

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL

STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

23 NOVEMBER 2023

Report Title	Improving Customer Service through a Better Customer Interface (Cw 3.2)			
Purpose of Report	To provide members with detail on the necessary upgrades to the council's main website and the development of the website strategy to improve customer experience. The report also provides an update on other work within the Fit for the Future programme to improve customer experience including the development of the customer contact centre.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to: a) Approve the continued development of the website strategy (as specified in section 2.4); and b) Agree an allocation of £51k from the Repairs and Replacements Reserve for the upcoming development of the website c) Note the ongoing Fit for the Future work associated with improving the customer experience.			
Consultation and Feedback	Strategic Leadership Team, ICT, Fit for the Future and Communications teams with feedback incorporated			
Report Author	Adrian Blick, Interim Director of Transformation and Change Email: Adrian.Blick@stroud.gov.uk			
Options	Relating to section 2.4 only: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave website Customer Experience unchanged • Amend recommendations relating to Customer Experience • Approve Customer Experience recommendations as advised in this report 			
Background Papers	None			
Appendices	None			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	Yes	No	Yes	No

1. Introduction / Background

- 1.1 This report outlines the work in progress and our proposed strategy for the websites that are currently hosted by the council. This includes the main Council website, the Gloucestershire Building Control Partnership (GBCP), the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and the officer's intranet (The Hub). It excludes the Members Hub and the Town and Parish council hub.

- 1.2 The websites are an important part of our servicing proposition and will become even more important as we develop this channel to provide better online access to council services. As such, we need to ensure the website foundations are strong and their structures and content are both easy and intuitive to use for everyone who wishes to do so.
- 1.3 The report also provides an update on the work to channel shift from largely telephone-based contact to more on-line services as this provides further context on work being done to improve customer service for everyone.

2. Website Strategy

2.1 The website software is supplied by Umbraco, LLC, and is highly regarded in the industry aligning with the principles set out in the Local Digital Declaration which the council has signed alongside three hundred local authorities and supporting organisations. <https://www.localdigital.gov.uk/declaration/>

2.2 The website strategy has two key objectives:

- Upgrade Umbraco to latest version and migrate to cloud-hosting
- Review and improve the customer experience.

2.3 Upgrade Umbraco and migrate to cloud-hosting

2.3.1 The funding for most of this work is in place, having been funded from the repairs and replacement reserve as an essential cost for website operation, and the upgrade work is in progress. The cost to date has been £28k for the upgrade work to take the website to cloud hosting and a further £22k for the first year of operation. It will ensure the website remains secure, supported, and will improve its resilience. Most of the work will be performed by a third-party specialist with the content migration being delivered by the council team.

2.3.2 The cloud migration will initially cover the main website and The Hub only and aligns with the council's IT strategy of having a more dispersed IT estate thereby reducing the risk of a widespread impact in the event of a cyber-attack. There are other important benefits which include improved alignment with accessibility and gov.uk standards.

2.3.3 Following a procurement exercise, People Places Lives Ltd (PPL) has been selected as the council's main hosting supplier. PPL was able to demonstrate that it could safely upgrade the websites and provide a hosted solution in its private datacentre. It also supplies this service to both Gloucestershire County Council and to Gloucester City which means the councils can leverage the relationship and share experience and insights.

2.3.4 Work to move these websites to PPL's cloud service will complete in Q1 2024 via two main phases, neither of which are likely to significantly affect availability of the services. The first phase is a simple upgrade to secure extended support of the Umbraco software and the second is a more significant set of upgrades and the move to cloud hosting. To minimise customer impact, the team will implement during periods of low usage and suitable communications will be issued.

2.3.5 The council team will upgrade the GBCP and LSP websites and will migrate them to Umbraco's own cloud service as this is more cost-effective for smaller websites. The

licence funding requirement is specified later in this section and the timescales for this work have yet to be finalised.

2.4 Improve the customer experience of the website

2.4.1 After the website has been successfully upgraded, we recommend a review of its content and structure to establish how the customer experience can be improved, with priority given to the following:

- Further compliance with the Web Content and Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.2) (*)
- Further compliance with gov.uk standards
- Improved consistency and quality of the website content
- Removal of materials no longer required
- Better sign posting and searching to help customers easily find what they need
- Enhanced page rendering for 'every' device type (e.g., mobile phones)
- Development of measures to establish end user satisfaction and usage patterns.

(*) We currently score 79/100 on the main accessibility measures and plan to improve this score to be as high as is commercially feasible.

