most features of news value (eg supporting the occasional consultation).
- T** Transactional sites
  - Should demonstrate all features of news value (eg offering the authoritative source of information for local emergencies).

## 7.5 E-mail

### **Can people do business by e-mail with the council?**

#### **Overview**

A natural development from providing information is to provide services. The first and simplest form of service is to do business by e-mail, because the interaction need not be structured in any way. The website should actively encourage the use of e-mail as a two-way communication medium with the general public. This might include enabling citizens to register to receive regular news bulletins or notifications of changes in services via e-mail.

#### **What makes the web unique**

The website allows e-mail to be used as a two-way communication medium that should enable enquiries and simple services to be processed efficiently by the appropriate person in the local authority. It can allow the citizen or service user to receive speedy communications from the council without having to check the website, at very low cost to the council.

#### **Background**

The Office of the e-Envoy has produced the following guidance about e-mail addresses:

*Personal email addresses must not be used; for example, richard@hotmail.com should not be used instead of richard@e-envoy.gov.uk.*

*Alternatively, generic addresses can be used, depending on the strategy of your organisation, eg, webguidelines@e-envoy.gsi.gov.uk. This allows for portability of email addresses during personnel changes.*

*When email addresses are to be included within an HTML page they should be displayed using the universally understood email format.*

*The person's name alone is not sufficient because:*

- *a new web user may not realise that they can establish contact if just the name is displayed*
- *some users may have changed the default settings of their web browser. They may have underlining of links turned off and some may have all links displayed in the same colour as standard text.'*

Source: *Guidelines for UK government websites*  
(Office of the e-Envoy)

Remember that visitors to the website may be using someone else's computer, a public computer or a work computer, and may not have access to e-mail. It is, therefore, good practice to include simple online contact forms, as well as e-mail facilities, with the facility for customers to fill in telephone and postal details as well as e-mail and to select their preferred method of response.

### Evidence of success

- E-mail addresses and online contact form should be at or near the home page for:
  - general council helpdesk
  - complaints with explanation of the process
  - web team for comments/corrections/questions about the site.
- E-mail addresses should be **explicitly stated** on screen rather than hidden behind a text link.
- Each **councillor** should have an individual '.gov.uk' address. It is not sufficient to have the address of an intermediary such as a committee clerk.
- **Council officers** should have at least a generic address for each service area.
- **Enquiries** should generate an acknowledgement and notification of any forwarding address and when to expect a reply with a unique reference number allocated to allow tracking of enquiry.
- The e-mail service is **clearly defined** in terms of time to reply and quality of reply response and the standards should be at least the same as postal or telephone enquiries.

### Better connected ranking

#### P Promotional sites

- May have one e-mail address only (eg the webmaster).

#### C Content sites

- Should have general e-mail address on home page for enquiries.
- Should have e-mail address for complaints/comments.
- Should have e-mail addresses for some councillors, or for all councillors via a third party such as a committee administrator.
- Should expect to reply within 5 days.

#### C+ Content plus sites

- Should have e-mail addresses for all public facing service areas.
- Should have e-mail address for complaints/comments.
- Should have e-mail addresses for all councillors with their names.
- Should acknowledge e-mails within 3 days and respond within 5 days.
- Should have e-mail address for web team.
- In general, should encourage use of e-mail.

#### T Transactional sites

- Should inform users of council policy and standards for acknowledging and responding to e-mail enquiries.
- Should have a tracking system for e-mail enquiries.
- Should offer simple contact forms as an alternative to e-mail addresses.

## 7.6 Forms

### **Can people complete council forms online?**

#### **Overview**

Another common type of service is the completion of forms. Here the transaction becomes much more structured than the e-mail message, although there are different levels of sophistication of form completion on the website.

#### **What makes the web unique**

The website allows forms to be completed electronically rather than in a printed version in a way that offers many additional features such as on-line help and correction of basic errors and can be integrated with back office functions. The council also benefits from cheaper administration in receiving online forms containing information that is already keyed.

#### **Background**

It is not easy to define exactly what a form is. At its simplest it is little more than a structured e-mail dialogue. At its most complex it becomes a sophisticated process for handling transactions.

Technically, forms vary in their complexity:

- Those that are essentially printed forms available electronically as *pdf* documents to be downloaded for completing and returning off-line back to the organisation. (Note that users with Adobe Acrobat Version 6.0 can complete forms electronically and submit them online or e-mail them back to the organisation if the *pdf* forms have been designed with this in mind.)
- Those that are simple forms that have been designed as web forms for completing online (with very simple pieces of information such as comments for a feedback form or for reporting faults such as broken street lights).
- Those that are complex, specially-designed web forms for completing online (eg payments, planning applications, job applications, library book renewals) and that might have sophisticated design (eg street maps for confirming locations or icons for types of fault being reported).

Putting a form online is an excellent opportunity to challenge current practice and rethink the process that supports it from a new perspective. As far as possible the work flow should be made electronic, supporting the move towards transactional services. There is no point in simply printing out electronic forms and then re-keying data separately. For example, job application forms completed online need only be signed when candidates come to interview, or indeed question whether they require a signature. Wherever possible, this opportunity should be taken to re-think processes.

**Further information** about web form design can be found on [www.formsthatwork.com](http://www.formsthatwork.com), a website created to support the book entitled '*Forms That Work*' by Caroline Jarrett and Gerry Gaffney, published by Morgan Kaufmann. One very useful paper on this website is '*Designing usable forms: the three-layer model of the form*' by Caroline Jarrett.



### Evidence of success

#### Scope of forms

The goal should be that, **wherever forms are used**, local authorities provide users with forms that enable them to enter and submit information electronically. In fact, the website is an ideal repository of infrequently-used forms and avoids individual offices having to maintain stocks of a high number of forms that are rarely used.

#### Features of forms

- Should provide **initial guidance** about information needed to complete the form.
- Should have **on-line validation and help** so that basic errors are not allowed.
- Should present **pre-defined options** for user to select (eg drop-down menus).
- Should be able to save **partly completed** and restart at a later time.
- Should be able at a later date to **retrieve a copy** of the form that has been returned, or at least be prompted to **print a completed version** immediately after submission.
- Should be able to provide **some pre-entered information** (eg address of the subject completing the form).

### Better connected ranking

#### P Promotional sites

- Very unlikely to have any forms available.

#### C Content sites

- Will offer some downloadable forms for completion offline, and the occasional simple web form for online completion.

#### C+ Content plus sites

- Will offer simple web forms and one or two complex ones for on-line completion.

#### T Transactional sites

- Will offer a number of complex web forms for online completion as part of a wide range of forms.

## 7.7 Services

### Can people do specific business with the council?

#### Overview

The final stage in the development of services concerns the use of specific transactions designed to handle specific business (eg reporting abandoned vehicles). This covers a wide range of possible transactions reflecting the diversity of local government business.

#### What makes the web unique

The website offers self-service options for a wider variety of services to be transacted electronically than is ever possible with traditional methods. It can also give secure access to back office systems to provide the latest personalised information about the transaction.

#### Background

The Government has set a target that 100% of services should be online by 2005. For the application of this target to local government, this definition has been produced.

*In order to meet overall government targets, all services that are capable of being electronically enabled should be so enabled. The type of interaction refers to any contact between the citizen and the authority, including:*

1. Providing information
2. Collecting revenue
3. Providing benefits & grants
4. Consultation
5. Regulation (such as issuing licences)
6. Applications for services
7. Booking venues, resources & courses
8. Paying for goods & services
9. Providing access to community, professional or business networks
10. Procurement

Source: *Toolkit for electronic service delivery* (IDeA)

This official definition forms the Best Value Performance Indicator 157 (BVPI 157) equivalent to NAWPI 1.5 in Wales (no equivalent in Scotland). Our definition of service is not intended to match completely with BVPI 157, which looks at interactions from a provider's viewpoint, but is intended to start defining those services from a customer's point of view.

Socitm *Insight* does not set out to provide any advice to support the collection of information for BVPI 157.

This is well covered by the detailed help from the IDeA 'Toolkit for electronic service delivery' ([www.esdtoolkit.org](http://www.esdtoolkit.org)).

### Evidence of success

#### Scope of transactions

It is very difficult to list all the possible services that might be made transactional as they run into hundreds even for small local authorities. The goal enshrined in BVPI 157 is that all those that are capable of being enabled electronically should be.

#### Features of transactions

The quality of the service is also important and generally will reflect the degree of process re-design that has been carried out prior to being made electronic.

Transactional sites will be providing added self-service value to the basic transactions, eg by checking Council Tax balances, checking progress about the approval of planning applications, browsing library catalogue.

### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - Very unlikely to have any services available
- C** Content sites
  - May include one or two simple transactions.
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Will include a range of simple transactions and some more complex ones.

- T** Transactional sites
  - Will include many transactions covering most if not all the types of interaction listed in BVPI 157.

#### Note:

The definition of services for transactional sites is not intended to be just a checklist for BVPI 157. The quality of the transaction and its link with the supporting back office function is more important than just the availability of transactions, especially if the form and process has not been properly re-designed.

## 7.8 Participation

### **Can people influence council decisions?**

#### **Overview**

The website offers the potential for a dialogue with the community it serves, seeking views on a range of issues from simple (eg feedback on services) to complex issues (eg local planning developments, budget options). It should actively encourage participation by electronic means.

#### **What makes the web unique**

The website can be used as a whole new form of democratic participation to citizens and consumers who otherwise would never become engaged through more traditional means such as attending public meetings.

#### **Background**

It is well known that we need to increase public engagement in public services and in the process of government. Turnout at local elections and national elections is low, yet often it is the only way in which many citizens engage with local democratic processes. The government has begun the process of developing policy on e-democracy that aims to take advantage of the potential of new technologies to encourage people to participate in the democratic process, and has published the results of a wide-ranging consultation at [www.e-democracy.gov.uk](http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk). A report into the e-voting pilots held in local elections across the country in May 2003 is available.

Policy in this area also embraces a much wider vision of participation, including making it easier for people to collect public information, follow the political process, discuss and form groups on political issues and scrutinise government.

For local government web technology can be employed as one method of encouraging and facilitating participation. This may start with committee documents, democracy information and publishing an online and preferably interactive version of the statutory Forward Plan of Key Decisions. The web can also make it easy to access all of the information relating to a topic of interest or concern from one place and in a format that is easy to digest. From there council sites should look to encourage feedback through online forms and e-mail, and to stimulate debate through the use of online discussion forums.

