APPENDIX N

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE - 29 JUNE 2010

Title:

REVIEW OF THE WEBSITE AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION
[Portfolio Holder: Cllr Stefan Reynolds]
[Wards Affected: All]

Summary and purpose:

The Waverley website was relaunched in May 2008 and has seen a considerable increase in visitors. Since the website was launched visitors have increased by 23 per cent and the number of pages viewed has gone up by 16 per cent.

Website statistics suggest that rather than coming to the site to browse, people visit with the objective of finding a particular piece of information, to answer a specific question or to complete a task. The most popular pages of the website are related to planning, refuse and recycling and recruitment.

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the improvements that have been made to the website and what is planned for the future.

How this report relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities:

A key priority is to keep residents informed about the services for which they pay and to improve public perception of service quality, efficiency and value for money. The website aims to provide up to date, transparent and accurate information to visitors.

Equality and Diversity Implications:

The website was designed to ensure its appearance was not an obstacle to readability or usability. The website provides an 'access key' facility which is a navigation device allowing users to move around the main website using their keyboard. Users can set the website's appearance to suit their needs: text size, colours and contrasts are just some of the settings that can be personalised.

The adaptability of the website to an individual's needs means that, for many, the website will be the first choice of contact with Waverley.

It is important that communication campaigns continue to clearly identify the intended target audience so that effective channels of communication are selected. This approach helps to ensure that people are not discriminated against because they are unable to access information online or cannot find information online.

Climate change Implications:

As a 24 hour a day, seven day a week service, customers can carry out their business via the website at a time that is convenient to them. Doing business online means that the need for car travel to the council offices is reduced. This has a positive effect on carbon emissions generated directly as a result of Waverley business.

The introduction of online forms will also reduce the need for customers to print and post forms. This will save paper and will cut the carbon emissions generated by the process of posting a letter and it arriving at its final destination.

Resource/Value for Money implications:

The website enables residents to access information not just about Waverley services but also provides links to other public service providers. Website transactions cost significantly less than face-to-face service delivery at 27 pence per visit compared to £3.22 for telephone enquiries and £6.65 for face-to-face visits (Source: Society of IT Managers).

Legal Implications:

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Background

1.   With around half a million website visitors, of which a quarter of a million are returning visitors, it is important to ensure the website meets the needs of repeat visitors and inspires and motivates first time visitors to return.

2.   There is also a call from Eric Pickles MP for greater transparency in local authorities. In a letter to local authority leaders, he expressed his belief that there is a 'wealth of information which people would find useful if they had easy access to it online.'

3.   To achieve this and to implement ongoing improvements to the website a programme of work is in place which includes:

Accurate and up-to-date information

4.   Content scheduling is used to ensure information is fresh and up-to-date. Website editors are able to set review dates for all pages and receive an email reminder requesting that they check the content for which they are responsible. This review should be carried out annually. Content that is not updated will be removed from the website until it has been reviewed.

5.   The recent introduction of a 'Created/amended date' at the bottom of each page of content allows residents to see when information was last updated.

Transactional website

6. At the beginning of 2010, the website's forms package was upgraded which will give customers the capability to complete forms electronically. Currently customers have to download, print and complete forms by hand.

7. Testing is currently taking place to integrate the new forms package with the online payment system. It is anticipated that this service improvement will go live in the summer. The target is to have 80% of forms online by April 2011.

Tailored information

8. The website includes a facility which allows customers to register to receive email updates on services in which they are interested. Website visitors can request to receive information about leisure, recycling and refuse, children's activities, school holiday events, countryside news and events, business and planning. It is intended that people who register will be sent an email alert when areas of the website in which they are interested are updated or a press release is issued on their area of interest.

9. A plan is in place to promote the facility and to increase the number of people registered to receive information direct.

10. A new mapping system has also been introduced which allows website visitors to type in their postcode or line of address and 'Find my nearest...' The facility provides visitors with information about nearest facilities such as leisure centres, local recycling sites, schools and car parks. This facility will be developed further to include planning applications, parks and playgrounds and other local services.

11. This improvement will enhance usability and improve the annual rating given by the Society of IT Managers (SOCITM). In the last year Waverley's SOCITM rating has improved with a score of 44 out of a possible 78 total points. The average score is 31.48 points.

Planning online

12. New more reliable software has been introduced for the viewing of planning applications. The system is more robust and includes new features such as measuring tools and a function to view thumbnail images.

Website upgrade

13. As part of the ongoing improvement of the website the content management system is being upgraded. New features of the upgrade will include integrated social media modules such as Twitter and Facebook along with superior multimedia facilities. New directories which can be updated externally and a refreshed design are also offered as part of the upgrade. Implementation is timetabled for September 2010.

Improved Search

14.	The search facility which originally featured on the website was very poor. An improved search facility has now been installed. Search results can be modified and ranked according to page importance and keyword statistics. The new facility has been in since April 2010 and enables residents to achieve more accurate search results much more quickly.

Service home pages

15.	Service homepages are being redesigned to make them uniform in appearance, more navigable and customer friendly. Pages that have been redesigned so far include refuse and recycling, community safety, sport, children's play, recruitment, youth, building control and the Borough Hall Cinema. All new homepages have a friendly url (ie. www.waverley.gov.uk/recycling) and appear in the search results, most usually at the top of the returned results.

