

Dorset For You

UNIQUELY BRINGING COUNCILS AND COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Wouldn't it be great if you could just go to one web portal, without needing to know which level of local Government provides which service, and be able to find what you want within a few clicks of a mouse?

If this sounds simple and useful, then you should perhaps take a look at the 'Dorsetforyou.com' project; the only integrated, multi-authority portal of its kind. Where all of the other local authority web portals act much like mini-search engines, directing the site's visitors to content on other local Government websites, Dorset's portal provides all of the local information from all of the local bodies on one website.

In its first month, following its launch in mid-April 2005, the website traffic statistics showed that there were 75,000 unique users, 142,000 visits, and page views are reported to have exceeded the combined statistics of the original four, individual Councils' websites. The Councils' targets sought 50,000 unique users, 100,000 visits and 2 million page views. So the effectiveness of having one portal is demonstrable. In September 2005 alone 100,000 people visited the portal, which uses JSP on top of a Linux platform.

The portal was created after a research study revealed that people were unsure about which tier of local Government (whether county, district, borough, town or parish) provided which service. "This meant they often have to visit several different websites to find the information they need, which could be a lengthy and confusing process. The portal should therefore improve customer satisfaction, greater efficiencies through economies of scale, and create joint procurement opportunities given that there is one website with four partners, rather than four individual website", says John Rider-Dobson – Dorset for You Partnership Manager.

The portal therefore enables Christchurch Borough Council, Dorset County Council, East Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council, and West Dorset District Council to provide one point of access to local information and transac-



tional services in one place, and it creates an intuitive step and example of the benefits of integrated local Government. Rider-Dobson believes that the site is further enhanced by its use of plain English, a useable website design, quality content, and "some good transactional functionality."

The following are determined as the target audience for the portal:

- Residents
- Businesses
- Visitors
- Staff and councillors
- And external partners, such as parish councils and suppliers

One of its major objectives is to provide access to Council services on a 24/7 basis to rural communities in the Dorset area. The portal's concept and potential benefits attracted the attention of the

national press. The Guardian newspaper went as far in February 2005 to call the project "a giant leap forward in e-Government."

The most powerful and useful features of the portal are considered to be online job applications (of which 100,000 have been received), access to planning applications review service, and the Dorset-wide contact process. This means that around 350 departments across seven Councils can be contacted through the portal.

The Savings Add Up

Warwickshire County Council has undertaken its own research into the impact in this area; their study suggests that the increased traffic is translated into non-cashable efficiencies. The study identifies that 55% of those using such a portal would have otherwise contacted their local authorities through other communication channels, that is if the website were not available to them. It is estimated that 5 minutes could be saved per site visitor, and that if you take a staff cost of £10 per hour, then the annual saving is around £230,907. This includes 504,000 extra visits than the norm, multiplied by 0.0833 times 10.

Rider-Dobson explains: "This figure does not include additional savings gained by customers downloading their own information, rather than requesting it to be posted to them (e.g. staff time, printing and posting costs). We currently don't have any accurate information about this, but non-cashable efficiencies in year one of the Dorsetforyou project will be around half a million pounds."

Taking away the costs, the Dorsetforyou project has made a total annual saving of around £201,000. A number of other related solutions and services, including support, were also purchased; such as search and taxonomy, and website monitoring tools in order to comply with the Government's e-GIF standards. If each partner had procured everything individually, then this would have cost each local authority four times as much as the total cost of the project put together.

Incidentally the project's media officer, Sarah Johnstone, says that the portal has achieved high Site-

Morse accessibility scores for A and AA compliance, and that the portal is also expecting AA Royal National Institute of Blind (RNIB) accreditation. The RNIB helped Dorsetforyou to tidy up some aspects of the site, and any current or potential improvements are constantly monitored.

Successful Partnership: Its Most Powerful Element

To ensure the success of such a project you need the right partners in place. Each partner must be able to compromise and fully participate in the project for the public's benefit. This is why the partnership between GOSS – the enterprise and intelligent content management solutions company which provides the CMS upon which the portal is supported – and Software AG has helped to make the project so successful. While learning more about each others products, the two companies have also applied this learning and their increased knowledge of Dorsetforyou to assist with the development of key services.

The potential savings, the evidential site statistics, the development of a simplified and customer-centric process for the delivery of information and area-wide services, and the potential for greater collaborative opportunities between the Councils also show how invaluable a portal like dorsetforyou.com could be to other Councils around the UK. What has also been unusual is that the portal uses a .com domain name rather than the traditional .gov.uk suffix. This is also described as being part of the portal's success story.

About GOSS Interactive

GOSS provides managed services and intelligent and enterprise-wide content management solutions. GOSS' solutions are based on a sound understanding of your requirements and the technology we use to meet your customers' needs.

<http://www.gossinteractive.com/DorsetForYou>

To contact GOSS for further information, please call +44 (0)1752 517 350 or email Sharron.Robbie@gossinteractive.com