The *Guidelines for UK government websites: illustrated handbook for web management teams* contains a section on discussion forums covering areas such as purpose, moderation policy and technology. For discussion forums to be well used they usually need a strong focus, initial stimulation and publicity. Those held for a limited time period as part of a consultation on an issue of local importance are likely to fuel greater participation and a more constructive debate than a generic forum with no specific focus. Councils should expect to provide a summary of the debate afterwards and any resulting decisions taken, as outlined in the Cabinet Office code of practice for carrying out consultations at [www.cabinet-office.gov.uk](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk).

The Hansard Society runs an e-coordinators courses for moderators to explore, establish and practise the skills of coordinating online democratic forums.

Further information: [www.e-democracy.gov.uk](http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk)

[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk).

#### Evidence of success

- Should invite **feedback** on quality of services, not just in general, but also for each major service.
- Should enable registration of **complaints**.
- Should provide **ready access to public information** such as committee documents, meeting schedules, councillor information, key policies and plans.
- Should offer a **single point of access** to a full range of supporting information on topics of local importance.
- Should regularly run **discussion forums** on local issues.
- Should support **debate on specific local issues** with reporting back on outcomes of debate.
- Should show the **actual results or impact resulting from political debate and review**, to illustrate that electronic participation has made a difference.

#### Better connected ranking

##### P Promotional sites

- Very unlikely to have any evidence of participation.

##### C Content sites

- Should support feedback of services and complaints procedure.
- Should provide access to some major public documents such as local plans, committee minutes, Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

##### C+ Content plus sites

- Should show some evidence of support for some form of participation in local issues.
- Should provide access to a full range of public information including all committee documents, public strategies and plans.

##### T Transactional sites

- Should show sustained commitment for participation in local issues.
- Should provide electronic forums for debate and consultation.
- Should present all information with a range of supporting information such as an overview for the untrained citizen, engaging content to stimulate public interest and feedback, and in-depth additional material for professionals and specialised audiences.

## 8 Usability

### 8.1 Ease of finding

#### Overview

The first step in being able to use the site is being able to find it. Most visitors to local authority websites are unlikely to be familiar with website addresses for local authorities, and some local authority names are quite different from the largest towns within them. Search engines such as Google should identify the right 'urls', if you enter any reasonable place name. This, of course, requires the proper use of metadata.

#### What makes the web unique

If properly indexed, the website allows visitors to be guided intuitively to it by allowing them to use a wide variety of names, some of which may only be loosely connected with the name of the local authority (eg famous sites such as Stonehenge or Angel of the North).

#### Background

The Office of the e-Envoy has produced the following advice about the use of metadata:

*'To improve the likelihood that web pages will rank highly in the results of users' searches for the information they contain, it is essential that websites incorporate additional descriptive information designed to be processed by government and third-party search and directory systems. This internal descriptive data, intended to be read by computer systems rather than by humans, is referred to as metadata.'*

*Government policy on the use of metadata in Internet publications is laid down in the e-Government Interoperability Framework. This mandates the use of metadata in government websites. It requires that metadata conforms with the e-Government Metadata Standard (e-GMS). e-GMS is based on the Dublin Core model produced by the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative (DCMI)*

#### Checklist

- *Metadata must be added to the top of an HTML file*
- *Metadata must conform to the standards laid down in the e-Government Metadata Standard (e-GMS)*
- *The description of the page must be relevant to the published information*
- *Register your site with search engines and directory services*

*Those responsible for the web strategy should consider creating a thesaurus of keywords and other terms for the same concepts. This will help*

- *content owners choose the consistent keywords for metadata*
- *and experienced users find keywords for their searches.*

*The international standard for the creation of a thesaurus is ISO 2788/BS 5723*

Source: *UK Government Guidelines: Illustrated handbook for web management teams,*  
(Section 1.7 Getting users to your site)

Further information: [www.govtalk.gov.uk](http://www.govtalk.gov.uk)

#### PICS rating

A subsidiary point about the use of metadata is the use of the PICS rating. This gives reassurance about the appropriateness of the content. Internet users browsing with certain ISPs using family filters (eg AOL) may experience difficulty connecting to their local authority website, or finding it through search engines, if it does not contain a PICS label.

Content rating labels conform with an Internet industry standard known as the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS). There are a number of alternative bodies that issue content labels, the most popular of which is the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA). Its purpose is to empower the public, especially parents, to make informed decisions about electronic media by means of the open and objective labelling of content. ICRA's aims are to protect children from potentially harmful material and to protect free speech on the Internet.

The subsequent ICRA PICS metadata rating should be inserted in the head area of the HTML document and the ICRA logo should be clearly displayed.

Further information: [www.icra.org](http://www.icra.org)

## Portals

A new twist to finding the right name comes in the development of local portals that give an alternative route to the local authority, or might even replace the local authority website. As this trend is still at an early stage, it is so difficult to be too precise about how portal names should be developed, but clearly they should make it easier, not harder, to find the site, and then to find the information that one is looking for.

### Evidence of success

- **Name of website** should be a name that is immediately obvious (subject to the constraints of the local authority name itself) and intuitive to find.
- **Names of main towns** in the local authority area (or other such names of localities) should lead search engines to the right website.
- **Names of prominent features** in the website should also lead search engines straight to the right website.
- **Portals** covering the locality should point immediately to the right website.

### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - May not have an appropriate name for website.
- C** Content sites
  - Should have appropriate name for website.
- C+** Content plus
  - Should show proper use of metadata (eg names of main towns or prominent features).
- T** Transactional sites
  - Should show proper use of metadata (eg names of main towns or prominent features).



## 8.2 Use of A to Z list

### *Can people find their way easily to a specific topic?*

#### Overview

The key to ease of use is the signposting of the site. There are many devices to be used to support the way in which users can navigate around the site. The most likely one to find before any other is the A to Z index. This should provide an alphabetical index to all the main areas of the site, incorporating the services of the local authority and common alternative names, so that it can be relied upon to provide full details of every reference to any topic entered. It may also cover services offered by other organisations linked to the local authority (eg local partnerships).

#### What makes the web unique

The website can direct users to information according to a variety of routes that do not depend on the structure of the website, nor even on knowing the name of the website where the information may be found.

#### Background

There are standard classification schemes for services that can be used to support an A to Z list. The most well developed one comes from the Local Authorities Website (LAWs) national project (previously developed as part of the APLAWS Pathfinder project).

One of the problems with referencing information is that people tend to express requirements in different ways. For example, how might a member of the public wanting to know which day their dustbin should be emptied find out the answer from the website? They might use references to 'bins' 'dust bins', 'wheelie bins' 'rubbish', 'refuse disposal', 'ash carts', 'collection rounds' or 'waste disposal'. To link these different terms to the one preferred by the council requires a thesaurus. This is an essential component of a broader based contact centre, if not just a website.

Further information: [www.aplaws.org.uk](http://www.aplaws.org.uk)

[www.thisisessex.co.uk/essex/information/seamless.html](http://www.thisisessex.co.uk/essex/information/seamless.html)

#### Evidence of success

- Should explain clearly the **scope** of the A to Z list (eg council services for this organisation, or services provided by other public services, or all services in the community).
- Should provide deep links directly to the relevant part of the website if it does refer to **other websites** (eg in two tier area).
- Should use an alphabetic index with '**clickable**' alphabet.
- Should point to the **relevant area of the website** containing further information or, if not appropriate to do this, should contain a brief overview (eg contact details including e-mail).
- Should offer **list of items** to browse through, but should be organised in such a way that each section should not be too long (say, 1-2 screens).
- Should **point to a map** (eg Multimap or other external postcode mapping system) if the entry is based on a location (eg leisure centre).
- Should ensure that entries are closely linked to **specific information pages**.
- Should be accessible from **all main pages or sections** as well as the home page.
- Should explain **acronyms** and hold **alternative names** for services (eg 'dustbins, refuse, rubbish').

### **Better connected ranking**

#### **P** Promotional sites

- Typically, will list council departments and/or services only, with telephone numbers and little else — often no description. The whole A to Z will be presented on one long page, perhaps with quick links at the top to jump to the start of a letter.

#### **C** Content sites

- May list all entries on one very long page but more typically will have separate pages for each letter, and may provide an index of title links, with more information on a dedicated page for each entry.
- May offer e-mail addresses for at least some services and should link to relevant pages elsewhere in the site.
- Likely to cover most council services, but not all the alternative names.

#### **C+** Content plus sites

- Should meet the criteria for a successful A to Z list of entries.
- Should offer a comprehensive directory of council services with plenty of alternative names and a good directory of key local non-council services as part of it.
- Should join up with other local authorities and key local partners, using deep links for some entries at least.

#### **T** Transactional sites

- Should meet the criteria for a successful A to Z list of entries.
- Should offer a comprehensive directory of council services with plenty of alternative names and a good directory of key local non-council services as part of it.
- Should join up with other local authorities and key local partners, using deep links for some entries at least.

### 8.3 Use of word search

*Does a specific word or phrase point people to the information they want?*

#### Overview

Every site should have a search engine that enables the visitor to find all references to any word, or combination of words, that are specified. It should be offered on or linked from home page and from every subsequent page. It should also have an explanation of what is included in the search, ie the whole website or just selected areas or types of information. It should provide clear evidence of the source of information that it finds, together with some means of evaluating the relevance.

#### What makes the web unique

The website can direct users immediately to information according to any word or phrase selected, no matter how broad and deep the contents of the website.

#### Background

The use of search engines is a complex and changing topic which it is difficult to summarise and clearly covers all types of website in all sectors of business and areas of life. The Internet is the obvious place to find further information. We have selected here one very well-used and dynamic site that provides a wealth of information about search engines.

Further information: [www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com)

#### Evidence of success

##### Checklist for searching...

- Should make accessible from **every page**.
- Should ensure that the search results **page returns** to either the previous page (Back button) or the home page (Home button).
- Should make it clear the **scope** of what is being searched, eg the whole site or part of the site.
- Should make sure that the search includes the **A to Z index** as well.
- Should ensure that all sites that have been **joined together** to make one site are included.
- Should use **flexible search criteria, keywords and categories** so that many combinations of searches can be carried out.
- Should make it clear how a search **using more than one word** is dealt with and also punctuation (eg inverted commas).
- Should provide **advanced search features** that allow refinement of initial search results and document searches.
- Should allow for **alternative spellings** or 'do you mean' for misspelt words.

### Checklist for finding...

- Should display the **number of search finds**.
- Should show **source of item found**.
- Should aim for a **small** number of **highly relevant results** that show the full path name of the item, together with a useful description so the viewer can check relevance.
- Should indicate the **sequence of the search results** — popularity, rating, weighting.
- Should show the **match or level of 'fit'** for each result.
- Should indicate whether the item found is a **web page or a pdf**.
- Should provide a facility to **refine results**.
- From results page offer '**back**' (back button) to search page or '**home**' (home page).

