Committee report

Committee	**CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**
Date	**15 DECEMBER 2021**
Title	**REPORT ON WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS**
Report of	**DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.   It was resolved at the Audit Committee meeting of 27 September 2021, that the Chairman liaise with the Chairman of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to discuss the potential for the website component of the council's digital strategy to be considered for review. This stemmed from concerns raised by committee members following a limited assurance internal audit report.

2.   This report provides Corporate Scrutiny committee members with an overview of those issues, actions that have been taken to address internal audit report recommendations and progress to date with the design and build of the council's new website in accordance with its agreed project scope and timeline for delivery.

RECOMMENDATION

3.   Members of the Scrutiny Committee are requested to examine the content of the report, seek clarification and understanding of any points of particular concern and to note the progress being made.

BACKGROUND

4.   The Isle of Wight Council's current website was first established in 2001. This was designed and built by the council's internal software development team in accordance with the e-government agenda in force at that time. It was built so that there is an integral content management system and customer relationship management system that serves it. The site has seen major updates on three occasions since then, the last being in 2014 to improve website functionality and to take account of best practice, including the introduction of many on-line transactions that enable 24/7/365 self-service access to some services and which has facilitated an overall reduction in the necessity to contact the council by telephone and secured an increase in the percentage of calls resolved at the first point of contact as can be seen from Tables 1 and 2 below.

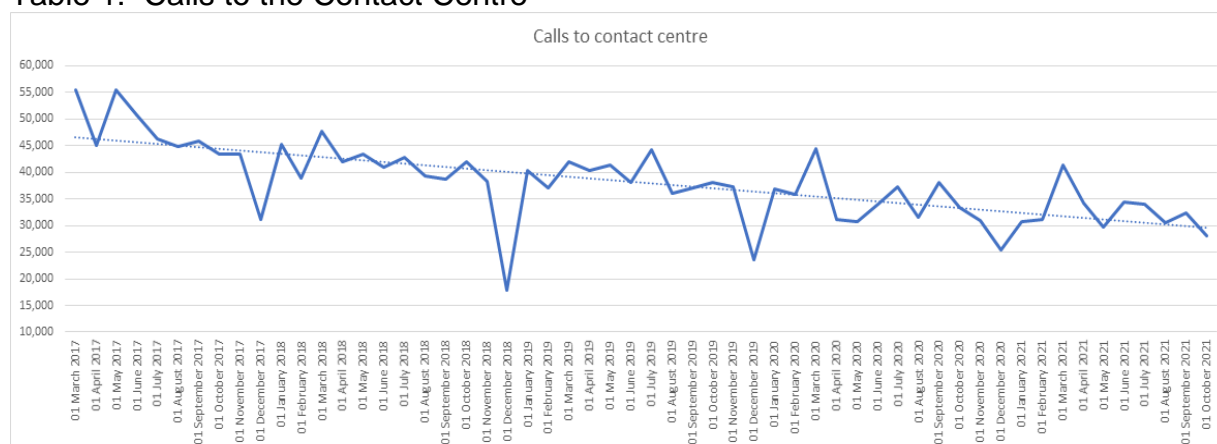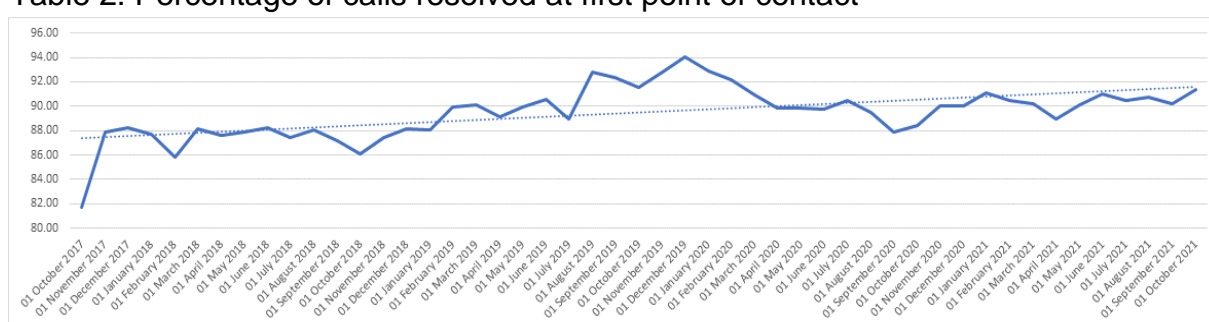Table 1: Calls to the Contact Centre

