Arun Websites and Intranet 2014-15

Report for Members 12/08/2014

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Background

The main Arun website has performed consistently badly in the annual SocITM Better Connected Web Accessibility Assessment, gaining no more than 2 out of a possible 4 stars. This is bad news for our "Click, Call and Come In" strategy, which cannot hope to succeed in shifting customer interactions to the cheapest channel, if that channel is less accessible than it should be.

A study of the 2014 Web Accessibility Assessment, shows that the items we are failing at are, for the most part, easily correctable. The list includes; site wide issues with navigability and structure, terminology and accessibility, as well as criticism that the most common customer interactions do not shape the design. The report also features a number of set tasks that performed poorly, or were not available to customers using mobile devices.

Almost all of these issues could be addressed with some attention and regular maintenance, but a fairly major resource will be required to review and improve the entire site as a first step. Consideration must also be given to other implementations that share the same platform, i.e.
- The Sussex by the Sea tourism website
- The employee intranet - Grapevine
- Approximately 20 Parish Council websites

CMT has asked for an appraisal of the work and resources required to re-launch the main website with a new front page and substantially improve both the content and navigation. There is an aspiration to produce a new site before May 2015.

The Way Forward

Significant numbers of staff in the Council have lost faith with the current platform – VerseOne - and our long term requirement is to move to a new platform. The main options are to use SharePoint, or to move to a new dedicated CMS provider, such as GOSS. The latter option could also be done in association with Chichester District Council, for which we have a proposal, although timescales may be an issue.

Discussion with GOSS has established that they could produce a new front page and a complete migration of the existing content before March next year, leaving us free to focus on redesigning the content. They have suggested that a team of 3 full time people could work with them to achieve this, mainly focussing on content revision, plus some IT and design resource as required.

However, there is no point in moving to GOSS (or a similar alternative) if we then decide to use SharePoint as a long term solution and a full appraisal of the best options is unlikely to allow time for procurement and content work within the current deadlines. Therefore, it makes more sense to upgrade the VerseOne offering, spending our time re-writing content and making the site better and then to migrate to a new platform as a second phase. This solution also avoids having to make any politically sensitive decisions about parish council sites, or affect Sussex By The Sea in any way.

Whichever option is chosen for the main web site, our Intranet (Grapevine) should be migrated to Microsoft SharePoint. This would follow the successful model already proven by Arun Direct with their SharePoint CRM and could also introduce features such as member or employee specific content, a revised room booking calendar, departmental drives, a new internal directory and lots more. This should be done as a second or third phase, once the initial customer facing work is completed.

In the long term, we will need to answer the parish council question. Alternative approaches could be considered including hosted, supported, or paid for options. Their existing pages can be left on v4 until we decide to switch it off. CDC manage half a dozen of their parish councils, but only having charged an initial set up fee. Worthing & Adur and Mid Sussex have reciprocal communications arrangements with their parish councils, but all parish council sites are managed independently through individual CMSs.

The Content Re-write

We have some content writing skills in house, but very little knowledge or experience of building a new website beyond a desire to improve the search functionality and give priority to high volume transactions in line with our customer service strategy.

As the main source of constructive criticism about our current site is from the SocITM Better Connected report, we intend to engage with a SocITM consultant to point us in the right direction. This piece of work would initiate any of the platform options and would include:

- an examination of the current governance arrangements for the website
- an updated assessment of the current website, analysed in greater detail
- an analysis of all customer access data available
- a clarification of the purpose of the website in terms of the council's strategy and objectives
- proposed changes in the governance of the website in light of its purpose
- the principles behind the design of a new website
- an outline plan for the implementation of a new website
- a full report of all findings and conclusions
- presentation of the report to CMT

Following this, we should start to build a replacement website and intranet, with a view to replacing the whole VerseOne contract as soon as possible.

The role of the Comms Team

A more effective relationship needs to be established between Customer Services and Communications. This will aid the development of a digital strategy, starting with our web sites, but including the important social media elements that are missing currently, e.g. use of social media streams to answer customer queries, or the development of apps to allow smartphone and tablet customers to contact us easily.

These will need to be guided and informed by Comms, but there is too much daily work involved in the operation of our customer contact streams for such a crucial channel to sit entirely in the Communications Arena. Arun Direct and the reception teams, as well as the departments themselves, all have a role to play. Communications could retain control of news and PR elements, without the burden of maintaining all departmental and customer services information.

Timescales and resources

Other councils have provided a significant resource for this work. Ashford took over a year to upgrade their website with a team of 4 employees, plus 60 departmental content managers, none full time. Adur & Worthing brought both sets of council pages together over a 2 year period following the merger, with 2 dedicated web developers doing all the work, following service specific meetings. All councils asked stated that the work was still on-going outside the main project timescales and for this reason there should be consideration of a permanent resource. None of the councils asked had a legacy team of less than 2 full time people. Chichester have 2.5 FTE.

A possible high level plan for the implementation could look like this:

2014
Sept – engage with SocITM consultant and begin training team.
Oct – begin upgrade of existing site to Verse One v5 and Arun team redesign content.
Oct to Dec – long term strategy/platform established, along with future staffing/maintenance plan.

2015
Jan – begin recruitment of new web role(s) once we know what skills they need
Mar – "New" website is launched
Apr to Dec – migrate to new platform and revamp intranet and parish councils.

This plan requires a hands-on project manager, plus at least 2 additional full time heads (or more if part time/seconded) to re-write a significant amount of content and rebuild the page structure for a March 2015 launch. This team of three would then move onto the migration and intranet phase of the project following go-live. There is an expectation that some design work will be lead or approved by Communications and there will have to be an unknown amount of IT involvement, particularly in the second phase when a new platform is being implemented and the in-house located Grapevine is rebuilt in SharePoint.