2.4.2 This part of the website strategy is currently in development as we need to thoroughly assess the scale of the work that needs to be undertaken. We are planning to identify key stakeholders, establish their requirements and then develop specifications in the FY 2024/25. We can then accurately estimate the work before initiating a phased programme of work throughout the year with completion expected in FY 2025/26

2.4.3 As part of initiating the work described in 2.4.2, we will assess whether the council has the skills to undertake this work in house or whether we will need to partner with a website vendor.

2.4.4 To provide committee with an indication of where the work to improve the website will start, it is anticipated that the Home pages will be reviewed first followed by a review of those pages which are most frequently accessed including:

- Bins
- Complaints
- Paying for services
- Planning.

2.4.5 We also plan to make similar improvements to the other websites referenced in the Introduction/Background section.

2.4.6 The budget for this work will need to be reviewed, when more detail is available (ref. 2.4.2 and 2.4.3), but the following is estimated and assumes support from a third party will be required:

- £50,000 for work to improve our four websites.

2.4.7 Also, we have been quoted £1,000 p.a. by Umbraco to host the GBCP and LSP websites in the cloud.

3. Customer Service Improvements

Customer service is being improved as we re-engineer our processes, increase the number of on-line services offered and as we transform our Customer Services team into a Contact Centre.

3.1 Process improvement and on-line services

The process re-engineering work is delivering improvements which can either be directly re-introduced to the service teams or developed as on-line services on our Digital platform.

Customers can access our on-line services 24 x 7, at their convenience, and (along with the work we are doing to establish our Contact Centre) this will also enhance the service for those who wish to contact the council via other channels, such as telephone, as the wait time will be reduced, and the council's agents will have more time available to process the calls.

3.1.1 We have thus far implemented five on-line services which are:

- Building Control contact form
- Bulky Waste
- Garden Waste - new bookings
- Garden Waste - renewals
- Waste Management (Waste and Recycling).

3.1.2 We recently implemented a customer satisfaction measure to help us assess how well the on-line services are being received by our customers and feedback has been extremely positive. Of the services implemented to date, satisfaction rates indicate that 96% of users found the services 'easy to use'. This is very encouraging as the team has prioritised keeping the customer at the heart of the process and improving customer experience.

Some feedback to date includes:

- "As an elderly person, it was one of the easiest to understand."
- "Thank you for making it such a great user experience. It makes all the difference – clear and easy to navigate. Fantastic."
- "No improvement necessary... very straightforward and easy to complete."

The customer satisfaction feedback forms also allow customers to make suggestions of improvement which is important as it helps ensure we continuously improve our online services. The suggestions made are carefully reviewed and, in most cases, we can implement the changes straight away and make the service better for the next person.

3.1.3 Our future pipeline for further on-line services includes processes related to:

- Elections (Target: By May 2024 elections)
- Enforcement (Target: February 2024)

- Licencing (Target: May 2024)
- Pest Control (Target: February 2024)
- Waste Management (Streets and Grounds) (Target: April 2024).

In addition, we have been working to pilot the development of a Web Assistant (also known as chatbot) for waste management and elections to establish whether this new channel is likely to prove popular.

3.2 Contact Centre

Finally, the development of the centralised Customer Contact Centre work will be multi-phase and the first phase (Target 31/12/2023) will encompass restructuring and training of the team, contact recording through the Digital platform and transfer of contact (e.g., phone calls) relating to Revenues and Benefits and Elections. Future phases will include further transfer of contact management relating to other council services and this will be supported by improved integration with systems to support the agents in answering the queries. We also expect to implement case management to ensure business that cannot be managed by the Contact team is safely passed to other teams and then tracked to completion. We expect to complete all the work within the next 2-3 years.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The Fit for the Future programme will continue to place our communities at the heart of everything it does.
- 4.2 The websites are an important part of our service proposition and reflect the relationship we wish to have with those who use them.
- 4.3 As more services are made available on-line it is critical that our websites remain secure, operational, and accessible as this will better serve those who use them. This will also enable release of council resource to better serve those who continue to contact us via more established channels such as telephone and the Contact Centre construct will further enhance this experience. The work that is underway and proposed will ensure this happens.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial Implications

The report sets out an estimated cost of £51k to implement the next stage of the website strategy. As an essential piece of Council infrastructure, the website is eligible for funding through the repairs and replacement reserve, as the upgrade works earlier in the year have been.

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5.2 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report

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5.3 **Equality Implications**

This will primarily focus on accessibility and an assessment will be undertaken ahead of the review of the website content.

5.4 **Environmental Implications**

There are no significant implications within this category.