Test your search with basic relevant words and phrases to ensure that appropriate and useful matches are returned high up the list (and not, for example, an endless procession of committee documents).

Adapted from: *Better connected* 2003

### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - Unlikely to have search facility.
- C** Content sites
  - Should have search facility but will only meet some of the requirements of the checklist of features (see above).
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Search should meet the full requirements of the checklist of features (see above).
- T** Transactional sites
  - Search should meet the full requirements of the checklist of features (see above).

## 8.4 Use of location

### ***Can people find information easily by using a map or postcode?***

#### **Overview**

Place differentiates local authorities. One very obvious set of navigational aids that develop from search engines relates to place names. All local authority websites should make full use of geographically based features such as maps, postcode searches because people generally relate to their own area, town or street. This includes selection of services by location through 'Where is my nearest?' searches.

#### **What makes the web unique**

The website can harness the full potential of geographical information systems (GIS) to guide visitors to information by maps. For example, information about places of interest such as schools or churches might be found just by looking at a map of the local area.

#### **Background**

Map-based information is very powerful to use and offers exciting potential in presenting information. It provides a pictorial view that is so much more eloquent and impressionistic than tables, statistics, graphs and certainly than just text. Much information is intuitively map based — details of country parks, locations of offices, how to find a car park, how to get from A to B.

Simply linking to Multimap or another commercial map system may be adequate for some purposes, but well-developed council websites should make full use of GIS. However, it is not a simple task to transfer internal GIS systems for public use because often access is simply too slow because files are too large. Integrating GIS into a website is not a straightforward task. Lessons from the very small number of local authorities that have tackled this provide the following advice:

- Do not confuse people with too many options and make buttons a reasonable size.
  - Carry out user testing, encourage feedback and act on it.
  - Use a prompt box for commentary and to suggest what to do next.
  - Ensure that the system complies with Ordnance Survey copyright requirements.
  - Offer plenty of help with an online 'help' facility and telephone numbers for contact.
  - Do not forget that scaleable maps are not accessible for those with sight problems. The more open-ended the facility, the less accessible it is.
- 
- Plan the availability of GIS on the web carefully, because the power and complexity of most internal systems will usually make them unsuitable without considerable modification.
  - Design a public version (which inevitably will be much simpler than an internal version) to be as easy to use as possible as there is no scope for training.
  - Select carefully what are the most useful facilities to make available online.

#### Evidence of success

- ‘Clickable’ **maps** should be provided of areas, buildings (eg schools, leisure facilities), local attractions, linked to specific information about them.
- ‘**Find the nearest**’ facilities should also be provided where the type of organisation or facility can be found by entering a postcode.
- Even better, **map-driven databases** should be offered to help users find their nearest organisation or facility, and offer a location map for each entry in the database.

#### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - Very unlikely to have any such facility.
- C** Content sites
  - Might have some ‘clickable’ maps (eg Multimap).
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Likely to have a ‘find the nearest’ facility.
  - Might have some form of GIS.
- T** Transactional sites
  - Might have GIS fully integrated into some site functions (eg reporting street lighting failure by map).

## 8.5 Navigation

**Can people rely on a totally clear and consistent style in finding their way around?**

### Overview

Navigation around the site must be supported by attention to the 'nuts and bolts' of site design. Often referred to as usability, this covers a whole range of issues such as consistency, branding, layout, structure and technology.

### What makes the web unique

If well designed, the website can become an extremely intuitive medium for navigating visitors to the precise piece of information that is required, wherever it is and however large the website.

### Background

*Usability testing of websites is a developing trend with a number of specialist consultancy services emerging to support it. This is not an esoteric practice only used by those with plenty of money and resources to invest. The point is to ensure that the site does what the user wants it to do and in a way that can be understood, using terms, images, language etc that users can relate to.*

*In fact, sites with poor navigation are likely to waste money and lose opportunities. If users struggle in navigating their way around a site, they will soon leave it, not to return. Employees, partners and customers who use and have confidence in the accuracy of website information are likely to reduce the organisation's costs by looking up and passing on information directly. The site becomes a tool for self-service.*

*The solution is to think carefully about usability right from the outset, build in the right features and test carefully with groups of typical users before the new version is implemented. The process is founded on the belief that users do have the answers as to what works but do not tell the developers when they are asked. The most effective way of finding out what works is to set users tasks and watch how they actually use the site to try to fulfil them. Feedback is based on actual experience rather than theory and perceptions. One very useful source of users for those that have one might be a Citizens' Panel.*

*The technique of usability testing is based on typical tasks set for users, on taking and watching a video of the interactions (ideally, in another room) and on analysing the results. Often solutions can be quickly developed on the spot and re-tested.*

Source: Better connected 2003

Further information:

- *Designing web usability: the practice of simplicity* and many other publications by Jakob Nielsen and his very useful web resource ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)).
- *Don't make me think* by Steve Krug ([www.sensible.com](http://www.sensible.com))
- *Quality framework for UK government website design: usability issues for government websites* ([www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm](http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm))
- Guidelines to be compiled by the LAWs national project (see [www.laws-project.org.uk](http://www.laws-project.org.uk) from January 2004).



### Evidence of success

- Should have **intuitive navigation** with clear, meaningful names.
- Should make **consistent use** of colour, text size, space and signposting.
- Should have a **clear home page** that sets the style for the site.
- Should include **clear directions** for 'clickable' content (eg external site, *pdf*)

These are just some of the ergonomic features that encourage usability, but it is not easy to provide checklists of usability features, because often the context is all-important. It is easier to point out common faults that are obstacles to usability such as this selection of irritants about home pages:

- 'splash' introductory screens before you reach the home page proper
- scrolling text on the home page, and elsewhere
- 'Flash' animations, particularly as introductory pages
- cryptic or vague names for site areas such as 'living' or 'enjoying'
- large graphics that serve no purpose
- home pages that take too long to load

Further lists of features that do not help usability can be found in *Better connected* 2003 ('*Don't make me cross*', Page 87)

### Better connected ranking

#### P Promotional sites

- Should be at least reasonably satisfactory in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are.

#### C Content sites

- Should be at least satisfactory in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are

#### C+ Content plus sites

- Should be at least good in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are.

#### T Transactional sites

- Should be excellent in terms of usability, offering the 'compelling user experience'.

## 8.6 Accessibility

### *Can people use the site if they have a disability?*

#### Overview

It is estimated that over eight million people in the UK suffer from some form of disability causing them to have difficulty in using the standard PC and keyboard. Websites should be designed with the needs of all those with such problems and difficulties in using technology. Accessible website design should ensure that web pages are easy to use in the broadest sense for all those who visit a website. This includes how the site functions, its usability, page layout, use of language and readability as well as how to it meets the requirements of those using adaptive or alternative technology.

#### What makes the web unique

If designed to be accessible, the website can open a new world of information to those whose disability problems are otherwise excluded from that world. If fully accessible, the web can be incredibly empowering for disabled people in that it offers a huge repository of information that can be accessed from one place (eg. housebound, wheelchair bound). At its best it is very flexible in the way that content can be accessed to meet needs of a wide range of disabilities and can allow independence with self-service facilities, that are also relatively cheap to provide (eg it is cheaper to make documents available on the web than providing braille alternatives or talking tapes).

#### Background

##### Three main forms of disability

###### 1 Keyboard/mouse difficulties

Many people have an impairment that creates difficulties with fine motor control as the result of conditions such as Parkinson's disease or Friedreich's ataxia, or simply through age. Others have difficulties with the use of their arms or hands as the result of such conditions as cerebral palsy, a stroke or high spinal injury, or an upper limb disorder such as RSI. Much can be done to tune the response of the keyboard and mouse to make them easier to use with more accuracy and fewer unwanted mistakes. There are also many alternative keyboards and types of mouse that can help.

###### 2 Visual impairment and colour-blindness

There are many people who do not have perfect vision. Some conditions (such as age-related macular degeneration) affect the central vision and make reading difficult, whilst others (such as retinal pigmentosa) only affect the peripheral vision, but can result in tunnel vision. Some people will find it difficult to read the equivalent of 10pt on a 14" monitor, others find it difficult to easily make out serif fonts such as Times New Roman. Without sufficient contrast between background and text many people will have problems reading the page. If the page is cluttered and complex, those with a limited field of vision can miss vital pieces of information.

People relying on screen-reading software (speech output) can find some pages impossible to access because images are unlabelled and multi-media components do not have an alternative. Those people who find it difficult to differentiate between blue and yellow, or red and green (the two most common forms of colour-blindness) need text and background colour combinations that avoid these combinations.

###### 3 Cognitive/literacy difficulties

Some people with dyslexia or dyspraxia also prefer a sans-serif font such as Arial and benefit from being able to apply their own colour choices. Those with learning or literacy difficulties like pages to be in plain English and uncluttered, with a simple and consistent method of navigation (with the judicious use of helpful images). Most web pages tend to be overpopulated and littered with jargon.

## The legal obligations

Social inclusion and equal opportunities are important policies for all public sector organisations, but it is worth reinforcing the importance of accessibility in the design of websites with a reminder about the legal position.

The *Disability Discrimination Act* states that it is unlawful for a service provider to discriminate against a disabled person by:

- refusing to provide (or deliberately not providing) any service which it offers or provides to members of the public
- providing service of a lower standard or in a worse manner; or providing service on worse terms
- failing to comply with a duty to make reasonable adjustments (under section 21 of the Act) if that failure has the effect of making it impossible or unreasonably difficult for the disabled person to make use of any such service.

The applicability of these sections of the Act in relation to the accessibility of public websites has not yet been tested in court, but local authorities should be wary about becoming the first test case!

In the USA under Section 508 of the *Americans With Disabilities Act* all federal agency websites have had to be accessible since 21 June 2001, and this is forming a significant backdrop to current thinking worldwide, not least here in the UK.

## Evidence of success

- Full compliance with Level A of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines (Version 1). The 14 guidelines for web content accessibility comprise:

- 1 Provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.
- 2 Don't rely on colour alone.
- 3 Use markup and style sheets and do so properly.
- 4 Clarify natural language usage.
- 5 Create tables that transform gracefully.
- 6 Ensure that pages featuring new technologies transform gracefully.
- 7 Ensure user control of time-sensitive content changes.
- 8 Ensure direct accessibility of embedded user interfaces.
- 9 Design for device-independence.
- 10 Use interim solutions.
- 11 Use W3C technologies and guidelines.
- 12 Provide context and orientation information.
- 13 Provide clear navigation mechanisms.
- 14 Ensure that documents are clear and simple.

