

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 MAY 2010

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE WINTER WEATHER AND THE RESPONSE TO IT

Response by ICT Services

General Comments

What went well.

- Many ICT staff were able to continue to work as normal via remote access / teleconferencing.
- Many council/NHS staff now have remote access and/or mobile devices which allow a degree of connectivity.
- Managers and team leaders applying flexibility with regards to staff working remotely and flexible hours
- Staff able to cover for other staff (in other departments) who were unable to get to work

What could be improved / what did not go well.

- Communications were good, but if you are away from your computer you will miss them.
- Closure of schools/services information on the website and communications between departments.
- Access to HC/NHS networks from all sites not available
- Some Buildings were closed early, this was not communicated to all staff.

Recommendations

- Severe Weather 'Handy Guide' for staff to keep in their cars/at home so staff are aware of their responsibilities for getting to work etc.

Schools Closure Information

- 51 of the top 100 web pages visited on the website in January were related to the extreme weather conditions and account for 133,594 of the page views and 101,096 of the visits.

- Significantly, however, only just over a third of the visits (36,946) and less than half of the pages views (46,475) were to the Press releases content. Yet this was where the web emergency information efforts were focused. The other service pages were not managed as part of the emergency information communication plan but account for the majority of the searches and visits. Appendix 1 includes the independent 'Better Connected' survey of severe weather coverage on all Council websites and acknowledges the currency of the news content. Appendix 2 is a summary of relevant comments from members of the public in our January 2010 website take-up service (397 respondents).

- It is clear from these figures and the independent reports that although information was available, publishing it in News articles not as effective as updating relevant service areas on the website where the public would expect to find it.

- In addition although the schools closures information appears to have been available from 6:00 am (CYPD report) there seems to be significant confusion about its route to other information channels. I could find no example of the data being available to publish on the Council's website before 7:00 am and more generally after 8:00 am. This appears to be at odds with its availability to the Emergency helpline and the BBC website for instance. For the public the timeliness of the information is critical. See email in Appendix 3.

- Although web staff are/were available our-of-hours to enable updates 24 hours if necessary and appropriate this is only an informal service and relies on the information being available to the web staff to publish and goodwill.

- The accuracy of the information was questionable and appeared to conflict with other published web content. Two examples:
 - Multiple press releases on the same day or multiple updates to the same press release on the same day. To help clarify communication's updates to press releases a timestamp was added to the published date.

 - County gritting routes for January 2010 were put onto the website on the 6 January in the "Snow Clearance and Winter Maintenance - Herefordshire Council" section which received a total of 5169 page views during this time. However the older gritting route documents for each area e.g. Leominster or Bromyard, were last updated in 2005 and were not removed or replaced.

- Lack of consistency in the presentation of key information which was raised in the website take-up service feedback. For example whether school closures were reported as open or closed.

Key Issues

- Timeliness of key information: A key issue is the lack of accurate, timely information for the Council website about emergency incidents. Parents need the information before 8:00 am for it to be useful e.g. to make alternative childcare provision, travel arrangements, getting the children dressed and breakfasted etc. The earlier the information is communicated the easier it is for families, and by extension employers, to manage the potential impact. Please note the comment we received from a parent that morning (in appendix 3).
- Under-utilisation of the Web and poor communication chain: there is a reliance on the Web team to troubleshoot news content but we are not given priority as part of emergency information communications. It also seems that the Communications team do not get the emergency information early enough e.g. the BBC were able to provide the information on their website well over an hour before the Web team received any information from Communications. As with previous incidents, there seems to be a critical delay in getting the information from Schools to Communications and then to the Web team. It is not clear when the school closure information was made available to the emergency telephone hotline. It would be a concern if there was a significant difference between getting school closure information on these channels (the phone line and website) OR if it wasn't available on the telephone hotline either until after 8:00 am.
- Communications with local media outlets : An immediate improvement measure would be to place a link to the BBC website as the school closure information is always up and available on the BBC Herefordshire & Worcester local radio website, however there is concern is that other local radios (e.g. Wyvern and Sunshine) point to the Council website, and expect that the Council can provide this information rather than another media outlet.
- Service information published in News articles only: Core service information is only contained in News articles. This year Local directgov has requested that all local authorities provide a link to the information on their websites for school closures and for gritting routes. This requires a service page for each. The gritting route information is on a service page managed by that area of the business but we have nothing similar for school closures. However there is also insufficient accountability for management of the service content we do have e.g. the January 2010 gritting routes on the service page were published by the web team but they do not have the service knowledge to know if information is no longer accurate. That is the responsibility of the service manager and this needs to be reinforced. The remaining documents were last updated by service user 'jlm' in 2005.

