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1. Introduction

These standards exist to help all NCC staff who publish or who wish to publish information on the public internet. They have been developed by the e-Content Strategy Group and endorsed by CMB and the Access to Services Board. The rationale behind them stems from:

- the findings from the Best Value Review of Access to Services (May 2002)
- the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) (Dec 2002)
- the IDeA review (April 2002)
- e-Government targets and BVPI 157
- Government website design guidelines (which discuss many of the issues raised in more detail).

The term 'e-Content' means content that is published electronically, for example information, forms, applications and databases. The context here is **website** content, but 'e-Content' can equally be applied to all other forms of electronic media eg intranet, extranet, digital TV, mobile devices.

2. Related documents

These standards complement the following documents where more in-depth or related information can be found:

Corporate Web Publishing Guide

Contains all documents relating to web publishing in the authority, including standards, training materials and guides

Website Style Guide

Explains the writing for the web principles and lists correct usage, spellings and naming conventions

URLs policy

Sets out the Authority's policy on the use of URLs (web addresses)

Mapping standards

Describes the mapping source on which all site maps are based

Corporate Communications Strategy

The overarching strategy for many web design and content principles

Corporate Information Strategy

Highlights the principles of information management referred to here

3. The web medium

The web is a **self-service** medium. It is easy, and often tempting, to 'flit' from site to site desperately seeking answers to questions. Research by web usability specialists has revealed that users tend to:

- Leave a site if they can't find what they're looking for quickly ie the answer must be 'somewhere else'
- Expect everything that they need to be instantly available on screen ie they do not follow up opportunities to 'find out more' or use online Help
- Restrict their web activity to communications eg participate in online discussion forums and chatrooms, send their enquiries by e-mail.

The implications of this research are:

- Information must be **structured** intuitively and headings must be phrased in **meaningful, everyday language** – 'brand names' and jargon must be avoided
- Content must be written **concisely** with **key facts** provided 'up front'
- Unless it helps the user understand the nature of a particular service, information '**about us**' is unnecessary
- Information provided should be **self-contained** and **self-explanatory** ie the user should not have to contact us to query content
- The **search** engine must retrieve precise, relevant results
- Opportunities for online **interactivity** and **participation** should be maximised
- Users should be able to **report online** any failures to find information or feedback on particular content. Site feedback form, Ask a Question, and e-mail enquiry addresses are provided for this function. Responses should be provided within one working day
- Contact details for other communication channels eg telephone, face-to-face, should be provided where **specialist advice** on a personal basis is likely to be required
- Users should be clearly told where a **related service** is provided by **another organisation** and guided carefully to that source (see links section)

4. Site purpose

The main purpose of the site is to provide quick and easy **access to information and services**. The 24/7 availability of the web means that the Authority can still offer a service when it is otherwise 'closed for business'.

The site should not be principally regarded as a 'marketing opportunity' to 'deliver messages' or 'promote services'. Instead enhanced image and reputation for the Authority and, indirectly, service promotion follow from a site that offers users:

- easy access to information and services
- relevant, useful and intelligible content
- opportunities to engage with the Authority.

In addition the site exists to:

- Increase public awareness of the services provided by the authority and the functions it performs
- Provide services and documents online, thereby increasing customer convenience and the Authority's responsiveness

- Strengthen local accountability by giving local people the opportunity to comment on issues and policies that affect them
- Make the Council more open and accessible

5. Site principles

Underlying site design and development are **10 key principles**:

1. All NCC services with content appropriate for a public audience contribute to the single core site. The full range of the Authority's content is available from a single source:

www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk

Standalone sites existing outside the core site are not permitted (see also URLs policy)