Each guideline has a set of 'checkpoints' each of which are assigned a 'priority level' one, two or three. For example, 'Checkpoint 1.2 Provide redundant text links for each active region of a server-side image map. [Priority 1]

The WAI guidelines also link to a set of 'techniques' for each checkpoint, which give further advice on how to implement the checkpoint.

There are three levels of conformance with the guidelines, as outlined in the document:

- **Conformance Level A:** all Priority 1 checkpoints are satisfied
- **Conformance Level AA:** all Priority 1 and 2 checkpoints are satisfied
- **Conformance Level AAA:** all Priority 1, 2, and 3 checkpoints are satisfied

#### Priority 1

A web content developer **must** satisfy this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it impossible to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint is a basic requirement for some groups to be able to use web documents.

#### Priority 2

A web content developer **should** satisfy this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it difficult to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint will remove significant barriers to accessing web documents.

#### Priority 3

A web content developer **may** address this checkpoint. Otherwise, one or more groups will find it somewhat difficult to access information in the document. Satisfying this checkpoint will improve access to web documents.

The guidance for *Implementing Electronic Government 2003* (IEG3) specifies Level AA conformance.

Further information: [www.w3.org/tr/wai-webcontent](http://www.w3.org/tr/wai-webcontent)

#### Better connected ranking

- P** Promotional sites
  - Should comply fully with Level A of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.
- C** Content sites
  - Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.
- C+** Content plus sites
  - Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.
- T** Transactional sites
  - Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.

## 8.7 Readability

### **Can people understand what the site says?**

#### **Overview**

Much of the hard work in developing and supporting websites can be undone if the information found is not easy to understand, or if the terminology used to guide visitors round the website is not simple and clear. Just as printed material meant for the general public should be carefully written and checked for its readability, so should website content. The language in which the content is written must be simple and easily understood. Not only does this cover English but other frequently used languages by local communities.

#### **What makes the web unique**

If clearly written for the general public, the content of the website enables people to inform themselves on topics of interest or that they need to know about, at their own leisure and convenience. It is especially useful if local government processes and terms can be explained clearly so that it is actually easier to use the website than to telephone.

#### **Background**

The informal style of the web and the greater accessibility that it offers to the public provides a real opportunity to encourage improved practices in making documents more readable. Ensuring that the content of a website is readable is another facet of usability.

Councils should apply the principles of Plain English, whether or not they strive for official accreditation from the Internet Crystal Mark scheme run by the Plain English campaign although this is a useful benchmark. In last year's survey, we found six local authorities with this accreditation. Now another six local authorities, all but two still in London or the Home Counties, can display this symbol (out of twenty-three organisations in total that have been accredited).

However worthy this particular scheme, we should not confuse accreditation with the principle of writing clearly and simply to a wide range of audiences. This principle is accepted as a matter of course for printed material (eg leaflets) that all public sector organisations issue day in day out. The problem with websites is that this principle has been neglected for a new medium of communication where we have been carried away with the ease of publishing content that new technology enables and have as a result sacrificed quality for quantity.

There are many tips that can be given, such as avoiding long words and jargon, writing in short sentences, using lists and bullets wherever possible, signposting text, and, above all, being consistent. However, this is a broad topic well beyond the scope of this report.

Further information : Plain English campaign\*  
[www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

*The Plain English campaign to designing clear websites*  
([www.plainenglish.co.uk/webdesign.html](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/webdesign.html))

\* The Plain English Campaign is an independent pressure group fighting for public information to be written in plain English. Public information means anything people have to read to get by in their daily lives. Plain English is language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading.

#### **Evidence of success**

- Official accreditation from the Internet Crystal Mark for Plain English
- If not accredited, consistent use of principles of Plain English
- Use of other languages by local community (eg Welsh language option for all councils in Wales)

#### **Better connected ranking**

**C**

Content sites

- Might show consistent use of principles of Plain English on some pages.

**C+**

Content plus

- Should show consistent use of principles of Plain English on most pages.
- Should show use of other languages for local community (if applicable).

**T**

Transactional sites

- Should show consistent use of principles of Plain English on most pages.
- Should show use of other languages for local community (if applicable).

## 8.8 Resilience

***Can people rely on the site to work in the way they would expect?***

### Overview

As websites become transactional, they must become resilient as operational channels. The disciplines associated with a production environment for ICT systems must now be built into the whole management process. Good performance and availability are an integral part of a usable design. This includes a number of issues, most of which can be tested automatically such as opening up the home page and preventing broken links.

### What makes the web unique

Through the use of automatic benchmarking tools the website can monitor technical problems about its operation in a way that helps to ensure total availability of service.

### Background

There are three categories of testing.

#### 1 Website function

This covers the testing of the website, looking at problems that prevent the site from operating correctly. It includes problems ranging from broken links and missing images to less than obvious problems such as e-mail address or html syntax.

#### 2 Website compliance

This covers the testing of the website to the standards laid down by both World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). One of the problems attributed to poor technical site build quality can be noticeable performance degradation of the website.

Further details can be found at [www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org) and [www.ietf.org](http://www.ietf.org).

#### 3 Website performance

This covers the testing of performance issues such as overall performance, the response of the server and the download and availability of the front page of the website. It is important to measure each individual page, but report as an average across the tested pages, giving a meaningful test of the site as a user would experience and not just the performance of specific site pages.

### Evidence of success

- Website available for 100% of the time (excluding any planned downtime for maintenance etc).
- Home page opened up consistently within the industry average of 15 seconds.
- Number of broken links minimised as the size of the website grows.

### Better connected ranking

#### P Promotional sites

- Should be available most of the time with only some broken links.

#### C Content sites

- Should be available most of the time with few broken links.

#### C+ Content plus sites

- Should be available at all times with very few broken links.
- The home page should load in less than 20 seconds.

#### T Transactional sites

- Should be available at all times with very few broken links.
- The home page should load in 15 seconds or less.



## 9 Take-up

### 9.1 Difficulties of assessment

In looking at the ways we might benchmark and improve the website as a product, we have been able to suggest a firm framework of criteria for improving the content ('useful') and for improving ease of use ('usable') of websites. When it comes to the topic of take-up, the third aspect of user engagement ('used'), then it is much more difficult to propose a similar framework. Until the product is useful and usable, it is premature to focus on use of websites. Consequently, the research and understanding of what encourages take-up is much less well-developed. For example, only in the latest of our five annual reports in the *Better connected* series have we been able to examine issues about take-up.

The reason for a focus on take-up is quite obvious. Most public sector organisations have invested time, resources and money in developing websites in the belief that this is a crucial step forward in improving convenience, efficiency and quality of public services. It is important to be reassured before investing further that users of public services value these web-based improvements. Some evidence to date suggests disappointing levels of take-up, most prominently the Prime Minister's address at the e-summit of 19 November 2002 for e-champions from across the world.

It is not easy to draw firm conclusions from the actual evidence about take-up for many reasons such as:

- What do users really expect from electronic access to government services?
- How can you really measure take-up satisfactorily?
- How reasonable is it to expect the public to change behaviours quickly?

We know from previous experiences in application of technology that take-up is notoriously difficult to predict. E-mail was available for many years, as indeed was the Internet, before the technology was readily accepted by organisations and individuals alike. On the other hand, mobile phones and text messaging which many would have predicted as having little long-term interest became embedded in everyday use in no time at all.

As far as local government is concerned, the picture about take-up is patchy, but what information exists is not necessarily disappointing. For example:

- Those councils that were able to reply in our Top 20 survey in May 2003 reported increases of take-up in the past twelve months, with most reporting doubling of visitors.
- Our own analysis of Internet traffic in the local government market drew a clear correlation between well-developed websites and well-used websites (see section 6.3 of *Better connected 2003*).
- Similarly, our own survey commissioned from MORI showed that usage of local government websites compared well with heavily promoted online brands such as BBC Online, NHS Direct and UK Online) (see section 2.3 of *Better connected 2003*).

Whatever the true picture about take-up, there is much to do in determining the best mix of indicators of take-up and understanding what encourages usage and what does not. The community engagement work stream in the LAWs project, and also the recently announced national project on take-up, should both help to throw light on these issues.

In the meantime we suggest that there are four important criteria in assessing take-up:

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Measurement | Are visitor numbers and interactions increasing?  |
| Feedback    | What do we know about visitors' experiences?  |
| Promotion   | Are websites being fully marketed to key audiences?   |
| Access      | Do people have easy free access to the Internet? (not forgetting access through intermediaries) |

The rest of this section will discuss these aspects of take-up.



## 9.2 Measurement

The starting point for any discussion about usage is clearly to know the current level of take-up. The objectives of knowing how many visitors come to the site, how many repeat visitors come, what type of person they are, and what parts of the site interests them are worthy objectives. The methods of achieving those objectives by analysing website usage statistics are fraught with difficulties such as the impact of various caching regimes that conceal true usage and the impact of software agents that may exaggerate usage.

Further information about such difficulties is given at [www.goldmark.org/netrants/webstats/](http://www.goldmark.org/netrants/webstats/).

This report cannot go into detail about all the pros and cons of different methods and different products which are in any case developing all the time. It is certainly important to understand patterns of website traffic in order to manage the workload from a technical viewpoint, ie ensuring that the website can handle surges of volume. Some products may be helpful in analysing general trends such as comparison of local authorities within a defined sector (ie local government) in order to understand who attracts higher level of traffic than others.

The type of measurement that is helpful to analyse is the volume of e-mail and other types of transaction (eg payments, bookings, etc) because the website visit ends in a measurable outcome. Even here the results should be interpreted carefully. For example, it is actually more successful from a resident's point of view to have fewer abandoned vehicles in the first place, than to have more being reported on the website!

Focusing on the outcomes of the visit also leads to a better understanding of the favourite applications. The table opposite summarises the most used features of our Top 20 sites. It highlights both the diversity of local government in the range of applications listed and the recurrence of certain applications just as job vacancies.

