Scrutiny Committee – 2nd March 2010

9. SSDC Website

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Purpose of Report

To respond to queries raised by the Scrutiny Committee regarding the new public SSDC website.

Action Required

That members note and comment on the report and the website demonstration.

Background

In May 2009, a report was presented to management board recommending a total re-write of the public SSDC website. This was approved. The project is currently running 3 months late, with a proposed launch date of Monday April 22nd 2010.

Report

This report will compliment a live demonstration and will attempt to respond to the concerns and queries raised in the report request raised by the committee.

1. *The sometimes poor download speeds.*
   - This has been a problem for some time. We are working closely with ICT to ensure the new website performs well. The hardware on which the website will run has been upgraded and our main internet link has been significantly upgraded. We will spend 3 weeks during April performing intensive testing at all hours of the day and from outside SSDC to ensure download speeds are consistently good and work to fix any problems. There is, of course, a risk that performance will remain poor. To mitigate this, we have the option to host the website externally. There are clear benefits to this, notably guaranteed performance and a 99.5% 24/7 'up time'. The obvious drawback is that hosting is expensive.

2. *Planning applications that you cannot download*
   - The facility to view and download planning documents is supplied by a third party (Civica). We have been aware of problems with some documents and are currently working with Civica to resolve this. One facility we are working towards is to enable all documents relating to an application to be downloaded in a single ZIP file. Also, we would like to standardise all online documents as PDF files. Currently we have a mix of word document, TIFF image files, PDFs and plain text files. We are implementing this as part of the 'lean' implementation and will be in place by October 2010.

3. *The search facility not being adequate (Google finds SSDC results better than SSDC's own web page)*
   - The current search facility is certainly not adequate. It is slow and brings back confusing results. This is primarily because of the way content has been added, with incorrect key words and inappropriate search 'boosting' (this explains why some results have a 400% match). Content for the new site has been fundamentally redesigned so the search should perform well. We are also investigating Google technology to run as our site search engine. More importantly, all new content will be managed centrally to ensure future consistency.

4. *The lack of customer friendly terminology*
   - During the re-write of the new site, we realised how extensive this problem was. Plain English was rare and jargon was rife. To ensure this is mitigated in future, all content will be managed centrally.

5. *Lack of on-line facilities - having to print a form and send it back rather than complete on-line*
   - The fundamental business case for the new website and the web development/e-communications team is to move people away from expensive access channels (post being by far the most expensive) to on-line contact (by far the cheapest). The live demonstration will show the plan to make this a reality throughout the organisation.

In general, good progress has been made with the new website. However, the project has been delayed due to the challenge of managing conflicting demands (specifically the corporate Potential Hazard System and the EU Services Directive). We also underestimated of the size of the task. The main problem was the extent of poor content. Initially it was thought that existing content could be retained but on closer inspection a total re-write was required. This was the only way to eradicate confusing navigation, poor English, extensive use of jargon, poor search results and out of date or missing content.

Previously, costs for developing the website were inflated due to a reliance on third parties. For this project, all work has been carried out internally thus keeping costs to a minimum. A cost-effective website must integrate efficiently with our services. It is for that reason that in-house development was preferred over outsourcing to private and expensive web designers.

Accessibility is a challenge. We have worked closely with our equalities officer to ensure options are available for users with mental or physical disabilities. We have built on our experience of working with the Shaw Trust and also copied best practice, specifically using the BBC website (acknowledged as one of the best in the world) as a reference. Accessibility to rural areas without broadband is also a challenge. We need to ensure a balance between rich content and speed. Again, we have used BBC as a reference.

Regarding community engagement, there are various options and plans to maximise this. Perhaps it would be better to discuss this during the live demonstration.

Background Papers: Scrutiny report request