2. The site is designed and organised around citizens and their needs as opposed to the organisation and its internal structures.
3. Site visual design, or 'look and feel', complies with the Corporate Communications Strategy which adopts a single style for consistency. Collectively a visible style emerges to reinforce the perception that the Council is a single organisation. There remains the opportunity for creativity where specialist audiences eg children, young people, are targeted. (See also URLs policy)
4. Content is owned and maintained by designated staff, in accordance with the Corporate Information Strategy. All live content will have been through an approval process. The responsibilities of content ownership should be treated seriously and managers should allocate sufficient resource to manage and maintain content effectively
5. Web Content Management (WCM) is the default web authoring tool for all NCC services.
6. Content has to have a clearly defined purpose and audience, and linkages with related content must always be considered and established for the citizen's benefit
7. Content must meet Writing for the Web (WFTW) standards and conform to the NCC Web Style Guide
8. The site must be easy to use, easy to navigate, intuitive, 'likeable' and popular with users. Information retrieval must be supported by metadata, an effective search and an intuitive menu arrangement. The site must be accessible to people with disabilities
9. The site must download quickly especially for those using lower spec technologies
10. The site must work function well technically with no broken links or errors

6. Quality of content

The effectiveness of a website is ultimately determined by the quality of its content. Content that is published without thought or planning frustrates users, discredits the organisation and lets the rest of the site down.

Before publishing content, think:

- Who is the audience and what are their needs? 'The public' is too imprecise to help determine appropriate content, style and language; 'parents', 'young people', 'consumers' are more appropriate examples
- What is the purpose? Why are you writing this? What are you trying to say? What do the audience want to hear? As with all content the needs of the end user must drive this; 'general publicity' is too vague; 'to inform parents of school term dates', 'to make those in business aware of support services', 'to put individuals in touch with community groups' are more helpful examples
- What linkages does it have with other information provided by NCC or partners? Remember that the site is based around citizens - their needs do not begin and end with information about one service only. Refer to related information and services where appropriate. Where gaps in content arise due to services not being provided by NCC, signpost users to appropriate agencies and their sites. Also consider those living in the City or outside the County
- Who will maintain it? Without a designated person, **who is allotted sufficient time** to use WCM competently, content will become out-of-date, inaccurate and bring harm to the overall reputation of the site and the Authority
- How can I ensure that it will be read? Web users do not read web pages. Instead they scan pages looking for clues that they are 'in the right place'. Research has shown that if users do not find what they are looking for instantly, they tend to give up and go to another site or try another search to find the answer which 'must be somewhere else'. Writing for the web (WFTW) encompasses a range of techniques to make life easier for the web user and to maximise the possibilities of you having your content read
- How often will it be reviewed? As a **minimum requirement** all content should be reviewed at least once every 6 months
- Does it meet BVPI157 regarding electronic service delivery – initially this will apply to services where the provision of information IS the service ie the service does not incorporate any transactions or ordering facilities that would need to be e-enabled. This data will be included in the BVPI157 Audit exercise currently underway.

7. Producing content

Refer to the Web Style guide for more information on this section.

7.1 Text

Information must be accurate, up-to-date, and spell-checked.

Scrolling should not be excessive. If the publication of a lengthy document is unavoidable, (see also publishing documents) a contents list should be provided at the beginning of the document, with hyperlinks to specific sections in the text and 'back to top' links at the end of each section.

The WCM system does not allow underlining of text to avoid confusion with links.

Similarly italics are not possible due to potential reading difficulty. Upper case words should never be used for the same reason.

Font size, style and colour are pre-determined within the WCM system.

Alignment of text is left to assist on-screen reading.

When referring to a particular service or initiative, it is important to use the same word or phrase on each occasion – inconsistency leads to confusion for the user

7.2 Images

Images must enhance text, deliver a clear message and not be used as 'wallpaper' or vanity publishing.

Download time is regulated by a maximum image size enforced by the WCM system.

Where larger images are required eg photos, a link may be provided from the smaller version, indicating file size of the larger image.

Too many images on the same page will impact on download time.

