

Refreshing your website for the recession: a good practice resource





Introduction

At this time of uncertainty and acute financial and economic pressure, councils must ensure that key information and essential resources reach their residents and businesses, and continue to reach them throughout the downturn. Effective signposting of support – advice, guidance, financial and other – could help employers, employees and residents survive their times of greatest difficulty. It could also help local residents prepare themselves effectively for the end of the downturn through training and education.

This good practice resource is designed to help local authorities and their partners refresh their websites in response to the challenging economic climate. It begins by providing the issues that are likely to be of greater importance for residents and businesses. It then goes on to provide a series of principles for refreshing a council's website, illustrated with examples of website designs that reflect the new needs and concerns of residents and businesses that have emerged as a result of the recession.



Information to provide

Here is a list of themes relating to the recession and the sorts of organisations that you could refer website users to. This is just an indicative list and any one council will be able to supplement it with links to local initiatives and organisations.

Personal finance, benefits and tax

- **Debt:** [CAB](#); [National Debtline](#); [Connexions](#); council debt advice team; local VCS advice centres
- **Credit and banking:** [CAB](#); [Consumer Direct](#); [Independent Banking Advisory Service](#)
- **Reducing costs:** [CAB](#); [Energy Saving Trust](#); [Warm Front Scheme](#); [Home Heat Helpline](#); [Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission](#); [Money Saving Expert](#)
- **Tax / Tax credit:** [Tax Offices](#); [HM Revenue & Customs](#), [Community Legal Advice](#), [Direct.gov.uk](#)
- **Benefits:** council benefits office, [Jobcentre Plus](#), [CAB](#)

Business support

- **Business advice and guidance:** [Business Debtline](#); [Business Link](#); local chamber of commerce; Regional Development Agency; local enterprise agency; local business network; local sector-specific advice services; [UK Trade & Investment](#)
- **Reducing running costs:** [Carbon Trust](#); [Energy Saving Trust](#); [Envirowise](#); [National Industrial Symbiosis Programme](#); [Netregs](#)
- **Recruitment and redundancy:** [ACAS Helpline](#); [CAB Online Advice Guide](#); [Community Legal Advice](#); [Jobcentre Plus](#)
- **Business finance:** [Business Debtline](#); [Business Link](#); Regional Development Agency
- **Skills and training:** [Business Link](#); local chambers of commerce; Regional Development Agency; [Train to Gain](#); The Prince's Trust
- **Business awards and grants:** [Business Link](#); Regional Development Agency

Care, health and wellbeing

- **Mental health:** [Samaritans](#); [Stress Management Society](#); Age Concern; [MIND](#); local therapy projects (e.g. art therapy); [NHS Direct](#)
- **Drugs and alcohol:** council drugs and alcohol service; Alcoholics Anonymous; [Drinksense](#)
- **Domestic violence:** women's refuges; local women's outreach projects
- **Healthy living:** local leisure centres and sports clubs; [Change 4 Life](#); [5aday campaign](#); [Love Food Hate Waste campaign](#); local allotments / grow your own campaigns; NHS exercise referrals service
- **Families and relationship support:** [Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission](#); local parents' support groups; local counselling and therapy services

Employment and skills

- **Employment, careers, unemployment and job seeking:** [ACAS Helpline](#); [CAB](#); [CAB Online Advice Guide](#); Local VCS advice centres; [Connexions](#); [Jobcentre Plus](#); [Community Legal Advice](#)
- **Training and development:** [ACAS Helpline](#); local further and higher education colleges; local community and adult learning centres; [Jobcentre Plus](#); The Prince's Trust; [Train to Gain](#)
- **Childcare and advice:** local nurseries, playgroups and pre-schools

Housing

- **Homelessness and temporary accommodation:** council housing needs and housing options teams; [CAB Online Advice Guide](#); [CAB](#); [Community Legal Advice](#); [Connexions](#); homeless hostels; local housing associations; Shelter; local YMCA; local refuges
- **Housing advice and support:** Local VCS advice centres; [CAB](#); council housing advice services
- **Housing providers:** local housing associations; sheltered and temporary housing providers (e.g. YMCA)
- **Housing benefits:** council Benefits Office, [Jobcentre Plus](#), [CAB](#)



Lead on assembling relevant information

These challenging times are an opportunity for councils to embrace their community leadership role, and work with local partners to plan an integrated, coordinated and comprehensive local response. Websites can play a key role in this as a first point of contact for residents and businesses with the public sector. The council and LSP websites can be the public face of local leadership and the local public sector – assembling all the resources that relate to the downturn on a single page or dedicated website. A few examples are given below:

www.weatherthestorm.org.uk

Cambridgeshire LSP has launched a website called 'Weather the Storm' providing advice and support on a range of recession issues. In the first six weeks, the site recorded over 5,000 hits.

www.tacklingdebtinsandwell.co.uk

This website – produced by the Sandwell Partnership – provides information for residents requiring support to manage their debt.

www.dorsetforyou.com/index.jsp?articleid=391182

Dorset County Council's dedicated web-page providing information on support provided by local councils and links to relevant public sector partners such as Business Link and CAB.