Table 2: Percentage of calls resolved at first point of contact

5.   The arrival of the economic downturn from 2010 onwards and subsequent central government austerity measures to reduce spending in the public sector, ICT infrastructure and equipment investments were significantly scaled back, together with a wider reduction in the council's staffing complement as necessary measures to deliver the savings required to meet funding gaps. This limited the ability for continued development of the website. Over time, this meant that the ICT infrastructure was quickly becoming not fit for purpose and lacking the capability to adapt to a rapidly changing technology environment.

6.   To address this position and in line with the delivery of the council's digital strategy (2017 – 2020), capital investment was secured for a substantial upgrade to our infrastructure and upon which current agile working methodologies can now operate. This investment, amongst other things, has resulted in a reduction of the number of administrative buildings (of particular note the release of Enterprise House and transfer of staff to the county hall complex) required and the associated overhead costs of running them. Together with these newly acquired efficiency gains, it brought forward new ways of working across the authority and at the onset of the pandemic, as staff were readily able to work from home where required, with minimum disruption to services.

7.   The next step for improvement was the council's website and the associated "back office" business and transactional processes that are driven from it, (of which there are some 500 connections) together with the third-party software solutions commissioned and utilised by services. Appendix 1 provides a high-level overview of the complexity of those connections. The council in 2018, signed up to the central government local digital declaration giving a commitment to the design of digital services that meet the needs of citizens. This aspect chimes with the council's own values of putting users of our services at the heart of everything. This presented the

ideal opportunity to consider a transformational programme of work that not only improved website look, feel and functionality, but which could also deliver business process improvements and potential efficiency savings as a result. Appendix 2 provides an overview of some of the analytical information that informed development considerations.

8.   To take apart this immensely complex set of interdependencies for consideration as to whether the next iteration of the website should be internally built or externally commissioned would have required a minimum of a twelve-month project with associated project resource funding identified and allocated to it. If an external commission had been determined as the preferred option, there would have also been the necessity to factor in a full procurement exercise given the likely value of a supplier contract. Even with an external commission there remains the requirement for an in-house project team to manage the implementation and integration of the end-product and to compile the new content required to populate it.

9.   It was also known at the time, that accessibility legislation was on the horizon that would set out specific standards that would need to be implemented and met for public sector websites.   This eventually resulted in the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications (No2) Accessibilities Regulations 2018 being launched on 23 September 2019 setting out the requirement for any public sector website launched on or after 23 September 2018 to be compliant with these standards; for existing websites to publish an accessibility statement on their current level of accessibility in line with legislative requirements and the plans in place to demonstrate compliance and a deadline of 23 September 2020 to meet full compliance.

10.   The four factors set out above led to the council's corporate management team in March 2019 considering a proposal from the then Strategic Manager for ICT and Digital Services to commence an internal council wide transformation project that would see the design and build from the ground up of a new website interface combined with a review of six key service areas (planning, registrars, fostering and adoption, revenues and benefits, human resources and waste services) that would see a redesign of their website content and back office business processes. The aim being to launch a new BETA website by September 2020, designed around the needs of those who use our services. £230,000 of the council's established transformation fund was granted to undertake this initial phase of work through which there would be a full business case developed by its conclusion that would identify the whole life project requirements, costs and funding ask together with any efficiency savings that could be delivered.