Copyright issues must be resolved before any images are published (see also Data Protection issues)

7.3 External Links

External links should be used where they enhance the user experience. They are useful for:

- Adding value to the site by satisfying the full range of users' information needs
- Providing information in more depth on a particular topic
- Signposting users to other valuable sources of information
- Saving time and avoiding frustration by directing users away from our site when we do not provide the service or information required

However external links should be used with care to avoid:

- Directing users to inappropriate sites or sites of poor quality
- Losing users before they have fully seen the scope of our information
- Diverting users away from the subject-matter of their original quest

It is important that the relevance and content of external links is explained sufficiently for users to make an informed decision on whether to follow the link or not. The risks of spreading confusion and frustration are potentially serious.

External links must open in the same browser window.

Linked sites' urls, especially where there is deep-linking at lower levels, should be checked regularly to ensure they are still current. The e-Content Team runs regular checks to support this process.

The site disclaimer includes the following statement on external links:

"The Council is not responsible for the content of any external websites and does not endorse any product or organisation contained therein."

See also information on links in the Accessibility section

7.4 Maps

Where the physical location of a service point is indicated, the location must also be shown on a map. A GIS based web-enabled mapping system has been specially developed for the site and this is the standard to be used on all occasions.

7.5 Metadata

Metadata is 'information about information' and helps the site user find the right information quickly. A number of labels or 'tags' are applied to web pages and these help search engines retrieve relevant results or 'hits'.

For this reason it is particularly important to add metadata **subject** and **keyword** terms to web pages. These must be terms that are consistently used by all content publishers to ensure that the vocabulary used is controlled. In other words we must all use the same thesaurus for our metadata subject and keyword terms. This will become part of the content authoring process when the facility becomes available.

7.6 Publishing downloadable documents

The website is predominantly a collection of web pages designed to be read on screen and containing quick-reference information. The general rule is that content likely to be of interest to site users should always be included in standard web pages. There are risks associated with publishing content in non-web format:

- Download time may be unacceptable, especially to those on lower spec technology
- Dedicated software or a reader 'plug-in' may be required
- Speech reader software may not be able to interpret documents, thereby denying access to people with visual impairment (see accessibility)

There are, however, cases where the provision of downloadable documents is unavoidable or even appropriate. These include:

- Lengthy, detailed documents eg Structure Plan
- Frequently published documents with tight publication deadlines eg Committee papers
- Several versions of the same document eg draft document for consultation
- Documents likely to be of very specialist interest only
- Documents which users require in their original printed form eg leaflets, bus timetables
- Documents that are originated in other web-enabled applications eg delegated decisions

In the above cases every effort should be taken to ensure that summaries and the key points of such documents are provided on standard web pages. This will bring them to the attention of users and indicate whether their download is worthwhile.

Downloadable documents should by default be provided in accessible pdf format. MS Office formats may additionally be provided to extend choice. All documents must be formatted correctly eg title, date and the file size must be indicated.

To keep download times to a minimum, care should be taken over file sizes. It is better to split up a large file into smaller ones than cause irritation with users whose browsers 'freeze' when attempting to download documents that are too big. NB There is no 'cancel download' button to abort the download.

Downloadable links must open in the same browser window.

7.7 e-mail addresses

E-mail enquiries are filtered through the site Ask a Question facility. This is because the majority of enquiries can be satisfied by answers already available in Ask a Question, thereby saving time for the user and the Authority. A 'Contact us online' link on the home page takes users to the main Contact Us page, where this is explained. If the user does not find an answer in Ask a Question, the enquiry is e-mailed to a permanently staffed service-point, and the enquiry is handled in a managed environment and performance levels are monitored.

E-mail addresses for specialist services may be contained within the context of service information pages. It is recommended that these be group-based as they are likely to be continuously staffed thereby providing a more responsive service.

Personal e-mail addresses are best avoided as levels of customer service cannot be assured to the same extent as with a dedicated customer service-point. Where it is unavoidable, it is permitted to include personal e-mail addresses, but continuous staffing must be assured eg using delegated access when the individual officer is unavailable.

Note: This policy is under review in the light of Government Priority outcome R28 requiring all e-mail and web form acknowledgements to include a unique reference number allocated to allow tracking of enquiry and service response.