Start with the home page

A council home page can speak volumes about the council's priorities and the extent to which these are adapted to the current context. In this challenging economic climate, residents and businesses may expect to see some specific reference to the recession on their council's website. They may also want to know what support is available locally, and what specific initiatives the council and its partners have put in place to support them through the downturn. The home page can play all of these roles – either by including features and content on the recession, or by including links to other sites that provide further information.

However, many councils remain wary of allowing news about the recession to dominate their websites; as psychologically this can perpetuate people's worries. A good council home page needs to reflect local concerns without amplifying them. Here are some council home pages that seem to have struck a good balance:

www.gloucestershire.gov.uk

www.essex.gov.uk

www.ipswich.gov.uk

www.sheffield.gov.uk



Regularly refresh information and narrative

With the local impacts of the recession changing so rapidly, there is strong incentive for councils to refresh their web content to reflect the current impact of the recession and show how the council and its partners are responding. This information can have several audiences – residents, local businesses, and local VCS organisations. Alongside this, the council can also communicate its refreshed vision for the local area in light of the recession and the potential the area represents for investors.

One way to do both of these things is to provide clear links to a council blog – often this is written by the Leader – which acts as the voice of the council. Providing a continuous renewal of web content sends a message that the council remains in touch with current concerns and priorities of local people. Here are two approaches to providing this refreshed content through an online news feed and an economic update:

www.teamhackneyupdate.org.uk

'Team Hackney Update' is an online newsletter that provides news on both the borough and the council. It includes summaries of recent research on local challenges, on council successes, on local events and on resources available for local residents and businesses. The front page is a short introduction from the Mayor of Hackney providing an update on the council's current priorities and actions. In the February / March update he discusses their priorities for skills and what progress has been made towards these objectives. The rest of the issue includes an explanation of grant funding to help small businesses through the recession, alongside 'good news' stories about local volunteering amongst other things.

www.sheffield.gov.uk/whats-new/creditcrunch

Sheffield City Council's credit crunch page includes a link to their monthly 'Economic Update'. This keeps local residents and businesses up to date with the national and local economic trends affecting Sheffield and the surrounding area. Started in October 2008 these updates provide a combination of statistics and analysis covering the impact on local employment, regeneration, investment and marketing.



Take a coordinated multi-agency approach

Creating a website that signposts services and support provided by a range of local partners invariably requires coordination between different agencies – through existing partnerships or new task groups. This is to ensure information provided is accurate and up to date, but it can also help with the design and content of web material, as service providers with a specialism – such as CAB – will be able to identify what information would be essential for their target audience in the context of a recession. Here are a handful of examples of where this has been done effectively:

www.slough.gov.uk/services/17997.aspx

The multi-agency Slough Economic Taskforce has created a dedicated web-page – clearly linked from the council homepage – that signposts sources of support for residents and businesses, as well as advice on housing, benefits, employment and training, and debt.

www.kent.gov.uk/business

Kent's 'Backing Business' page includes information on steps taken by the council to support local businesses in the recession, links to a variety of different organisations – SEEDA, Locate in Kent, Business Link – and links to 'most requested' pages and local business news.



Think beyond benefits, employment services and business support

As the recession deepens and its impact spreads, councils will be assessing the extent of the impact the recession is having on residents and businesses; and their websites should reflect that. Many employees will be concerned about losing their job, many businesses concerned about falls in demand, and residents will be concerned about mortgage repayments.