### What are the top three most used features of your website?

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| Council 1  | The Council<br>Home page<br>Jobs pages   |
| Council 2  | Job vacancies and online application forms<br>Webcams (Wedding and Wembley stadium)<br>A-Z services  |
| Council 3  | Applying for jobs<br>Viewing planning applications<br>Parking fines  |
| Council 4  | Vacancies<br>Libraries Home page<br>A to Z of Services<br>Borough map  |
| Council 5  | Jobs<br>Local studies (libraries)<br>Devon Grid for Learning   |
| Council 6  | Web Cam<br>Job vacancies<br>Local event information  |
| Council 7  | A toZ of services<br>Council contacts<br>Events  |
| Council 8  | Home page, including monthly features, is the most popular.<br>Education, training and lifelong learning home page<br>Search facility (includes specialist searches as well as main site search)<br>Schools e-mail access page |
| Council 9  | Search<br>A to Z<br>Jobs   |
| Council 10 | Jobs<br>Search and directory<br>Online services  |
| Council 11 | Places to go<br>Clubs and organisations<br>Events  |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Council 12 | Job vacancies<br>Planning information<br>Events information   |
| Council 13 | News<br>OSC<br>Whats On   |
| Council 14 | Life episodes<br>FAQs<br>News   |
| Council 15 | A to Z<br>Council Tax band enquiries<br>FAQs  |
| Council 16 | Home page<br>Press releases<br>City council   |
| Council 17 | Streetworks reporting (potholes,<br>streetlights)<br>Credit card payments<br>Requests for paypoint/post office<br>payment cards           |
| Council 18 | Access to William Morris Gallery<br>Jobs<br>Leisure activity pages  |
| Council 19 | Travel planner<br>Planning application<br>Site search   |
| Council 20 | Planning<br>Environmental services<br>Democratic services   |
| Council 21 | Jobs<br>Libraries<br>Record Office  |
| Council 22 | Search facility<br>Libraries information (including<br>online catalogue)<br>Council information (members, area<br>forums, committees etc) |
| Council 23 | A-Z services directory<br>Live Webcam<br>Online services index page   |

Chart 18 Most used features (Top 20 websites)

### 9.3 Feedback

As the business of understanding take-up is at a very early stage for most councils, it is especially important to analyse every form of feedback about the quality of the experience. Although this might be difficult to achieve, it should aim to include:

- Logging all e-mails, their content and the tenor of any comments (positive or negative). Queries for information can be used to analyse whether the website does already show the information (in which case there might be an issue of usability about the site) or does not (in which case there may well just be a need to add the information to the website).
- Logging all queries for information through other channels of access such as call centres, one-stop shops etc. Again, the content of those queries are a very good indicator about the relevance of the website and its usability.
- Setting up e-mail reply forms on specific pages so that serious interest about a topic can be assessed.

The process of collecting and analysing feedback should be built into every plan for improving the website. This can also be supported by carrying out surveys, both web-based and more traditional methods such as satisfaction surveys and also by making use of focus groups, citizens panels etc, whereby questions about relevance of information and services can be asked.

The key point about all these methods is to involve the website user in the process of developing the website content.

## 9.4 Promotion

As well as understanding current levels of performance and analysing feedback about the site, local authorities should also be active in promoting the site. There are many ways of doing this that include basic advice that we identified in *Better connected 2003* and reproduce below.

### Checklist of promotional methods

- Make sure your web address is on all stationery, business cards and publications.
- Make sure also that it is used on all posters and flyers in public access points such as receptions and libraries.
- Build the web address into reciprocal links with other local organisations.
- Submit it regularly to search engines and site directories.
- Put out press releases for launching new facilities.
- Make use of links with local college courses.
- Consider radio advertising.
- Consider posters on buses, council vehicles and street banners.
- Ensure that all employees are made aware of the need to promote your website.
- And finally, do not forget to complete your meta tags properly!

There is also scope for innovation in this field, as demonstrated by the two examples quoted below.

Promoting local web awards ceremonies  
**Hampshire CC**

Taking the website to local events  
**Warwickshire CC**

Although quite different events, they both show how publicity, consultation and the spreading of good practice can all be linked together. For example, the Hantsweb Awards attracted considerable positive local media attention, which reflected well on the Hantsweb site itself as well as the award winning websites which it encouraged.

Source: *Better connected 2003*

These actions should also be supported by the contribution from perhaps the most valuable resource of all: the people who work for the council. They need to be made aware of the potential and to accept that they have a role in promoting what the website has to offer. This will not work unless employees are themselves fully aware about how their websites can help the public (eg through staff briefings, newsletters, use of intranets) and are to some extent educated in the importance of promoting the website. This is all part of the change management process that should be an integral part of e-government preparations.

In order to explore beyond these straightforward methods of promotion we asked our group of Top 20 sites how they have promoted their sites and what they have learnt from the process. The range of the approaches reinforces the point that most councils are experimenting in different ways.

### What has worked well as a promotional device?

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Council 1 | No direct research has been done.  |
| Council 2 | No information.  |
| Council 3 | It is difficult to quantify how much of the increase in usage is due to the publicity or people having the ability to get on line. For instance we saw a big increase in usage at the time of the council tax rise but that was not promoted as something that could be done on the web. |
| Council 3 | No magic. Drip, drip effect.<br><br>Webcasting during major issue (Foot & Mouth Inquiry) and allied web-information service boosted use considerably.  |
| Council 4 | The webcam has brought huge amounts of traffic to the site but has given us other problems in the bandwidth requirements.  |
| Council 5 | Advertising and promotional material such as bookmarks.  |

|            |   |            |  |
|------------|---|------------|--|
| Council 6  | Hantsweb Awards attracted considerable local media attention, nearly all positive, which reflected on the Hantsweb site itself as well as the award-winning websites.   | Council 16 | Advertising the web site in the council's magazine. Linking up with other Communications colleagues. Long process, but starting to get there. Giving local business/orgs the chance to fill out an online form to advertise.   |
| Council 7  | Popular transactions: We have had several instances of significant increase in usage associated with transactions, in particular:<br><br>secondary school admissions<br><br>highway fault reporting<br><br>copy birth/marriage/death certificates.  | Council 17 | Special newspaper and printing address on every printed publication/poster.  |
| Council 8  | Presentations at forums and events.   | Council 18 | Not known – we have no statistics to support an answer.  |
| Council 9  | Timed marketing for prominent releases (eg libraries, e-payments).  | Council 19 | Immediate updating of results from local council elections; providing a direct benefit.  |
| Council 10 | Borough newspaper and where individual services promote their areas of the site eg Opera Holland Park independently promote their part of the website <a href="http://www.operahollandpark.com">www.operahollandpark.com</a> which then redirects to <a href="http://www.rbkc.gov.uk/ohphollandpark">www.rbkc.gov.uk/ohphollandpark</a> | Council 20 | Quick poll, news items, items of a general nature in times of crisis eg flood warnings, road works.  |
| Council 11 | Banners and adverts – but I am talking private sector advertising here – We will look into direct marketing of our site and services this year.   | Council 22 | Registered users were entered into a prize draw with the winners receiving a holiday or theatre tickets.<br><br>Postcards and bookmarks advertising the prize draw were also used.   |
| Council 12 | Council magazine – and on-line promotion from other key local sites.  | Council 23 | Local website awards competition – recognising and celebrating the use of the web in the local community – increased awareness and usage of the authority's website, plus helping to raise standards and awareness of local website community.<br><br>Regular press articles |
| Council 13 | Press releases and features in local media, website URL is added to all council printed material.   |            |  |
| Council 14 | Talking to people at events or places where they go – with 'touchy feely' demos of offerings there now.   |            |  |
| Council 15 | Variety of newspaper campaigns plus changing council logo to <a href="http://www.tameside.gov.uk">www.tameside.gov.uk</a> – this features on all vans, stationery, posters, banners, media adverts etc.   |            |  |

Chart 19 Promotional devices (Top 20 websites)

## 9.5 Access

The final element of the take-up equation is the issue of access. Local authorities may have little scope for influencing the social and economic trends that lead to increased levels of access. It is important, however, to know the profile (eg age, gender, employment status, location) of those who have regular Internet access, not just at home but at work and school or college.

It is fast becoming important to extend access within the community in order to ensure all citizens have access to council services. Local authorities can find different ways of stimulating access to the Internet and showing local community leadership by so doing. For example, they have some opportunities for supplementing these obvious sources of access with other points of community access. Socitm's benchmarking work indicates that some larger councils have been able to provide in the region of 200 to 300 workstations in up to 100 locations. To do this effectively not only requires a commitment to resource workstations for public use with or without local partners, but also to map the provision of public access points so that areas of greatest need can be targeted.

### A case study from East Manchester

Getting a local community online has been a major success story for the regeneration initiatives in East Manchester. The Eastserve project is providing a model of best practice for the development of Manchester City Council's e-government agenda. It has provided Internet access and training to over 4,000 people, giving hope and cohesion to what was a sink area.

Eastserve.com's ICT literacy campaign was set up in 2000 with funding from the Beacons for a Brighter Future Initiative — the programme that is managing the New Deal for Communities and Single Regeneration Budget funding for the Beswick, Openshaw and Clayton neighbourhoods of East Manchester. Eastserve.com also received funding from the DfES Wired Up Communities programme — and hopes soon to become self-sustaining.

'The idea has always been to give people access to jobs and educational opportunities they wouldn't have had,' says content manager Daniel Bainbridge, who is based at the project headquarters in East Manchester. 'In total, we've installed 3,500 PCs, mostly new, in homes in Beswick, Openshaw and Clayton — that's nearly half the homes in those areas.'

'People get PCs at a heavily-subsidised rate — a new computer with all the peripheral equipment costs them just £200, with us paying half. A recycled PC costs them £30. As part of the deal, they have to take a three-hour training course.'

Source: *Local e-government now*, 2003

Other case studies of innovation by local authorities are found in this report such as the story of economic regeneration at Blackburn with Darwen Council.

A development of this theme is the opportunity to stimulate local supply of access by support for broadband initiatives. There are many such projects in local communities that have received support from local authorities seeing broadband as a key to local economic regeneration. Further information can be found in the joint DTI/Socitm *Insight* publication *Broadband in local government* (November 2002).

Finally, one particularly important access channel that local authorities might be able to develop is access by intermediaries such as Citizens' Advice Bureaux. Such agencies are potentially heavy users of local authority websites as they help people with particular problems of dealing with government (eg benefit claims of various types).

Moreover, those being helped are generally the ones who for reasons of money, skills or job status do not themselves have access to the Internet. Local authorities are in a position where they might be able to help fund and support intermediaries (for example, much of the funding for Citizens' Advice Bureaux does, in fact, come from local authorities).

Any actions that the council takes to extend access to the Internet within the community should, of course, be well promoted, especially on the website itself, because some people may occasionally use the council website, but be limited by lack of free or cheap access from more regular use.

#### Summary of actions

- Measure the patterns of existing usage and focus on applications that attract interest.
- Analyse comments about the website and improve the website as a result.
- Promote the benefits of websites in as many different ways as possible and learn from others what might work well.
- Support and encourage increased levels of access to the Internet.

# Part C

## Improving our assessment process

This re-definition of criteria for successful websites is reflected in the way in which we carry out our *Better connected* surveys to help local authorities and other public sector organisations. We set out the implications for the *Better connected* assessment process.



## 10 Ranking of websites

This section provides additional material for Socitm *Insight* subscribers beyond the advice given to the LAWs project. It should be read by all those who are developing websites (eg web teams).