8. Accessibility

"The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect." Tim Berners-Lee, World Wide Web Consortium Director and inventor of the World Wide Web

The internet can play a key role in tackling social exclusion, providing opportunities for information access and communication to people with a learning or physical disability.

Accessible web page design, or pages that are said to be 'accessibility-compliant' are constructed so that people with disabilities, such as hearing, visual, physical or cognitive impairment are able to make use of the site.

The Disability Discrimination Act applies to all information and services provided on a website. We also have a clear responsibility to ensure that web content is accessible to all, in line with the Authority's commitment to equalities.

Simple navigation, clear site structure, meaningful terminology, and multiple access routes to the same information are all employed to help users find and interpret information quickly and easily. Download times are kept to a minimum to assist users with low spec technology.

The site is developed to comply with [WAI Level AA](#) and **all** content should adhere to this standard. This is a government requirement, as specified in Priority Outcome G20.

As part of the Authority's commitment to equalities, there is a longer-term aim to conform with [RNIB's](#) See it Right initiative. Validation tools are used to check for accessibility on a continuous basis. Developers should satisfy themselves that their applications meet these guidelines in full.

Font size is designed to enable users increase or decrease the size by changing their browser settings.

Font type is Verdana or Arial for browsers that do not recognise Verdana – these fonts are known to be easier to read on screen than Serif-based ones .

Font style - Capital letters are generally harder to read than lower case so capitals should not be used for continuous text. Similarly Italics are not permitted.

Colour Contrast

The contrast between the background and the type is critically important. The better the contrast, the more legible it is hence the use of black text on a white background to display the majority of content. Colour must not be used to convey information or meaning.

Navigational aids

A number of navigation aids to help people work their way around the site are provided. Recurring features such as site navigation, breadcrumb trails and headings are always in the same place and same style.

Links to external sites

Where a link is provided to another website meaningful link text must be provided

Links to downloadable documents

Where a link is provided to a downloadable document it should be accompanied by:

- a link to the Access Adobe site
- meaningful link text
- an appropriate logo (eg PDF, Word)
- an indication of file size.

Standard wording should be provided on any page that contains a link to a downloadable document – refer to the site current wording.

Browser windows

Links to external websites, downloadable documents, other web pages should open in the same browser window

A link should only open in a new browser window when a smaller window is required eg maps, terms & conditions, help. If a new window opens this must be clearly stated next to the link text.

9. Data Protection issues

A privacy statement is available from all points on the site.

Separate standards for forms' design are in preparation.

Online forms must include the following statement:

Data Protection Action 1998

The personal information collected on this form will be processed on computer to provide and manage the information or service that you have requested.

**For further details regarding your privacy please see our Privacy Statement
<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/home/privacystatement.htm>**

Forms that collect **sensitive** personal data must not be used unless security of data can be ensured.

Photographs containing close-ups of individuals must not be displayed without completed permission forms – for copies, adult and child versions, see Appendix 1 in the **Corporate Communications Strategy**.

Cookies should not be used

10. Site management

The site is managed and content is published within a defined management framework. (See the e-Content Management chart - Appendix A)

The e-Content Strategy Group (eCSG):

- makes recommendations on the Authority's e-Content strategy in the context of Access to Services
- formulates site visual design, structure and navigation
- makes connections between related content on the site
- has the main editorial advisory role for content
- in liaison with the e-Content Team formulates standards and ensures they are observed within departments
- represents the publishing needs of departments
- highlights and builds on best practice in web publishing

The **e-Content Team (eCT)** has responsibility in the following areas:

Quality Standards

- provides overall and final approval for all web content
- advise eCSG on the development of standards
- produce web publishing standards
- provide editorial scrutiny of the overall quality of content
- co-ordinate site content to ensure citizen focus
- oversee standards compliance
- work with departments to improve quality
- conduct usability testing and technical analysis to ensure site is accessible to all

Training and support

- provide day-to-day help facility
- deliver training in the use of WCM
- commission writing for the web training
- advise on style and content