11.   The project team had been recruited by the Autumn of 2019 and the initial investigations and design work for the prototype upon which the website would be built had been established by December 2019. This early project activity had also seen the training (facilitated and paid for by the Government Digital Service) of the project team in the nationally recognised agile methodology considered to be best practice for digital transformational developments; the completion of a 12 week public perception and consultation exercise to assess the potential for new website homepage layouts and to understand more about how people want to use the website; the delivery of internal activities with staff in the design by identifying best of breed features through the testing out of national best practice websites; the development and presentation of "mock ups" to afford visual representation of webpage layout, hierarchy, structure and navigation for decision making purposes

and detailed analysis of google analytics to map out current website usage, how people navigate their required information and where on-line interactions fail to inform priority developments and improvements.

12.   Project planning and delivery began in earnest in January 2020. Workshops with staff from the planning, registrars, fostering and adoption service areas commenced as the first tranche of website content and process review. The Strategic Manager for ICT and Digital Services and project lead at the time left the council's employment to take up a new role with another local authority. The service user engagement activities to test, trial and inform developments and planning for the remainder of the initial service area reviews were also being prepared when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country in March 2020.

13.   By necessity, the digital content team resource was redirected to the pandemic response to manage the essential public interface communications necessary throughout the response period. The ICT resources were also redirected to the immediate needs of staff who were required to work from home throughout the period of the lockdown and other priority delivery needs identified as necessary, such as the design and build of the waste and recycling centre booking system that would allow for a safe return to use. However, the technical framework building and pre-requisite developments for the website continued as far as was possible throughout this period of time and some content review where possible with initial service areas.

14.   As a result of the prolonged period of the pandemic and continued engagement of the key areas planned for review in the pandemic response also, it became clear that the September 2020 deadline for the delivery of the BETA website would no longer be feasible. Progress was further hampered during October 2020 following a further worsening of the Covid-19 situation right through Christmas of that year and into the spring of 2021.

15.   The internal audit service concluded a planned review of the council's digital strategy in accordance with their agreed workplan in March 2021. A particular focus of that review was given to the website re-development project. That resulted in a limited assurance rating being determined. Recognising the valuable role of internal audit, the recommendations of the audit were readily accepted and have been actively addressed since receipt of the report, together with other remedial action necessary to allow the project to get back on track.

16.   Due to the increasing pressure of timescales for the council to meet its obligations of having a fully accessible website in accordance with legislation, it has been necessary to focus attention on the delivery of the required actions for content review and design to meet compliance. Whilst a high-level review continues to be undertaken on the more transformational elements of the project originally planned for business process improvements, these are being captured as a "backlog" list for future consideration and business case development as necessary. It was also necessary to redetermine the list of services for inclusion in the first phase of review due to the on-going resource demands in some service areas due the pandemic situation.

17.   Audit committee received and reviewed the report of internal audit at its meeting of 26 July 2021. They expressed their serious concerns as to the outcome of this audit. At the committee's request, the chief internal auditor presented an interim progress report against the audit report agreed actions at their meeting of 27 September 2021.

This update highlighted from limited review that positive progress was being made, with key steps to get the initiative back on track taken; project management arrangements addressed with key gaps in documentation and governance also addressed. A full follow-up audit will be conducted later in the 2021/2022 audit year. Committee members also raised several wider concerns outside of the scope of the audit investigations, notably regarding the decision to select and build both website and the content management functionality

18. The rationale for determination of the in-house build option is set out in brief within this report. A further report had been compiled for the cabinet member with portfolio responsibility for digital transformation for the purposes of explanation of the decisions taken to also design and build a replacement content management system as an essential component of the website redevelopment.

19. That report highlighted that the delivery of a new website required the creation and configuration of a new content management system to provide the necessary platform upon which the legislative requirements for accessibility could be met. Following undocumented investigation undertaken at the time, this decision was reviewed to illustrate the factors that had been taken account of and to provide the evidence of the cost/benefits over the life of the entire project, had other options been chosen. To do this, an investigation was undertaken into the content management systems in use by other local authorities, costing models ascertained and reference customers in local government contacted for qualitative understanding of the solutions implemented.

