

REPORT TO PICKMERE PARISH COUNCIL

11th August 2020

AGENDA ITEM 5.2 – POSSIBLE REPLACEMENT OF PARISH COUNCIL WEBSITE

1. Background

- 1.1 At your meeting on 3rd March 2020 you resolved that the Council should take up the current website provider's offer of securing the current website's compliance with the Website Accessibility Regulations, which come into force in relation to existing PC websites in September 2020. This was done and the provider has made some changes to the site, in particular to make it more accessible on mobile devices. However, the provider has not responded to requests for their confirmation that the website is now compliant with the Regulations, and there remains doubt that it is fully compliant.
- 1.2 Members have also considered, at meetings in late 2019, whether it would be appropriate at this time to revisit the website with a view to incorporating features that are now easily available, and to render the site more accessible to and more easily usable by the public.
- 1.3 A sub-group of the Council, comprising Cllrs. Bold and Flannery and your Clerk, longlisted and then shortlisted possible website providers, seeking a provider who has a track record in providing sites for parish and town councils and is therefore well aware of their requirements and methods of working. During July the three short-listed providers were interviewed online to discuss their potential to provide a new site for the Parish Council.
- 1.4 All three proved capable of doing this satisfactorily.
- 1.5 The broad cost of a replacement website from any of these providers, over a period of 5 years would be in the order of £2000. The initial set-up cost is obviously the largest element, with subsequent annual payments relating to ongoing maintenance of the system. It should be noted that the Council is currently contracted to pay an annual maintenance fee for the current website, and also for its email host. These payments would clearly disappear on implementation of a new website. The cost estimates for each of the three short-listed suppliers are provided at agenda item 6.2 on the private part of this agenda, because clearly the figures quoted are commercially sensitive.

2. Report

- 2.1 The immediate question, though, for this part of the agenda is whether your Council should actually proceed to replace its current website – why is it necessary?
- 2.2 The initial impetus for this was the Website Accessibility Regulations 2018, which require that by mid-September 2020 all parish councils with a pre-existing website have a site that is compliant. The Regulations are aimed at ensuring that there are no barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to websites, by people with disabilities, whether of sight, hearing or other forms.
- 2.3 The lack of response of the current website provider to recent emails as described above rather confirms your Clerk's view of that company. Your Clerk has reported to Council on previous occasions that the provider has not issued any invoices for annual maintenance of the website for some years, and that, it seems, is reflected in the performance of the company.

- 2.4 This reason alone suggests that we must seek another solution.
- 2.5 However, the other significant factors suggesting that we should replace our current website include the following:
- The existing site is plainly rather old-fashioned, inflexible and not easy to use or navigate, particularly for those not particularly IT-literate; a new site offers much simpler ways of accessing e.g. Council agendas or minutes, news items, etc.
 - If the Council is minded to pursue a Neighbourhood Plan, the publicity requirements for that process essentially require that the Council's website incorporate means by which members of the community can follow, and indeed take part in, the NP preparation process. That would not be possible with the current site without commissioning the provider to carry out development work on the site, which would bring some additional cost, even were that company minded to do this.
 - A new site offers the possibility of providing far better and more flexible means of engaging with the Pickmere community – for instance by incorporating the Council's Facebook feed on the site, or by incorporating the ability to send regular news bulletins by email to residents who subscribe to such a service, or by incorporating the ability to carry out resident surveys, whether on specific one-off questions, or perhaps in relation to the Neighbourhood Plan. Such possibilities are available but do not have to be incorporated – there is considerable flexibility.
 - A new site would be much more easily capable of enhancement or alteration as time passes. Because it is written using WordPress (over a third of the Worldwide Web is built using WordPress), alterations to the site could be made in-house, or if more radical by the provider the Council might use to build the site, or indeed by virtually any other website provider. This contrasts sharply with the Council's current site.
 - This flexibility is a key feature; website pages can be prepared in draft and only introduced when required. Pages could be provided for instance for the Community Group, or Pickmere Women's Institute which those organisations could themselves edit and keep up to date, though without their being able to alter any other part of the site.
 - Importantly, a high level of site security would be provided whichever solution is selected.
- 2.6 For these reasons and more, the sub-group looking at this possibility is convinced that the Council should proceed with the replacement of its current site as soon as possible, and that the cost will be justified by the benefits a replacement site would provide.
- 2.7 Some work on the Council's behalf will be required in the specification of our needs but the sub-group is happy to undertake that task. In addition, whilst each of the providers might transfer some of the elements of the current site (e.g. Council agendas and minutes, and historical photographs of Pickmere), it may be that the Council would have to undertake part of this task, although that need not hold up the establishment of the site.
- 3. Conclusions**
- 3.1 The sub-group therefore concludes that the Council needs to do something to ensure that it is compliant with the Accessibility Regulations, and that the best and most advantageous way forward is to replace its website with one that is far more fit for purpose.
- 3.2 The timescales for getting a new site up and running are relatively short – a matter of several weeks from the provider receiving from the Council the information it needs to structure and populate the new site. It is possible that this could all be achieved, and the new site

implemented, before the Accessibility Regulation deadline. If this is not possible, any delay should be minimal, and it is thought that this will not result in any significant issue if it is clear that the Council is moving forward as quickly as it can.

4. Recommendation

- 4.1 That the Council accepts the principle that it will commission the replacement of its current website in accordance with the principles described, as soon as possible.
- 4.2 That at an appropriate moment and subject to the establishment of the new website, contracts with the current website provider and also the current email hosting company be terminated.

Jack Steel

Clerk to Parish Council