Recommendations

1. Include representation from the Web team in emergency planning meetings and actively engage them in exploring options to utilise digital communication channels. Provide a mobile work phone for the Corporate Web Editor if out-of-hours support is expected.
2. Review information flows across ALL channels of communication to the public to support the automatic distribution of service information e.g. implementing service information pages on the Council website for school closures, containing **auto-published** details of school closures.
3. Agree and implement mechanism(s) to improve the flow of school closure information, for example through SMS texting and txt to voice services so they allow information to be supplied once and used in many ways e.g. hotline, web and mobile. ICT work closely with Children's Services and Rob Reid [?] to identify a viable solution e.g. neighbouring authorities, specialist suppliers, and customised generic services. The SMS solution should be a corporate tool as the statistics clearly show that the public require timely as well as accurate information for not only school closures but other service areas such as transport (e.g. road usage and buses), refuse and recycling, public spaces e.g. libraries (but could also be clinics), and bus timetables. One option would be to consider the Emergency Planning team as the business sponsor for this piece of work.
4. Utilise social networking sites such as twitter and facebook to distribute the information as widely as possible and as soon as possible and seek to engage social media enterprises with open data sets e.g. gritting routes & mappa-mercia.
5. Put a link to the BBC local radio school closures on the website, as a related link.

Appendix I – external assessment of information on website

Socitm carried out a structured survey of the websites of the 121 subscribers to the Socitm Website take-up service (Herefordshire Council is a subscriber) to see how they were publishing information about service disruptions during the snow and ice in the first two weeks of January. The results for the Herefordshire Council website are in blue below.

Questions about website

- Q1 Does the homepage contain a link or statement about service disruptions due to current weather situation? (Yes/No)
Yes
- Q2 Is a graphic used to highlight this information? (Yes/No)
Yes
- Q3 How is the information being provided? (0-nothing found, 1-news release only, 2-dedicated webpage, 3-several refs on home page, v comprehensive)
3
- Q4 Which services are highlighted as being disrupted?
- 4a Library closures? (Yes/No) No
- 4b Refuse & recycling collections? (Yes/No) Yes
- 4c Road gritting information? (Yes/No) Yes
- 4d School closures? (Yes/No) Yes
- 4e Services for older people (meals on wheels / day care centres)?
(Yes/No) No
- 4f Something else? (please state in Q6) (Yes/No) No
- Q5 Rate how effectively you think this council is promoting service disruption information? (0-none found, 1-poor, 2-satisfactory, 3-very good)
2
- Q6 What comments do you have to make about what you have found? -
Number of news releases. Not just one, but no dedicated page.
At the content page for the first service named in Q4.
- Q7 Does the service description page refer to current service disruption information (ref what's on the home page)?
No

Questions about Twitter

Q8 Does the home page include a link to Twitter? (Yes/No)

No

The council website does not link to Twitter so the following questions are all negative.

Q9 Am I encouraged to follow Tweets for service disruption information? (Yes/No)

Click the Twitter link and check the feed.

Q10 How long ago was the last Tweet posted? (Hours)

Q11 How long ago was the last Tweet about disruption to service posted? (Hours)

Q12 Is there any evidence that the council is actively engaging with Twitter users (eg. a message acknowledging Twitter users, a reply to an individual) (Yes/No)

Q13 How many followers does the Twitter account have? (Hours)

Q14 What comments do you have to make about what you have found?

Questions about Facebook

Q15 Does the council homepage include a link to Facebook? (Yes/No)

No

The council website does not link to Facebook so the following questions are all negative.

Q16 Am I encouraged to visit Facebook for service disruption information?

Click the Facebook link and check the news feed or wall.

Q17 How long ago was the last entry posted by the council? (Hours)

Q18 How long ago was the last entry about disruption to service posted? (Hours)

Q19 Is there any evidence of Facebook users interacting with the Council (e.g. responding to updates by leaving comments on the 'wall') (Yes/No)

Q20 Is the Facebook presence a 'page' rather than a 'group'? (pages have 'fans', groups have 'members') (Yes/No)

Q21 How many 'fans' or 'members' does it have?

Q22 What comments do you have to make about what you have found?

Overview

Q23 How do you rate this council? (1- poor, 2- satisfactory, 3-very good)

1

Q24 Please note any further comments or innovations

Just press releases really - high 1 or low 2.

