

# Insight

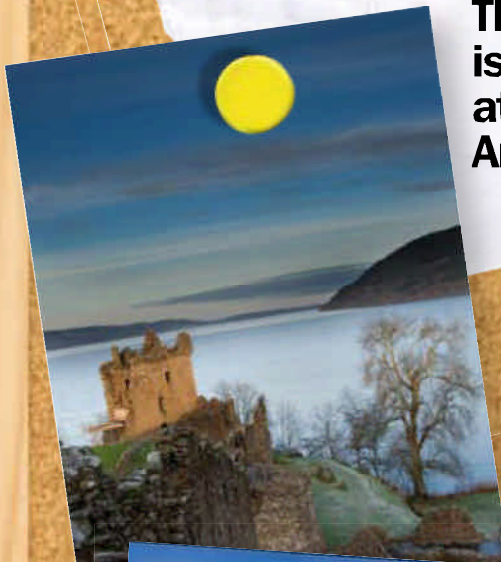
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## A LITeral crisis

There are many taxing  
issues to be discussed  
at this year's Scottish  
Annual Conference



IKRV Scottish Conference  
3-4 Sep.  
GRIEII



Web efficiency // Empty property rates // Council meetings round-up

# Striving for improvement

A recent review of revenues and benefits websites highlighted that while work is constantly underway to enhance web efficiency, there is still a lot to be done.

**Simon Bailey** reports

In my last article I reported that the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) had released its yearly report, *Better Connected*. The report contained the findings of reviewers who visited local authority (LA) websites with pre-set questionnaires.

That gave me an idea. Why not do a similar review of revenues and benefits websites and report on these findings? As part of a day's training course on website design and protocol to revenues and benefits professionals, I included a workshop session. At this session, attendees split into groups and were given access to the internet. The groups were also given a set of questions, relating to what should be looked at on a revenues and benefits website, including:

- council tax (CT);
- business rates;
- benefits;
- fraud; and
- the general look and feel of the site.

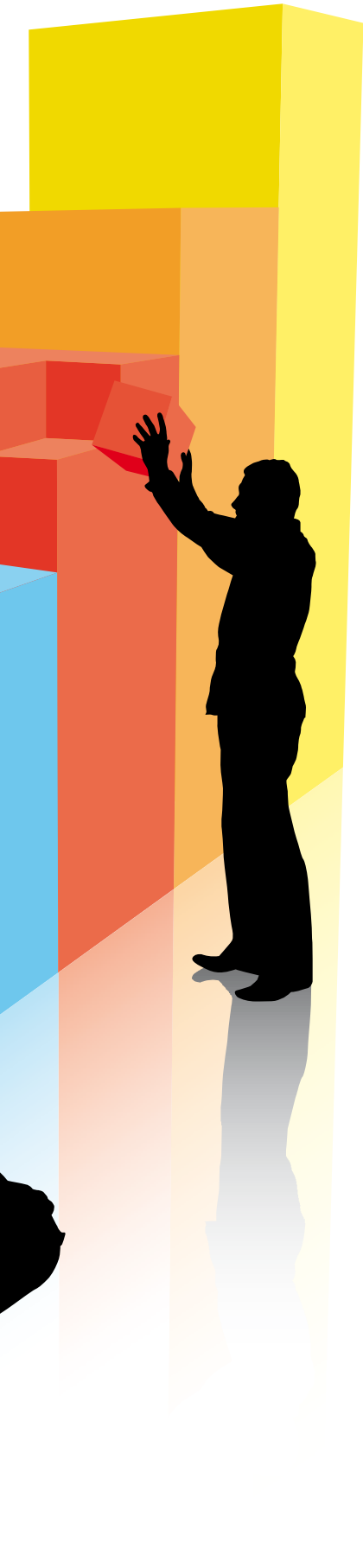
The attendees (now reviewers) were asked to rate their findings on a one to five basis, one being poor or not present information, and five being excellent.

What made it interesting and informative is that they were not allowed to review their own websites, but were given the website of another authority represented on the course. The groups were also asked to report back, by way of a five-minute presentation, their findings and overall views. This review proved informative and fun and highlighted several areas of good practice, but more importantly flagged up areas where the sites could be improved. It is often very difficult to review your own website with true candour.

