

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 communications activity to the web medium ie 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