WCM management and administration

- provide central administration eg data entry rights and password allocation
- ensure documents and pictures are made available to content authors
- template production and development
- troubleshoot performance issues
- liaise with the WCM supplier on all system issues
- register and maintain the Authority's domain names

Site development

- co-ordinate site development in liaison with the e-Content Strategy Group
- develop technical applications that support WCM
- consult internal and external users on site development
- provide dynamic news and features content to ensure freshness and currency

- maintain and develop home page to reflect eCSG and Customer Management (CM) requirements

Promotion and publicity

- develop marketing strategy
- promote the sites
- raise awareness and profile of sites

Emerging and alternative technologies

- review emerging technologies with eCSG and CM
- develop appropriate content for alternative technologies with eCSG
- develop compatible versions of sites for alternative technologies

Linkages with related work

- advise and support staff working on related projects eg electronic service delivery, access to services, connecting with communities
- ensure linkages are made to e-Content within related projects

11. Publishing Model

A publishing model exists to ensure that all content passes through an approval process before publication. All involved in this model fulfill one or more defined roles within the supporting workflow (see Appendix B). These are outlined below.

NB Depending on local circumstances, the same individual may fulfill more than one role eg Content Approver and Departmental Web Publisher, Content Owner and Content Approver

Content Owner

Key role: To provide content for inclusion on the website.

- Communicate needs to Content Author
- Be familiar with and comply with the Web Publishing Standards
- Review content regularly with Content Author for currency and appropriateness

Content Author

Key role: To input and edit content in line with the Web Publishing Standards.

- Place content in the appropriate location in the site architecture
- Follow WCM procedures and web styleguide
- Set content to approve and make corrections as notified by Content Approver
- Liaise with Content Owner, Content Approver and Departmental Web Publisher
- Review content regularly with Content Owner for currency and appropriateness

Content Approver

Key role: To ensure that content meets the Web Publishing Standards

- Ensure that content adheres to WCM standards and web styleguide
- Check that content is located in the appropriate position in the site architecture
- Ensure naming conventions are applied correctly
- Ensure accessibility standards are followed
- Notify author of any corrections required
- Arrange for approved content to be published
- Review content regularly with Content Owner, Content Author, Departmental Web Publisher and e-Content team
- Keep a log of review dates for content.

Departmental Web Publisher

Key role: To co-ordinate and give final approval to all departmental content

- Fulfil Content Approver role where a local approver does not exist
- Support and advise Content Owners, Content Authors and local Content Approvers
- Ensure all departmental content is regularly reviewed and maintained
- Liaise with e-Content Team and web publishers from other departments
- Represent the department on the e-Content Strategy Group

12. Using the WCM system

These standards are underpinned by the Obtree C4 Web Content Management system.

As well as being a non-technical publishing tool for content publishers, the system provides a management infrastructure to ensure that:

- content is owned by identified staff
- content can only be created and edited by authorised staff
- all publishing activity is recorded
- all content undergoes a pre-publication approval process

Staff usage of the WCM system is dependant on:

- Familiarisation with and commitment to the Web Publishing Standards
- Undertaking the approved WCM training course
- Creating and editing content in line with the WCM procedures

13. Marketing and publicity

The site marketing strategy focuses on:

- Promoting the site via the marketing of services and events
- Emphasising convenience and 24/7 availability
- Targeting appropriate media related to specific services eg adverts for online bus timetables on buses, bookmarks in libraries advertising online library renewals
- Promoting interactive or transactional features

The site address: www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk should be included on all corporate stationery and publications bearing contact information. Service-based URL's eg www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/libraries may also be included on relevant publications. References to the website should be included in all publications and press releases. Out-of-hours phone messages should include a reference to the site as a valuable source of information.

The website address will be periodically included on franking outgoing mail.