Additional improvements

16.	Further improvements, which are currently being worked on are as follows:

•	As one of the most popular sections of the website, the Planning pages are being overhauled to make them more customer-friendly.
•	A 'report it' facility has been introduced so that visitors can report a problem online and be directed to the correct service and provider regardless of whether the service is offered by the borough or county.
•	Enquiries and questions sent to the generic Waverley email address are being captured and turned into a comprehensive 'frequently asked question' section of the website.
•	New homepages are being created for high profile services such as Business and Licensing.
•	E-petitions: existing legislation currently requires online petitioning to be available online by 15 December 2010. A joint project has been set up across Surrey. It is being managed by Surrey County Council who are working in partnership with all the Surrey borough councils.
•	To improve Members' access to electronic communication the Memberzone area of the website is currently being improved. It is intended that electronic access to the internal telephone directory, organisational charts and a facility to register interests online will be offered.

Future plans

17.	In line with the Communications service plan, a strategy is currently being developed to explain the proposed approach to integrating social network marketing into Waverley's overall communications strategy. Developing social media is necessary for responding to the increase in electronic media and the demand for instant information (96% of 'Under 30s' have a social media account and this group make up 50% of the population.) This need for instant communication was dramatically illustrated during the snow when the site received a 50% increase in visitors.

External visits to website
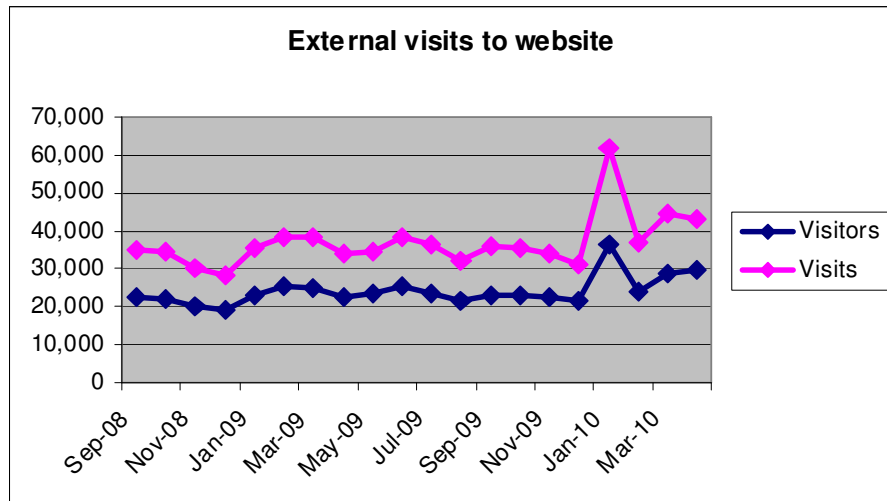
18. The strategy and action plan will expand on plans to set up a Waverley Twitter account so that followers can be updated about Waverley news and services by Tweets. News on services such as recycling/refuse, new planning applications, planning decisions and website news will be fed automatically to the Twitter account.

19. The use of Facebook campaigns will also be developed and used to promote and raise awareness for issue-based campaigns and consultations. The biggest recent increase in Facebook users has been amongst females aged 55-65. Facebook is currently used to promote the Waverley Youth Council and the Waverley Apprenticeship scheme. Upgrading the content management system of the website will also enable Waverley to use blogs to engage with residents.

20. In response to changes within the news industry, the Communications team intends to offer the media video clips for use on online news websites. There is also an opportunity for Waverley to trial the use of video channels such as You Tube to promote key projects – ie a 40-second clip showing the start to finish refurbishment of Farnham Sports Centre or for key recycling messages such as how to use the new food waste service.

Staffing

21. In the past six months, the post and responsibility for Freedom of Information requests has transferred from Legal to Communications. The Freedom of Information role has been integrated into the roles of existing members of the Communications team. To manage the increasing demand for the development of the website and to enable Waverley to respond to the growth in social media, it is proposed that the staff skills in this area are strengthened. This report seeks to achieve this by regularising the current arrangement and making post TAF04 an establishment post. This would alter the full time equivalent posts from the budgeted figure of 5.2 to 5.5.

Budget Implications

22.   The cost in 2010/11, including oncosts, of extending this post for the 3-months beyond the end of the current temporary contract-end would be up to £12,100. The cost in the full year 2011/12 would be up to £48,400. The salary budget for communications includes provision for a part-time Freedom of Information (FOI) role, post BB02. This, combined with a range of other savings within the team resulting from reduced hours, means that regularising post TAF04 within Waverley's establishment can be met from existing staff budgets. Post BB02 would need to be deleted from the establishment and the FOI work would need to continue to be undertaken within the existing team.

Conclusion

23.   The website and other forms of social media are essential communication tools. Use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have grown at a rapid rate over the past year.

24.   There is now a group of people who only ever use electronic communication to send and receive information whilst others continue to rely on traditional communication channels. It is estimated that Broadband coverage will extend to 96% by 2012.

25.   For Waverley's communication to be effective this divide needs to be recognised and, whilst Waverley's electronic communications presence needs to be developed, people who do not use electronic communication should not be discriminated against. The choice of communication channel needs to be selected according to the preferences of the target audience. Blanket communication should be sent out using both traditional and electronic communication.

26.   Regularising the current staff structure within the Communications team will enable the Council's website and social media skills to be strengthened. This will allow the team to meet the increasing demand for information to be communicated through these channels.

Recommendation

The Executive is asked to:

1. note the report and to endorse the future direction of travel; and

2. recommend to the Council that

    a.   post number TAF04 is made permanent within the establishment and that this is met from within the existing budget during the current year; and

    b.   post number BB02 be deleted from the establishment as the Freedom of Information role has been integrated into existing roles within the Communications Team.

Background Papers

There are no background papers (as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972) relating to this report.

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