### Our assessments

Part B of this report sets out the criteria that websites should strive to achieve in becoming a transactional site. Here, in Part C we set out how we intend to apply the criteria in our *Better connected* assessments. We do not intend to apply the criteria rigidly, especially in the first year of using them. We will apply the spirit rather than the letter of what is set down here. Whilst the direction is to be as objective as possible, there is still an important element of subjective judgement. We will not necessarily exclude from assessing a site transactional if it fails on one of the criteria set out in this document.

### 10.1 Overview of ranking system

Our main ranking uses a four-point classification to reflect the state of development. Although we have clarified in much greater detail the ranking system used by the *Better connected* surveys, we have only made some minor changes to the description of the categories from previous years.

We classify websites as:

- P is for promotional site. Such sites provide basic promotional information about the organisation with very little scope for interaction. They might typically concentrate on tourism, economic development and basic departmental information, with limited information on individual services beyond an A-Z with telephone contact numbers. Little use will be made of e-mail or online feedback, although a few gateway links might be provided.
- C is for content site. Such sites provide useful content and encourage some interaction. They have more sophisticated promotional information (eg accommodation search, downloadable files) and include features such as What's New pages, A-Z service listings and keyword site search facilities. They usually include some basic user interaction (eg clicking on an area map to find details of local councillors) and make use of e-mail and online feedback on home pages.
- C+ is for content plus site. Such sites provide very useful content and offer some examples of more advanced online self-service features. They allow individual users to define their own search criteria (eg search by postcode for service information, refine searches of local tourist accommodation by type and price), may include links to services such as Girobank for online payment and online databases for items such as library catalogues, planning applications, committee minutes. Service information is comprehensive and makes widespread use of e-mail, online feedback and even discussion forums. Such sites also typically host information on behalf of the wider local community.



**T** is for transactional site. Essential content and self-service values drive the whole of such sites and combine to offer a compelling user experience. Such sites demand attention for their accessibility, completeness, thoughtfulness and coherence. They have developed more than one type of online interaction (eg payment, applications, consultation, bookings) and also offer examples of customer recognition (eg ability to check outstanding council tax balance, renew library books). They also provide specific e-mail contacts for different service enquiries and make widespread use of databases, downloadable forms and online form filling (eg for service requests, appointments). They routinely utilise the potential of the Internet for joined-up government (eg OFSTED reports listed alongside schools listings, life event scenarios) and offer unique examples of the application of the medium in a local government context.

**Readers must be clear in understanding that our assessment is based entirely on the evidence before our eyes. From this we assess the state of development of websites, not whether they are actually delivering benefits, or even being well used or efficiently managed. To do that would involve in-depth discussion with webmasters and others which goes beyond the scope of this survey.**

#### **Unclassified sites**

Each year when we survey local authority websites, a handful have so little information that they are of almost no value or are not accessible (eg temporarily closed because a major new version is being developed or temporarily unavailable with technical problems). In the future we will rank these sites as **U** for **unclassified** sites.

## 10.2 Promotional sites

Such sites provide basic promotional information about the organisation with very little scope for interaction. They might typically concentrate on tourism, economic development and basic departmental information, with limited information on individual services beyond an A to Z with telephone contact numbers. Little use will be made of email or online feedback, although a few gateway links might be provided.

### Useful content

#### Information

- May cover some services, but in little depth.

#### Currency

- Will fall well short of the evidence for success (eg little changing information).

#### Links elsewhere

- Might have small range of links to external home pages (eg neighbouring local authorities).

#### News value

- Very unlikely to show much evidence of news value.

#### E-mail

- May have one e-mail address only (eg the webmaster).

#### Forms

- Very unlikely to have any forms available.

#### Services

- Very unlikely to have any services available.

#### Participation

- Very unlikely to have any evidence of participation.

### Usability

#### Ease of finding

- May not have an appropriate name for website.

#### Use of A to Z list

- Typically, will list council departments and/or services only, with telephone numbers and little else — often no description. The whole A-Z will be presented on one long page, perhaps with quick links at the top to jump to the start of a letter. There will usually be fewer than 100 entries.

#### Use of word search

- Unlikely to have search facility.

#### Use of location

- Very unlikely to have any such facility.

#### Navigation

- Should be at least reasonably satisfactory in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are.

#### Accessibility

- Should comply fully with Level A of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.

#### Readability

- Might show consistent use of principles of Plain English on some pages.

#### Resilience

- Should be available most of the time with only some broken links.

### 10.3 Content sites

Such sites provide useful content and encourage some interaction. They have more sophisticated promotional information (eg accommodation search, downloadable files) and include features such as What's New pages, A to Z service listings and keyword site search facilities. They usually include some basic user interaction (eg clicking on an area map to find details of local councillors) and make use of email and online feedback on home pages.

#### Content

##### Information

- Should cover all services, some in some depth.

##### Currency

- Should be able to show most of the evidence of success (eg What's On, What's New, press releases, etc).

##### Links elsewhere

- Should have broader range of links to external home pages, at least some explained in context.

##### News value

- Should show some features of news value (eg local events, press releases, council minutes).

##### E-mail

- Should have general e-mail address on home page for enquiries.
- Should have e-mail address for complaints/comments.
- Should have e-mail addresses for some councillors, or for all councillors via a third party such as a committee administrator.
- Should expect to reply within 5 days.

##### Forms

- Will offer some downloadable forms for completion offline, and the occasional simple web form for online completion.

##### Services

- May include one or two simple transactions.

##### Participation

- Should support feedback of services and complaints procedure.
- Should provide access to some major public documents such as local plans, committee minutes, Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

#### Usability

##### Ease of finding

- Should have appropriate name for website.

##### Use of A to Z list

- May list all entries on one very long page but more typically will have separate pages for each letter, and may provide an index of title links, with more information on a dedicated page for each entry.
- May offer e-mail addresses for at least some services and will link to relevant pages elsewhere in the site.
- Likely to cover most council services, but not all the alternative names.

##### Use of word search

- Should have search facility but likely to meet only some of the requirements of a fully successful facility.

##### Use of location

- Might have some 'clickable' maps (eg Multimap).

##### Navigation

- Should be at least satisfactory in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are.

##### Accessibility

- Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.

##### Readability

- Might show consistent use of principles of Plain English on some pages.

##### Resilience

- Should be available most of the time with few broken links.

## 10.4 Content plus sites

Such sites provide very useful content and offer some examples of more advanced online self-service features. They allow individual users to define their own search criteria (eg search by post code for service information, refine searches of local tourist accommodation by type and price), may include links to services such as Girobank for online payment and online databases for items such as library catalogues, planning applications, committee minutes. Service information is comprehensive and makes widespread use of e-mail, online feedback and even discussion forums. Such sites also typically host information on behalf of the wider local community.

### Content

#### Information

- Should cover all services, most in some depth.

#### Currency

- Should be able to show all the evidence for success (eg Whats' On, What's New, press releases etc).

#### Links elsewhere

- Should have links to external home pages of most organisations listed.
- Should be able to demonstrate most features of quality of linking (eg evidence of full consideration and planning as to which links are needed to provide comprehensive information).

#### News value

- Should demonstrate most features of news value (eg supporting the occasional consultation).

#### E-mail

- Should have e-mail addresses for all public facing service areas.
- Should have e-mail address for complaints/comments.
- Should have e-mail addresses for all councillors.
- Should acknowledge e-mails within 3 days and respond within 5 days.
- Should have e-mail address for web team.
- In general, should encourage use of e-mail.

#### Forms

- Will offer simple web forms and one or two complex ones for on-line completion.

#### Services

- Will include a range of simple transactions and some more complex ones.

#### Participation

- Should show some evidence of support for some form of participation in local issues.
- Should provide access to a full range of public information including all committee documents, public strategies and plans.

## **Usability**

### **Ease of finding**

- Should show proper use of metadata (eg names of main towns or prominent features).

### **Use of A to Z list**

- Should show all the evidence for a successful A to Z list of entries.
- Should offer a comprehensive directory of council services with plenty of alternative names and a good directory of key local non-council services as part of it.
- Should join up with other local authorities and key local partners, using deep links for some entries at least.

### **Use of word search**

- Should have search facility that will meet all of the requirements of a fully successful facility.

### **Use of location**

- Likely to have a 'find the nearest' facility with extensive links to Multimap or other mapping system.
- Might have some form of GIS facility.

### **Navigation**

- Should be at least good in terms of usability, however well developed or not its facilities are.

### **Accessibility**

- Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.

### **Readability**

- Should show consistent use of principles of Plain English on most pages.
- Should show use of other languages for local community (if applicable).

### **Resilience**

- Should be available at all times with very few broken links.
- The home page should load in less than 20 seconds.

## 10.5 Transactional sites

Essential content and self-service values drive the whole of such sites and combine to offer a compelling user experience. Such sites demand attention for their accessibility, completeness, thoughtfulness and coherence. They have developed more than one type of online interaction (eg payment, applications, consultation, bookings) and also offer examples of customer recognition (eg ability to check outstanding Council Tax balance, renew library books). They also provide specific email contacts for different service enquiries and make widespread use of databases, downloadable forms and online form filling (eg for service requests, appointments). They routinely utilise the potential of the Internet for joined-up government (eg OFSTED reports listed alongside schools listings, life event scenarios) and offer unique examples of the application of the medium in a local government context.

Note: The definition of services for transactional sites is not intended to be just a checklist for BVPI 157. The quality of the transaction and its link with the supporting back office function is more important than just the availability of transactions, especially if the form and process has not been properly re-designed.

### Content

#### Information

- Should cover all services in some depth.

#### Currency

- Should be able to show all the evidence for success (eg Whats' On, What's New, press releases, etc).

#### Links elsewhere

- Should have links to external home pages of all organisations listed.
- Should be able to demonstrate all features of quality of linking (eg evidence of full consideration and planning as to which links are needed to provide comprehensive information).

#### News value

- Should demonstrate all features of news value (eg offering the authoritative source of information for local emergencies).

#### E-mail

- Should inform users of council policy and standards for acknowledging and responding to e-mail enquiries
- Should have a tracking system for e-mail enquiries.
- Should offer simple contact forms as an alternative to e-mail addresses.

#### Forms

- Will offer a number of complex web forms for online completion as part of a wide range of forms.

#### Services

- Will include many transactions covering most if not all the types of interaction listed in BVPI 157.

#### Participation

- Should show sustained commitment for participation in local issues.
- Should provide electronic forums for debate and consultation.
- Should present all information with a range of supporting information such as an overview for the untrained citizen, engaging content to stimulate public interest and feedback, and in-depth additional material for professionals and specialised audiences.