The site url is registered with relevant search engines

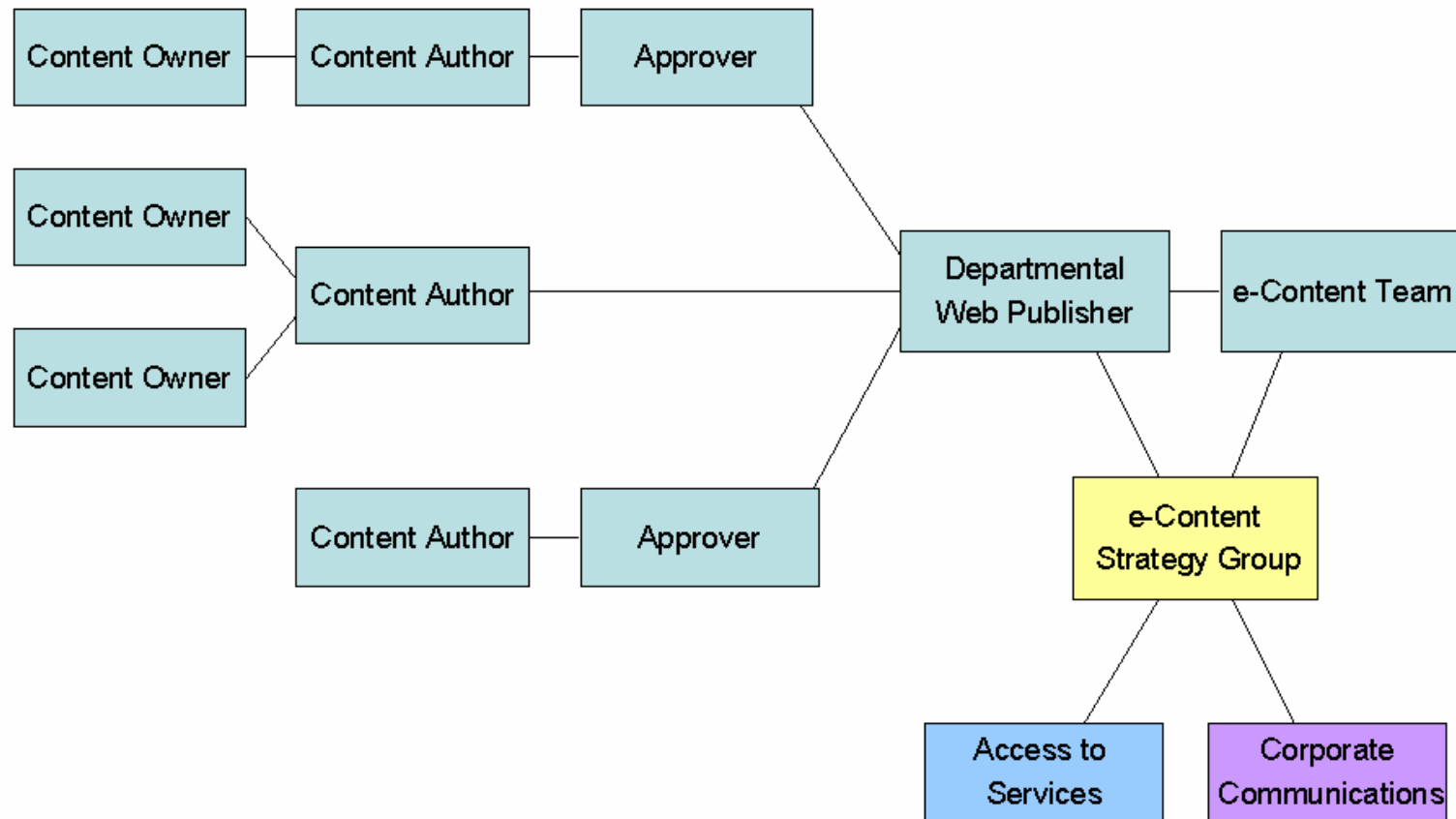
14. Monitoring and Evaluation

Site usage statistics are available from the NetTracker system.

Headline data is published quarterly on the public website, including:

- total visits
- unique visitors
- page impressions.

Appendix A – e-Content Management Model



Workflow