The reviewers were given 16 questions to complete regarding the CT area of the websites, using the scoring methodology mentioned above, the maximum possible score was 80. No site scored the maximum and in percentage terms, sites scored 51% on average. The worst site scored just 20%, with the best site achieving 70%.

Some examples of CT questions were:





- can I find information on exemptions?
- are there downloadable forms that I can print and use? and
- can I set up a direct debit online?

Most authorities offered online payment facilities, this being the highest scoring question with a score of 75%. Authorities were marked down if the navigation from the CT pages was not obvious or the information not easy to read.

The lowest score was for electronic billing, or the lack of it. No authorities within the survey provided e-billing as an option for CT payers. This is not surprising, as many authorities that have offered the service have reported low take-up. The cost of e-billing may also not appear to be justified due to the low demand, however, it is difficult to improve take-up if the service is unavailable. It is my view that this area will grow, albeit slowly.

Worryingly, the following questions also attracted low scores:

- can I complete a direct debit online? Which scored 31%; and
- can I report a change of address/circumstances online? Which scored 33%.

These are probably the two main reasons a person would contact a revenues section, and the lack of these facilities evidenced by the low scores will only increase avoidable contact. Authorities should provide a web-based access channel for those unable or unwilling to contact by alternative methods.

Reviewers were also asked to make general comments about their CT sites, which included:

- small fonts which were hard to read;
- bands displayed with the incorrect year;
- poor explanations;
- very slow running;
- online revenues which weren't up-to-date;
- bad appearance;
- cluttered headings with poor colours;
- slow and poor searches;
- fast and easy navigation;
- easily available PDFs; and
- good first-time searches.

The reviewers then had 16 questions about benefits, using the same scoring system. No website scored the maximum, and in percentage terms sites scored on average 55%. There was no particularly poor site, with the lowest score being 41%, the best site achieved 86%. Does this mean that benefits staff update and maintain their sites on a more regular basis? My thoughts on the higher scores are that as the information relating to benefits is ever changing, there is a more enforced opportunity to revisit and maintain correct content.

When analysing the results it became clear that no website offered the facility to notify a change of circumstances online, with the question, "can I report

a change of circumstances online?" attracting a score of one for each LA. Similarly, no website offered the opportunity to complete an online claim form.

Not surprisingly, the highest scores went to information on Local Housing Allowance (LHA). This item was topical at the time of the course and the following questions attracted the highest scores:

- can I find information on LHA? Which got 76%; and
- can I find the latest LHA rates? Which scored 83% on average.

I believe this is good news. Dissemination of information via websites must be growing, and authorities placing current LHA rates on their sites is an excellent idea, with increased use of this very important access channel.

One of the areas of concern was the current benefit calculator, with 50% of sites being reported as having it out-of-date or not present at all.

Overall the quality and content for benefit sites appeared to be better than those for CT. Is this because these sites are being maintained by different web-masters to those for revenues?

Moving on to benefit fraud, the reviewers were given just two questions.

- I want to report a suspected fraud. Is there information on what benefit fraud is? and
- can you report a suspected benefit fraud online?

The scores provided the greatest range of all reviewed topics. One site scored 100% but unfortunately another only scored 20%. The average score for all authorities was 70%, highlighting that this area has clearly been given

attention by those administering fraud.

Business rates also provided a wide range in quality of information available. The reviewers were posed three questions:

- can I find information on empty property rates, which is up-to-date?
- can I find information on how business rates are calculated? Is the multiplier correct or present? and
- can I find a link to the Valuation Office or Scottish Assessors with adequate explanation?

The survey found that sites either had very poor information, or had no information at all. Is this because business rates are the most stable area of revenues and benefits? In my own personal experience, I have found the business rate area of a website to be the most visited. Should it not therefore receive the most attention and contain up-to-date information?

In conclusion, as with the SOCITM survey, I found that there is a wide range in the quality of websites. I would suggest that every authority reviews its website either by self-assessment, or preferably by a third party. This peer review can provide the catalyst for improving websites as they continue to be an essential access channel for gaining and providing information.

Many thanks to the participants on the course and, in particular, their enthusiasm when undertaking the review and reporting back. ■

## “This review highlighted several areas of good practice”