## **Usability**

### **Ease of finding**

- Should show proper use of metadata (eg names of main towns or prominent features).

### **Use of A to Z list**

- Should show all the evidence for a successful A to Z list of entries.
- Should offer a comprehensive directory of council services with plenty of alternative names and a good directory of key local non-council services as part of it.
- Should join up with other local authorities and key local partners, using deep links for some entries at least.

### **Use of word search**

- Should have search facility that will meet all of the requirements of a fully successful facility.

### **Use of location**

- Might have GIS fully integrated into some site functions (eg reporting street lighting failure by map).

### **Navigation**

- Should be excellent in terms of usability to offer the 'compelling user experience'.

### **Accessibility**

- Should comply fully with Level AA of Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines.

### **Readability**

- Should show consistent use of principles of Plain English on most pages.
- Should show use of other languages for local community (if applicable).

### **Resilience**

- Should be available at all times with very few broken links.
- The home page should load in 15 seconds or less.

## 11 The assessment process

### 11.1 Context for assessment

We have set down in Part B a clear framework of quality which can be used to drive improvement plans for the website. Here we describe in brief how we will assess websites against the criteria in this framework in our annual surveys and other individual website assessments that we are asked to make.

Before we do this, it is worth reminding readers that we set out to provide an informed view of the quality of the experience that members of the public are likely to have when engaging with local government through a website. We do this by examining how well it deals with common queries and situations. The results are based on what we actually find in the review period (November and December each year), not on aspirations or good intentions that may have been documented in reports such as the *Implementing Electronic Government* (IEG) statements.

Our survey is based on a number of scenarios and themes carefully selected to give a rounded view of each website. We vary the questions each year, although we do repeat some from the previous year in order to make valid year-on-year comparisons.

In searching for answers to the questions in our survey, we learn quickly how easy it is to use each website. However, while independent, our reviewers are very experienced in finding their way around local authority websites. Although we aim to act as everyday visitors, our reviewers in practice will actually be much more tolerant of errors and navigational difficulties than the general public might be.

Finally, we need to remind readers that we are investigating what we see in front of us as a product. We do not generally consider information from inside an organisation, because we are assessing the direct evidence available to the website visitor anywhere in the world. Our assessment is on the state of development of the websites (ie the products), not how well integrated they are with back office functions or how effective they are or even how well used.

In developing the criteria further for assessing websites, we do not intend to change the basic assessment process significantly for the annual *Better connected* surveys but we do intend to align the main survey and supplementary surveys to the new framework set out in Part B of this report. The rest of this section outlines how we plan to do this.

#### Interpretation of criteria for 2004 assessments

As the 2004 report (based on surveys from November to December 2003) will be the first report using the criteria defined in this guide, we will interpret the criteria in a sensible way that helps everyone to evolve from where they are now to where they need to be in, say, 2005 and beyond. Expectations about standards of quality to be achieved are increasing and even well-developed sites might not find it easy to keep up with those trends. For example, some criteria such as Level AA conformance for accessibility are very demanding. In this case, it makes more sense to use Level A as the criteria for the 2004 report at least.

We will, therefore, apply the new criteria carefully in assessing websites for improved standards.



## 11.2 Basic approach to assessing content

***Does the website have the information that people are looking for?***

### Information

We plan to assess this by asking sample questions related to scenarios designed to test the scope of information. This will be no more than a sample of chosen scenarios and questions.

### Currency

We will ask a series of questions designed to test facilities that are time-dependent (What's New) as well as checking the currency of answers to all the questions in this survey.

### Links elsewhere

We will check a sample of links to other sites that are designed to test both the scope and the quality of links.

### News value

We will ask questions designed to test news value as we have defined it.

### E-mail

We will check the scope of e-mail facilities and send sample e-mails to test out speed and quality of response.

### Forms

We will ask questions designed to test the range of forms available on the website and the quality of the form-filling process.

### Services

We will test certain common transactions in order to track progress to the achievement of the target of all services online by the end of 2005.

### Participation

We will test the degree of participation encouraged.

## 11.3 Basic approach to assessing usability

***How easy is the information to find and use on the website?***

### Ease of finding

We will ask at least one question designed to test the ease of finding the website.

### Use of A to Z list

In searching for answers to the questions designed to test the content of the website we will also assess the usefulness of the A to Z list.

### Use of word search

In searching for answers to the questions designed to test the content of the website we will also assess the usefulness of the search facilities testing different combinations of words and phrases.

### Use of location

In searching for answers to the questions designed to test the content of the website we will also assess the usefulness of any maps and postcode searches.

### Navigation

In finding the way around the website in search of information, we will also assess the navigation. However, this will not be the level of detail associated with usability testing, because our team is much more informed about using council websites than panels of casual users. We advise organisations to undertake their own testing.

### Accessibility

We will test the website design for accessibility criteria using a mixture of automated and manual testing methods. Initially, our tests will focus on achieving Level A of the WAI guidelines rather than the very much more demanding Level AA.

### Readability

We will not be able to test the readability of the website in all cases because of the resources required from advisers specialising in the use of Plain English (eg the Plain English campaign).

## Resilience

We will use automated benchmarking tools to test the resilience of the website. Our intention is to use the SiteMorse product developed by Business2www because to our knowledge it is the only one available that tests for site functionality and violations of all international standards.

For further information visit [www.sitemorse.com](http://www.sitemorse.com)

## 11.4 Basic approach to assessing take-up

The *Better connected* survey is unable to test take-up of each website. Each organisation should develop its own set of metrics to understand its own trends. However, we will continue to use the Hitwise product that analyses the market share for all local authorities in order to identify relative trends in usage between similar councils. The results from Hitwise will be analysed each quarter and added to the subscriber-only area on [www.socitm.gov.uk](http://www.socitm.gov.uk) for Socitm *Insight* subscribers.

For further information visit [www.hitwise.co.uk](http://www.hitwise.co.uk)

## 12 Frequently-asked questions

With the publication of each report we receive many queries from subscribers about aspects of our assessments. We reproduce here a sample of such questions.

### **Q1 Have you considered what sites that are already transactional should now achieve?**

As part of the review of our criteria that has led to this publication we did consider a ranking beyond the current T status. However, for the 2004 report at least we feel that the clarification of the criteria for T sites (and other rankings) needs to be applied consistently first. The evidence from subscribers is that we should not make major changes to our ranking system right now.

### **Q2 How can our site be classified lower than others that score less well?**

Subscriber:

I am deeply disappointed and at a loss to understand how we only rate a 'C' when your scoring mechanism gives us a higher result than some of the councils awarded C+ (examples quoted). My Chief Executive requires this clarification.

*Socitm Insight*

We make it clear that our assessment is based not just on the hard evidence of, say, number of questions answered, but on more subjective view of the overall experience of using the site. If reviewers become frustrated trying to find information and come across many errors and inconsistencies that undermine the credibility of the site, then it will be reflected in the score. Conversely, an engaging site that works well may attract a higher rating than its scores would indicate.

This is difficult to quantify, but explains why there is not always exact fit between our final assessment and the harder evidence. Assessing council websites is not an exact science, although we do our best to ensure consistency.

Having said that, we think your site is at the top end of a C and the others you quote are at the bottom end of a C+.

Note: The much clearer criteria laid out in Part B of this document will help to avoid this type of reaction, but may not eliminate it, because part of the judgement has to remain subjective.

### **Q3 Is it misleading just to focus on websites because in our council they are just part of a much broader e-government strategy that includes contact centres etc?**

Councils with the more developed websites are certainly seeing website development as part of a broader information management strategy with the website merely seen as one channel to use. However, the member of the public is not at all interested in what is going on behind the scenes and will treat the website as still the most visible source of information.

### **Q4 How relevant are websites when many councils are developing portals based on local partnerships?**

It is true that portal development may well change the landscape of the local authority website. Whilst much work currently seems to be taking place with such portals, it has not come to fruition. When it does, we will analyse what can be learnt from using them.

The website remains a major building block within a portal in the sense that there is no point in having an excellent portal linking into a poorly maintained council website.

### **Q5 How much functionality should be included within a citizen portal?**

Again it is still quite early to be commenting on this question about portals.

### **Q6 Is there some merit in auditing the top sites to see how deep the transaction side goes?**

Our survey does not test out what happens once the transaction is received and indeed it is difficult to achieve that. The visitor is not interested really in what happens as long as it appears to be handled promptly and correctly and the transaction is fully completed. We strongly endorse the principle of electronic end to end processes, as opposed to electronic faces for paper processes, because in the long-term this is the only sustainable policy to adopt.

**Q7 Our district council site joins up with the county wherever possible, but some of the county information and transactions you are looking for are not available on the county site. Why should we be penalised for this?**

We also get this complaint from counties attempting to join up with several districts in their area, whose sites are in differing stages of development. We assess all sites from the point of view of an ordinary resident, who is unlikely to know exactly which services are provided by which tier of government and so could be looking for the information from website of either tier. It is important to signpost the full range of local authority services from each site. If some of that information or transactions were missing from the other tier, then individual scores for those questions would obviously be affected, but it is unlikely that the site would be given a lower overall rating.

**Q8 Is it getting more difficult to achieve a high ranking?**

It could be. Over the years the expectation of websites has grown they have developed in usefulness and sophistication. Reviewers do not intentionally become tougher in their assessment of a site, but over the five years of the survey their expectations have also increased as websites provided more and more online services.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1    Organisational development – survey of top 20 websites

Much of the information and advice in Part A of this report comes from a survey completed in May 2003 of all our Top 20 sites in 2003 (plus those who appeared in our Top 20 sites in 2001 and 2002, but did not in 2003). This appendix documents the questionnaire used.

In this report we have selected replies to some questions in the form of charts and tables. A full set of responses to this survey is available in the subscriber-only area of the Socitm website [www.socitm.gov.uk/public/insight/subscribers.htm](http://www.socitm.gov.uk/public/insight/subscribers.htm)

### Part A    Management arrangements

- Q1    Who is responsible for day-to-day site management? Individual (Job title, background) and/or team**
- Q2    Who is responsible for strategic direction?**
- Q2a    Elected member (political portfolio)
- Q2b    Senior officer (Job title, background)
- Q3    What is the link with the e-champion?**
- Q4    Is there a group responsible for steering development of website?**
- If yes,
- Q4a    Who sits on it?
- Q4b    How often does it meet?
- Q4c    How effective is it?
- Q4d    What roles and skills do they encompass? (eg webmaster? designer? developer?)
- Q4e    Can they commission work from services/departments?
- Q4f    Does the group have any direct responsibility for achieving BVPI157 targets?
- Q5    Who has overall editorial responsibility for content?**
- Q6    How is content managed?**
- Totally centrally, or mixed centrally and devolved, or totally devolved
- Where any element of devolved
- Q6a    How long has this been the arrangement?
- Q6b    How many suppliers of content?
- Q6c    How much training is given?
- Q6d    Who is responsible for specifying and delivering training?
- Q6e    Who is responsible for ‘populating’ the website? (eg enthusiasm of individual business units or content corporately ‘commissioned’?)