20. The basis of this investigation focussed on a list of key requirements which included the need for:
   • the price of licences, support, maintenance, and hosting to be affordable for the council,
   • the content management system development aspect of the project to enable costs to be kept as low as possible whilst delivering the required outcomes.
   • The website to be capable of integration with a commissioned search engine tool
   • The system to be .NET to enable existing technology stack, council expertise and development work to be undertaken
   • a stable and secure by design, capable of meeting National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and other appropriate published standards.
   • An intuitive and easy to use system for content editors
   • parallel development capabilities
   • integration with other platforms, to avoid the need for re-key of captured information
   • compatibility with a range of publisher and editor role-based access models to be easy to manage
   • the support of a range of online payments and links to other integral council systems
   • the continued use of or replacement of the current council customer relationship management system

21. The investigations also took account of the need for a standard set of internal resources required for all options in the development of a modern fully featured website with appropriately designed and accessible services, end to end transactions and a personalised customer area. Those resources were defined as being project management, business analysis/process and development specification creation,

digital content management and internal software development resources to enable the integration into backend council systems to be achieved.

22. The report concluded that the resources allocated and committed to the project were appropriate and when compared to other similar size and complexity of unitary local authority, the costs were lower.

23. To provide the best possible cost comparison on a like for like basis, for the full length of time the local authorities contacted have taken to deliver their website projects, the cost models were calculated on a five-year build programme to cover a digital customer services project that delivers a new main website and content management system. For illustrative purposes the outcomes of this investigation identified:
(a)   In-House - Total estimated cost £1,394,290
(b)   Supplier 1 - Total estimated cost £1,703,320
(c)   Supplier 2 - Total estimated cost £1,716,240
(d)   Supplier 3 - Total estimated cost £2,312,485

24. The total funding allocation to the council's in-house design and build of a new website and content management system, launch of the BETA site by 31 March 2022, transfer of all existing site content to the new website and closedown of the existing by March 2023 is £765,000. This is based on a three-phase programme of work. Phase one £230,000 (the extended period between 1 October 2019 – 31 March 2021 as highlighted within this report); Phase two £202,00 (the period between 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022) and Phase 3 a planned allocation of £333,00 (the period between 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023). As set out above there will be elements of consideration for business-as-usual website maintenance and potential business process improvement/efficiency and savings beyond the design and build project, but which are yet to be determined but will be identified during phase three.

25. The project currently remains on track to deliver a BETA website in line with the approved project initiation document (shown at Appendix 3). The deadline for the delivery of the Alpha version of the content management system has also been met and is currently in testing with the digital content management team. Once testing has been completed, the commencement of content population can be secured for wider user engagement purposes and refinements to be undertaken in readiness for go live in April 2022. This will build upon the existing user engagement workshops that have been undertaken with a range of stakeholder groups to assist with the design, build and testing of the new website product.

CONCLUSION

26. The project has without question had challenges to address. It lost its leadership stability upon the departure of the then Strategic Manager for ICT & Digital Services, shortly followed by an unplanned world-wide pandemic situation which necessitated a large scale, complex council wide response over a prolonged period and had not been able to establish the basis of good project management and governance arrangements during that period of time.

27. A significant amount of work by the project team has been undertaken to get the project back on track and to address the internal audit report recommendations so that it is on a better footing to deliver a new council website. The original intended plans and outcomes for the project have by necessity been scaled back to meet the statutory obligations set out by the accessibility legislation and its associated

standards for public sector websites and for the council to demonstrate compliance as soon as feasibly possible.

28. The next iteration of the council's digital strategy is scheduled for consideration by Cabinet in January 2022.

APPENDICES ATTACHED

29. Appendix 1: User Centred System Architecture
30. Appendix 2: Iwight.com Analytics
31. Appendix 3: Website Project Initiation Document – Phase 2

BACKGROUND PAPERS

32. Isle of Wight Council Digital Transformation Strategy 2017 - 2020
33. Local Digital Declaration
34. Audit Committee - Monday, 26th July, 2021
35. Audit Committee - Monday, 27th September, 2021

Contact Point: Claire Shand, Director of Corporate Services ☎ 821000 e-mail claire.shand @*iow.gov.uk*

CLAIRE SHAND
Director of Corporate Services

CLLR IAN STEPHENS
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community Protection, Digital Transformation, Housing Provision and Housing Needs.