Employment services, benefits payments and housing services are therefore all crucial. Advice on personal finances will also be important as many households are required to adapt their budgets to reduced incomes. But in addition, there will almost certainly be many secondary impacts – on health and wellbeing, on family relations, on crime (in particular acquisitive crime), and on community cohesion. These cannot be ignored and the website should signpost support to pre-empt these impacts.

www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/recession

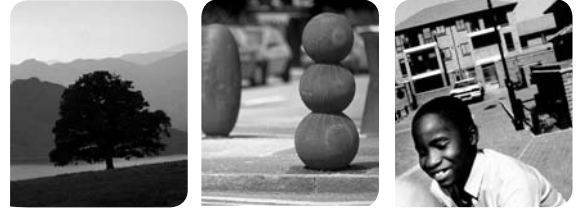
Gloucestershire County Council has launched a dedicated section on its website to guide people to local support services. It includes contact details for local councils and community organisations; housing advice; information on redundancy, job-seeking and retraining; and support for businesses. The portal also covers a wider range of money advice covering debt, benefits, fuel costs, pensions, safe savings and energy saving. It also includes information on a broader range of services relating to the physical and emotional health of residents and support for children and older people. This reflects the council's recognition that the recession is likely to take its toll on residents' social relations, health and wellbeing.

www.weatherthestorm.org.uk

Cambridgeshire LSP's Weather the Storm website features national and local news about the economy and advice for communities and businesses, including how communities can come together to form 'fuel clubs', which could save money on fuel bills. It also acts as a signposting portal, providing information and links to the national and local organisations that can advise and support individuals, families and businesses in Cambridgeshire during the economic downturn. The site includes employment services, business support and housing advice but also signposts support for people faced by a wider range of problems, including unmanageable personal debt and mental and physical health problems.

www.warwickshire.gov.uk

Warwickshire County Council has also established a dedicated 'credit crunch' website providing advice, information and links to support for residents and local businesses to help them through the downturn. It covers the full breadth of key issues facing local communities in the downturn: money, business, employment, housing, local support, and family.



Gather intelligence on the local impact of the recession

Websites are not only sources of information for users; they can also be used as an interface to gather information and views. In the context of the downturn, your website could be used to collect up-to-date information and intelligence about the impact of the recession on your local area. Comments provided by local residents and businesses can help clarify the specific current challenges local businesses and residents are facing, and can also provide them with an opportunity to make suggestions about the type of support they need.

www.kent.gov.uk/business

Kent County Council has created an online form for local businesses to provide their views on the key challenges facing their business during the current economic climate. This is part of their 'Backing Kent Business' campaign, which has its own web-page on the county council's website, providing links to the support and advice they supply on a range of issues that affect both new and existing businesses.



Encourage residents to share their own ideas and get creative

Whilst in many instances support and from public and voluntary sector partners will be crucial, local residents may have an abundance of tips for how local people can help themselves and each other to get through challenging times. In this way, councils can encourage residents to take a proactive role in finding local solutions to local problems. The tips given may refer to initiatives or ideas that are simply too small-scale or localised to get on to the council's radar, but of great help to locals; as in the example here.

www.portsmouth.gov.uk/CreditCrunchForum

Portsmouth City Council has established a 'top tips for tough times forum', where residents can submit ideas on a range of issues, in particular good personal finance and money saving. Posts include:

- an initiative providing second hand school uniforms, sports equipment and musical instruments
- a suggestion that residents establish a neighbourhood credits system where neighbours exchange skills and time without the need for cash payment.



Provide specific pathways for specific users

Different types of website users will inevitably be looking for different types of information or resources when accessing the council website. Those looking for support to help them through the recession are no different – they will be a diverse group facing diverse challenges. To ensure they get access to the information or guidance they are looking for, it is crucial to guide them to the right part of the website from the home page. The two websites here provide good examples of how to do this.

www.essex.gov.uk

Essex County Council's website now has two separate web pages, available via two different links, to local initiatives and resources specifically designed to support local businesses ('Helping Essex through the downturn') and people ('See the benefits') in the recession.

www.westminster.gov.uk/beattherecession

Westminster City Council's dedicated web-page ('Beat the recession') signposts sources of support – from within the council and beyond – for businesses, individuals and families. Rather than organising the page around themes or organisations, they structure it around questions directed at the reader, such as *Are you looking for advice and support for your business?*; *Are you out of work or looking for a new job?*; and *Are you having difficulty affording your mortgage payments?*. This makes it more accessible, avoiding the need for users to search extensively on the council's website to find the service that could help them with their problem.

IDeA

Layden House
76–86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG

t: 020 7296 6600
f: 020 7296 6666
e. info@idea.gov.uk

www.idea.gov.uk



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

© IDeA – April 2009

For a copy in Braille, Welsh, larger print or audio,
please contact iHelp on 020 7296 6880.
We consider any requests on an individual basis.

L09-303

Produced by Liberata Design and Print Studio



Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