- Q6f Are transactional services (eg booking resources, receiving money, etc) managed differently from 'information only' content?
- Q7 Does the authority allow any of its business units to go it alone?  
eg separate domains/web addresses for services like Fire Brigade or Adult Education?
- Q8 How does the authority manage the issue of relationships with other tiers of government? (eg if it wants to integrate delivery between district and county, how does it integrate the concept of seamless access with branded delivery?)
- Q9 Does the authority 'host' the pages of other partner organisations eg parish councils) how does it manage this relationship?  
If so, does it set down minimum compliance standards and does it make a charge for the work associated with maintaining those pages?
- Q10a How are you managing the process of moving from being an information based website to a transactional website? (Is it being technology driven/led? Or is it being led by access requirements or what?)
- Q10b Is there any direct relationship between BVPI157 management and transactional web management?
- Q11 What new roles have emerged in delivering services online?
- Q12 Who owns the management of on-line transactions?  
Q12a At elected member level?  
Q12b At officer management board level?  
Q12c In service business units?  
Q12d The website editorial group?  
Q12e Other (please describe)

## Part B Resources

- Q13 How large is the site? (a) no of pages and (b) number of BVPI157 transactions (excluding information only)
- Q14a How many full-time-equivalent employees (FTEs) develop and support website?
- Q14b Do these staff also develop transactional services (excluding information only)?
- Q15 How does this compare with 12 months ago? (circle one)  
Much higher/Higher/Same/Less/Much less
- Q16 Have you ever used outside suppliers in the past three years?  
If yes for information only pages,  
What policies and standards are in place to govern this? (eg a roster of approved web development agencies?, fixed guidelines re: housestyle?  
If yes for transactional services,  
Do the same policies apply as for information only (internal or external supply)?  
How are solutions which are embedded into 'turnkey' systems (eg library book renewal, online planning applications) managed within any policy?
- Q17 How much does it cost to support the website?
- Q18 How is content funded? (eg a corporate 'pot' or are developments funded by individual 'sponsors'?)
- Q19 Are the same people responsible for both Internet and intranet?

## Part C Methods of working

- Q20 Is a content management system is used?
- Q21 If yes which one and which components of the system have been purchased?
- Q22 What quality control exists over content?
- Q23 What standards exist about content?
- Q24 What guidance exists for editors?
- Q25 What process is used to upload new information to the live website?  
(eg is it done by a central web development team or can other authorised 'gate-keepers' do this?)
- Q26 What is the process for building/establishing an online service to the public?
- Q27 Are there different standards for Internet versus intranet? (eg Internet has to comply with standardised corporate branding but intranet can be more flexible/creative??)
- Q28 What, if any, based mechanisms are in place which make/encourage employees go through the intranet every time they switch on their PC before moving on to other applications?
- Q29 What is the policy regarding electronic publications?  
(eg does there have to be on-line versions of all hard copy publications? How does the website integrate with the need for a Freedom of Information publications scheme?)
- Q30 What are the rules regarding software use for Internet applications/web pages? eg are only ICT people allowed to use sophisticated packages and others only allowed to input via standardised templates?
- Q31 What other in-house rules or conventions exist for the web site (eg maximum file size for pdf documents)?
- Q32 How is the website branded?  
(eg as a local government site or a community portal or what?)
- Q33 How does the web tie in with electronic document management systems?
- Q34 If your council has a call or contact centre in place, how does it use the website?
- Q35 What standards exist for updating material?  
(eg if pages are not checked within a set period and 'signed off' as current is there a facility in place for automatic deletion?)
- Q36 What system, if any, is used for supporting e-forms?
- Q37 Is there a clear navigation system in place to guide people quickly towards any electronic transactions they may wish to pursue?  
If yes, how does it work?
- Q38 Can the website be personalised or customised by the user?  
If so, to what extent?



#### **Part D Marketing**

**Q39** How well used is the site?

Q39a How many unique visitor sessions per week? (March 2003 )

Q39b What percentage of repeat visitors per week? (March 2003)

Q39c What has been the percentage increase in usage in the past year? (ie in unique visitor sessions)

Q39d What other useful usage statistics do you have?

**Q40** What are the top three most used features of your website?

**Q41** How have you promoted the website in the past year?

**Q42** What has worked well as a promotional device?

**Q43** What has not worked well as a promotional device?

#### **Part E Improvements**

**Q44** When did you last have a major redesign of the website?

**Q45** When do you next plan to have a major redesign of the website?

**Q46** What are the most important top three improvements you have made in the past year?

**Q47** What top three improvements do you plan to make in the next six months?

**Q48** What lessons would you pass on to others that they might consider applying?

**Q49** What pitfalls have you experienced?

**Q50** What plans have you to change any of the current arrangements for managing the website?

**Q51** Any other comments?

Finally...

**Q52** What other questions would you like us to ask of the other well-developed local authority websites?

## Appendix 2 Guidelines for local government websites

### 1 Introduction

The Office of the E-Envoy has issued *Guidelines for Government Websites* with a number of supplementary documents branded as part of these guidelines:

- *Illustrated handbook for web management teams*
- *Framework for senior managers*
- *Framework for local government*
- *Quality Framework for UK government website design*
- *Quality Briefings for UK government websites — Issues of best practice for government website management*

Further information is available at  
[www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm](http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm)

The document entitled *Framework for Local Authorities* was issued in June 2003 (no version number provided, but effectively Version 1) after liaison with many representatives from local government. It describes its purpose in the following way:

*This document is aimed at providing a best practice framework for guidance on the development and management of UK local government websites. As such it is primarily aimed at senior managers and web management teams in local government authorities. While the advice given in this paper may be of interest to local government in the devolved administrations, this framework concerns local government in England only.*

*The framework is part of the national Guidelines for UK government websites and builds on existing guidelines and frameworks, in particular linking to another part of the Guidelines — the Illustrated handbook for web management teams. The latter contains detailed practical advice, free downloadable code and working tools, including checklists.*

*This document also supports the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's 'national strategy for local e-government' (<http://www.localgov.gov.uk>) which sets out the vision, priorities and practical steps which will enable comprehensive local government web systems to be put in place by 2005.*

*In providing website guidance to local authorities it outlines ten key best practice guidelines for UK local government websites. These ten guidelines set the website in a broader context of policy, and clarify the kinds of tasks that need to be planned and considered in website development and management. A separate section is also included which discusses how best to work with the existing government infrastructure.*

Those responsible for developing and supporting local authority websites are advised to read the full content of these documents. For convenience we have reproduced here the '*ten key best practice guidelines for UK local government websites*' that form the heart of this document:

- 1 Website management and resourcing
- 2 Help meet targets for providing services electronically
- 3 Be both accessible and usable
- 4 Join up with the rest of government
- 5 Build trust
- 6 Provide uniform basic content
- 7 Evaluate success
- 8 Promote your website
- 9 Consider and use other channels
- 10 Adopt web best practice

#### **Relevant resources**

- Disability Discrimination Act:

[www.e-envoy.gov.uk/publications/guidelines/webguidelines/handbook/management/104.htm](http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/publications/guidelines/webguidelines/handbook/management/104.htm)

- eEurope 2002 action plan:

[http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/eeurope/action\\_plan/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/action_plan/index_en.htm)

- e-gov@local: Towards a national strategy for local e-government:

<http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/consult/egov/index.htm>

- www.localgov.gov.uk: The national strategy for local e-government:

<http://www.localgov.gov.uk>

- e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF):

<http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/publications/frameworks/egif4/egif4.htm>

- e-Government Metadata Framework:

<http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/searchresult2.asp?docnum=473>

- e-Government Metadata Standard:

[http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/interoperability/metadata\\_document.asp?docnum=524](http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/interoperability/metadata_document.asp?docnum=524)

- Guidelines for UK government websites:

<http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm>

- Guidelines for UK government websites: Illustrated handbook for web management teams:

<http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm>

- Quality framework for UK government website design: usability issues for government websites

<http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/webguidelines.htm>

## The Socitm *Insight* library

### Meeting the Challenge of Change (from 2000)

#### Introduction

- 2000 *Meeting the Challenge of Change*

#### Modernisation Challenge

- 1999 *Wales.gov*
- 2000 *E-Scotland*
- 2002 *Learning in the 21st century*

#### Leadership Challenge

- 2000 *Services at Risk? – The Growing Shortages of ICT Skills*
- 2001 *Local e-government Now*
- 2001 *Local e-government: learning from the best*
- 2002 *Local e-government Now, 2002*
- 2002 *Developing a regional e-strategy*
- 2002 *Local e-government: learning from the best in New Zealand*

#### Information Challenge

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- 2001 *Better connected 2001? – a snapshot of local authority websites*
- 2002 *Better connected 2002? – a snapshot of all local authority websites*
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- 2002 *The technology challenge in 2002 (CD only)*
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#### Special Issue Papers

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- 2001 *Better Connected? – Travelling abroad*
- 2002 *Going up?*
- 2003 *Making a difference*
- 2003 *Passing the test*

#### Summaries

- 2003 *Socitm Insight Collection 2003, CD-ROM* containing all MAPIT and *Insight* publications up to 31 December 2002
- 2001 *Insight Bibliography 2002 (on Insight Collection CD-ROM only)*







All local authorities must have access to appropriate technological solutions to meet the target of 100% electronically delivered or supported local authority services by 2005.

These solutions need to be customer-focused, standards-based, relatively inexpensive and easy to implement and use. LAWs will build sustainability models for its outcomes and provide local authorities the means to deal with any organisational development implications.

The LAWs National Project will develop a suite of applications that can be implemented in a modular fashion dependent on local technological skills and maturity. Implementation will be supported by a structured knowledge base and best practice guidance. The LAWs project will be completed by 31 March 2004.

The LAWs project builds on a number of Pathfinder projects (including Camden APLAWS, Tameside web-based services for local authority functions, the Sunderland Public Access Gateways and the Welland Community Portals).

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Founded in 1986, Socitm is the professional organisation which represents those managers in local government who are responsible for ICT policy. The objectives of Socitm are to provide a focal point for ICT management, share experiences, promote the recognition of ICT and influence legislation. It has now over 1500 members and continues to grow. One example of its role is the Socitm *Insight* research programme.



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