

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 15 FEBRUARY 2011
title: REVIEW OF RIBBLE VALLEY WEBSITE
submitted by: JOHN C HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
principal author: JOHN C HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To ask members to consider a reference from Planning & Development Committee requesting that Overview & Scrutiny Committee consider the operation of the Ribble Valley website.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- **Council Ambitions** – increasingly, with the Council's website is the preferred access point for people requiring information, or to carry out transactions with the Council. Enhancing the operation of the website will improve access for all.
- **Community Objectives** – as above, enhancement of the operation of the website will encourage and improve access for all.
- **Corporate Priorities** – making the website more transactional will help to provide services for people where they live, and to improve access to services.
- Other Considerations - none

2 BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 16 December 2010, Planning & Development Committee resolved:

'that Committee ask Overview & Scrutiny Committee to investigate the operation and testing of the Council's website, particularly in relation to the receipt of planning applications, and report back to this Committee in due course.'

This recommendation arose from the fact that it had come to light that some householders' comments on planning issues, submitted through the council's website, had not been picked up by planning officers prior to reporting to Committee.

The oversight came to light at a later date and, on consideration of the overlooked comments, it was concluded that no great damage had been suffered in relation to specific planning matters.

However, in terms of the Council's reputation, the damage, as measured by coverage in the press and other media, was significant.

The precise reason for the problem that had arisen was that there were two locations on the Council's website where provision had been made for people to comment. The comments made were saved in two separate locations on the website, and only one of those locations had been accessed by planning officers before the anomaly was brought to the Council's attention.

Since that time, the duplication has been removed, so that the same error cannot be repeated.

However, given that the internet generally is becoming more and more a mainstream communications medium, and that the Council's website, in particular, is becoming more busy, it was felt appropriate that a review should be carried out.

3 ISSUES

Many of the Council's taxpayers/customers are now very familiar with the use of the internet and a variety of websites. As website design has developed, internet users have higher expectations in respect of functionality and ease of use of the sites that they visit.

However, there are inevitable hurdles to be overcome in designing a single website for an organization as complex as local authority. In terms of information alone, the subject matter included in the Council's website will range from benefits to burials, food hygiene to football. The information needs to cover many statutory issues, but is also expected to include leisure opportunities, general advice, and link to a variety of other service providers.

All of this means that a local authority website is unlikely to be as slick and focussed as, say, a website intended to sell products.

Having said that, there are a number of highly regarded local authority websites about and, as in other areas, it may be useful to benchmark our own performance against that of other organization to see whether we can identify areas for improvement.

Some of the limitations that we might have to work with include the operating system for the Council's website, Jadu. To a degree, this dictates the form that the website will take, and to move onto an alternative platform would be somewhat expensive and time-consuming.

In terms of management, operation and editing of the website, we are also limited by the resources at the Council's disposal. The Council does not employ a dedicated webmaster or editorial staff. Currently, we aim to ensure that information on the website is accurate and up-to-date, and a number of different members of staff are involved in trying to make sure that this is the case.

This approach has meant, inevitably, that we have a number of people who are familiar with part of the Council's website; we also have a small number of people who may be familiar with more than one part of the Council's website. For that reason, it is difficult to be confident that the website is entirely consistent, is entirely up-to-date, or is as easy to use as it possibly can be.

On 20 January 2011, I met with the chairman of Planning & Development Committee, Councillor Sherras, and with chairman of this Committee, Councillor Sutcliffe, to consider how to take forward the request of Planning & Development Committee.

After some discussion and a small amount of empirical testing, it was felt that the following represents a list of some of the key issues that might be explored further:

- Finding information / documents (searching the site)
- Contacting the Council (making comments or responding to consultation)
- Complaining (either in the formal sense through the Council's complaints system, or on a more day-to-day basis)
- Making service requests
- Ensuring that the site is current/replacing outdated documents

Ease of navigating might also be added to the list, as an area to be explored (although, as explained above, there are limitations to what might be achieved in this regard because of the necessary complexity of the website, and the platform on which it is built.)

4 **OPTIONS**

There are a variety of options available to the Council to examine and to test the website, with a view to identifying areas for improvement.

At one end of the spectrum is the option of employing specialist consultants to come into the Council, look at our site, and make recommendations. Whilst we have no specific estimates for this work, I am confident that it would be expensive and not necessarily conclusive.

It would also be an option simply to allow the Council's customers to 'de-bug' the system by responding to complaints and comments over time, and slightly amending the system as and when the opportunity to do so arose. This has the benefit of being a low-cost option, but may well be unsatisfactory from the point of view of site users, as it would be slow, and would depend on someone becoming dissatisfied enough to let us know of their dissatisfaction before they were prompted to ask.

A third option might be for Committee to set in train a system of user testing the site, either by inviting individuals to do so, or by organizing a team to work its way through the website, testing as many parts of the site for the issues listed above, as possible.

The advantage to this approach would be that it would be relatively low cost, and it could be as comprehensive as Committee wished it to be (equally it could be as light touch as was felt to be appropriate).

In terms of organization, this could be split into a series of work programmes for individuals to carry out in their own time and at their own convenience or, alternatively, it may be possible to ask the Council's IT section to set up the members' room in the Council Offices with a number of computers so that a team could access the website at the same time internally, in order to systematically test the various transactions available.

5 **RISK ASSESSMENT**

The approval of this report may have the following implications:

- **Resources** – any major change to the Council's website will be resource-intensive, most likely for the Council's IT section, who are currently under pressure because they are one person down on establishment levels.

However, user-testing the site by the methods identified above would need little, or relatively minor, IT support to set up, and may then be dependent on the investment of time of members of the group carrying out the testing.

No quotes have been obtained from specialist web design consultants, but it is reasonable to assume that the cost of such an exercise would be measured in thousands of pounds.

- **Technical, Environmental and Legal** – major changes to the structure Council's website would require technical expertise that resides within the Council's IT section, but there are no major risks under this heading identified at the time of writing.

- **Reputation** – it is clear that the Council's reputation suffered as a result of the identification that we had not picked up all the comments deposited via the Council's website in relation to certain planning issues. The Council has already demonstrated that it takes the criticisms seriously that were levelled at it, and has addressed the specific problem by removing one of the files for comments on planning applications, in order to avoid future duplication. Taking the matter further, and reviewing the operation of the whole of the Council's website, may well enhance the Council's reputation for responding positively to a negative experience.
- **Political** – there are no political implications arising as a direct result of the content of this report.

6 **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

Considers the content of the report and determines whether and how to take forward a review of the Council's website, particularly in relation to the receipt of planning applications.

JOHN C HEAP
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES