Consultation Report

Planning and Building Control Web Pages

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Relevance

In the past decade or so there has been a big shift from how companies market their services and products. Before most people could access easy information online from anywhere through their portable devices, companies were used to top down marketing campaigns where they would focus on broadcasting a brand idea and establishing it in people’s minds. However, today’s companies no longer see the customer as a passive player, someone to be targeted, but as an active player who deserves to be at the heart of companies’ decision making processes.

“Today’s customers have more options, are more selective, and are more likely to share their experiences with others. Companies understand that their brand is at the mercy of every customer interaction – and that this means that every touch-point, or journey across touch-points, must generate the appropriate reaction whether that is to engage, satisfy, delight, surprise, reassure, inform, or intrigue.”

This goes even further with Inclusive Design. Here, accessibility is at the focus. If an organisation cannot secure that their content, software and devices can be used by the maximum number of people regardless of ability, age, or skills, what’s the point? By not considering this, an organisation is liable to alienating a large section of potential customers, supporters, and commentators. The central government understood this principle and followed through with their Digital Strategy which not only resulted in savings of £1.7 to £1.8 billion each year but it even won them a prestigious award (Design of the Year, 2013).

Background

The review of the external webpages project originated as one of the actions needed to improve the overall customers’ satisfaction and experience with the service provided by City Development. Such need was flagged up in the Customer Awareness Survey (CAS).

During the first steps of the review, many pages were found to be outdated, even as far as 2008, so we concluded that these pages needed updating and testing. Consequently, some changes have been implemented and have now been tested to verify whether there has been any improvement to the user experience since the CAS. In order to do this, City Development consulted with the public directly.

In principle:

1. User testing identifies aspects of a web page that cause users difficulty, confusion, or misunderstanding. These may lead to errors, delays, or in extreme cases inability to complete the tasks for which the product or service has been designed for.

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1 Meriel Lenfestey, partner of Experience Design Agency Foolproof.
2 For more information, the video below featuring Joshua Marshall, Accessibility Lead at the Government Digital Service, will give you a very good introduction to inclusive design (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-UQoQvco5c&feature=player_embedded). Other organisations such as AbilityNet and Action for Blind People also campaign to help companies understand the difficulties of customers when faced by poor accessible media.
2. Testing helps writers understand users and see things from their perspective, so that they are more likely to write something that works for users first time.

3. Testing gives confidence by verifying that real users can use the website successfully and/or identify what prevents them from doing so.

4. User testing also provides insight into users’ preferences. The information that is gathered enables the designers to improve the layout of information and interface in the next design iteration, so that they better fit users’ requirements.

This project’s objective is to make the web pages more accessible to all kinds of users independently from their level of experience navigating the internet or from which device they are accessing the website from. When this is achieved City Development can then provide its services online more effectively and benefitting specially those customers who are not totally comfortable with or knowledgeable of jargon related to this service area.

Notwithstanding, the ability to deliver against customer needs and expectations will be restricted by fixed corporate design and procedural requirements dictated by statute. In such cases, it will be important to communicate these constraints to customers.

**Methodology**

**Questionnaire**

From 1st September to 31st October 2014, City Development launched an online questionnaire with open and closed questions, using a variety of scales and administered through eConsult. In this way, responses were received and downloaded almost immediately. Questions were centred on (quantity and quality of) content (including images, annexed documents, links, etc.) and layout (including ease of navigation of editable menus and pages).

**Guerrilla testing**

Guerilla testing (also known as “corridor testing”) is a user testing method where participants are not recruited but approached. Business Development officers have worked alongside Planning officers on Planning Advice Duty Service and approached 5 people who had come to consult the officer on duty at St. Aldate’s Chambers and set them a task on a computer. The Planning Advice Duty Service is the optimal environment to conduct this type of research as there is a greater chance to find individuals that have navigated the Oxford City Council’s website or will in the future (which means that there is also an educational value).

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4 This will be limited to content only (e.g. improve overall content structure with better spacing and paragraphing). We have no control over responsive design.

5 For more information: [https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/user-research/user-research-surveys.html](https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/user-research/user-research-surveys.html)


7 For more information: [https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/user-research/guerrilla-testing.html](https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-centred-design/user-research/guerrilla-testing.html)
The sessions were short, lasting typically from 5 to 10 minutes and were loosely structured around specific key research objectives. For example, the officer would ask a participant to find a specific piece of information on the oxford.gov.uk website in order to observe the participant’s actions and decisions - from the onset to the completion of the proposed task.

The output from this type of user testing is typically ‘qualitative’ so insight is often rich. This process allowed Business Development officers to see people interacting directly with the website, see which areas need improvement and how we might go about resolving any issues. This approach also does away with any lengthy reporting back. Insights can be observed, taken away and fed back into the design process almost immediately (where possible).

Involvement

29 people replied to the questionnaire and 5 people attended the user testing sessions.

Results

Online questionnaire

The results from the questionnaire were predominantly reassuring.

- Over 60% stated they found navigating around the web pages easy or very easy (Q2)
- On average respondents agreed that (Q5):
  - menu items are well organised and easy to find;
  - it is clear on a given page, which items are clickable; and,
  - links, documents and tables are clearly labelled (i.e. gives them an indication of what they are for, what they are about).
- 65% of respondents found the number of clicks to reach their destination (from the Planning home page) acceptable or low (Q7).
- Over 80% finds the links provided on the Planning web pages to be helpful or very helpful (Q8).
- 90% of respondents are happy with the quality of PDFs and other documents downloaded from the Planning web pages (Q9).
- On average respondents positively agreed that usually (Q10):
  - they understand what a given page is about at first glance;
  - information is presented in a logical order;
  - content provides meaningful, useful information; and that,
  - Information is written in terminology they can understand.
- Roughly half of the respondents agree (or strongly agree) that technical terms are being sufficiently explained (Q11).
- Over 60% of respondents stated that the website provides the right amount of information (Q12).

8 Please note many of the percentages have been expressed cumulatively. For individual percentages, please check the summary of results online.

9 Includes Planning, Planning Policy, Planning FAQs, Building Control, Land Charges, Street Naming and Numbering, Conservation, Archaeology, Tree, Woodlands and Hedges web pages.
• Over 60% of respondents stated that they can find answers to their questions easily (Q13).
• Over 80% of respondents stated that they find images provided helpful or very helpful (Q14).
• Over 50% of respondents stated that they can easily find a contact they need (Q15).
• Over 70% of respondents find understanding how to navigate the website easy (Q16).
• 65% agree that they can find the content they want by searching and using relevant keywords (Q17).
• Over 65% find that City Development web pages are overall easy to use (Q18).
• Respondents shows slightly more satisfaction with the content rather than the design and layout of the web pages in questions (6/10 vs. 5.5/10)
• Over 30% of those surveyed visits the website only when needed. Almost 15% state to visit it often and over 20% on a regular basis.
• Over 70% of respondents believe to have above basic experience with regards to their IT abilities.

Guerrilla testing

• Certain words such as “felling” or “dangerous structure” may not come to the users mind when searching directly from a main search engine (or may be outside of users’ vocabulary). This would, therefore, make the search more difficult as the page would not be located so easily.
• If users type in “good” key words into a main search engine (e.g. Google, Bing, etc.) they tend to find their required page straight away. The website’s own search function was not deemed as helpful.
• When a user does not find the page or information needed after roughly 3 attempts, they will abandon the search and telephone the City Development department.
• Certain users found that pages, apart from the main landing page (oxford.gov.uk), look “fake” as they are very different from the “oxford.gov.uk” homepage and felt much disrupted by “rolling” adverts.

Analysis and recommendations\textsuperscript{10}

Points of conversion between questionnaire and guerrilla testing:

1. Content (quality and quantity of information) – comprehensive, helpful
2. Language – could be improved
3. Contacts – should be more prominently displayed
4. Search facility – oxford.gov.uk own search function could be improved. It is easier to find through generic search engines (e.g. Google, Bing, etc.)
5. “Rolling” adverts – disruptive
6. Design – could be improved
7. Public Access – could be improved

\textsuperscript{10} The recommendations are subjective to the individual’s opinion and experience.
1) Content

The first thing that really stood out from the survey in general was that users appreciated the quality of information found on the webpages and considered them comprehensive. On the other hand, because it was so comprehensive, some users found that information got “buried deep” within the website and was difficult to locate if the user was not a frequent visitor or tried to locate the page from within – oxford.gov.uk – or using the website’s own searching facility. In addition, some users found that some pages would benefit from some form of “decluttering” because in some instances they are too crowded with information.

Nevertheless, the majority of the questionnaire respondents considered the “number of clicks” to reach their chosen page to be acceptable (Q7) and menu items well organised and easy to find (Q5a). The majority of respondents also agreed that information is usually presented in a logical order and it is meaningful and useful (Q10a-b).

Recommendation:

There are a few ways to improve the find ability of content.

a) Review names of categories and items in it (cascade menu). Make them clear, accurately conveying content and restructure any categories with wrong items.
   • As observed from guerrilla testing, users would not always look at the “tree” menu, thus, other measures should also be considered. Furthermore, the navigation system is not entirely flexible and would not allow for optimal improvement.

b) Include links in other key related pages (e.g. by hyperlinking keywords).
   • This would increase the chance of users finding a page if they browsed related pages.

In order to improve quality and quantity of content:

c) Re-structure the content of “problematic” pages. Ensure important information is at the very top and clearly visible and that information which is not relevant (e.g. repeated information) is left out, wherever possible. Also, ensure good use of white spaces and appropriate paragraphing to improve legibility.

d) Ensure information is routinely reviewed.
   • Pass on comments to relevant teams where users would like to see extra information on their webpages.

2) Language and terminology

There was a clear duality on this topic between users that filled in the questionnaire and users that participated to guerrilla testing. Many respondents of the former largely considered the terminology and language to be adequate and clear (Q10c) whereas the latter would like to see simpler, more intuitive words. It should be considered that some questionnaire respondents alluded to be of a planning related background and therefore would understand the related jargon. However, there were a good amount of comments that requested the planning jargon to be reduced or at least explained – most of the times users will not re-read, instead they will abandon the task and find other ways, such as calling City Development.
Recommendation:

e) Include non-technical words (where possible) and provide explanations.
   • “Specify what you have left out of consideration, as well as what you have
     included. Explain why you are asking us to decide in general terms.”
   • This would also ease the searchability and improve Search Engine
     Optimization.
   • This might avoid too many people calling for clarifications.

3) Contacts

It is very important to include key contacts on the webpages as users value face to face
interaction a lot. However, testing revealed that many users still struggle to find an
appropriate contact (Q15) on the website.

Recommendation:

f) The placement of contacts should be somewhere where the user expects to find it
   (e.g. on main pages, when in extensive form – address, phone number, and email –
   at the bottom of a page).

g) Use direct dials whenever possible.

4) Search facility

Many users across both studies were not satisfied with the website’s search facility. The
current search function is not capable to find “hits” unless the keyword is the exact match,
which means that any misspelling or synonym may not allow the user to find their
destination page. Instead, at each mistake, the result is a 404 error message which does not
give any suggestion to the user whether this is showing because of a misspelling or because
the actual content is not there.

Recommendation:

i) Improve search function.
   • Specify nature of error message.
   • Pass on the comments on the search function to the team responsible for
     this.

5) “Rolling” adverts

Many users across both studies found the rolling adverts on webpages disruptive. Adverts
divert the user’s focus away from the task they are trying to complete.

Recommendation:

j) Get rid of ads but if necessary, keep only still ads.

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11 A respondent’s answer to question 4: “From the pages that you've browsed, please suggest 3 ways
   in which we could make improvements.”

12 “If you must include advertising, please make it stationary images only” – a respondent’s answer to
   question 4: “From the pages that you've browsed, please suggest 3 ways in which we could make
   improvements.”
6) Design

Users across the study exposed some negative aspects of the design of the website (including aesthetic aspects). A few thought that the website is “not intuitive” as it does not “follow standards.” Also, some users feel confused by the different interfaces they see between the “oxford.gov.uk” and derived pages (some said the latter look “fake” in comparison).

Recommendation:

k) Keep the design consistent throughout the entire website.
l) Improve overall design.
   • Pass on the comments on design to the team responsible for this.
m) Assess whether there are any chances to improve design of current pages with better colour contrast.

7) Public Access

From the questionnaire comments indicated that a relatively large amount of grievance is actually about the Public Access system (which is analogous to the Customer Awareness Survey results).

Recommendation:

n) Relay the comments related to the Public Access system to the system’s manager.
   Part of the comments exposed also positive opinions.

Conclusion

The study was able to identify 7 aspects of the City Development webpages that causes users difficulty, confusion, or misunderstanding. In the next 3 months City Development should have the capability to improve 3 of these – content, language, and contacts. City Development has limited scope on the other 4 as they are managed corporately.

Testing the webpages gave the insight into what City Development is doing well (e.g. quality of information) and users’ preferences (e.g. with regards to pictures and links) which will be monitored and reviewed as preferences may change in the future.

Overall the website seems to be performing relatively well and simple changes should further improve user experience.

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13 Respondent’s answer to question 2: “I found navigating around these pages to be”
14 A respondent’s answer to question 4: “From the pages that you've browsed, please suggest 3 ways in which we could make improvements.”
15 The consultation did not ask of the Public Access system and did not attempt in addressing the issues.
16 Compared to the items tested in the consultation.
Appendix

Guerrilla testing “interviews”

User 1
Task: to find out whether property is in Conservation Area

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council”
2. Oxford City Council website – main page
   a. Eyes fixed on “Do it online”
3. Types “conservation areas” on site’s search facility
4. Finds Conservation Areas main page, search neighbourhood, opens appraisal.
5. PDF is of good quality, interesting topic – might go back to this once at home (did not know this existed, this is new information to them).
6. Looks at the end of PDF to find a contact for the conservation team – there isn’t one. Looks at previous webpage and finds it relatively easily.

User’s thoughts:
- Happy to browse for information but appreciates more face to face interaction;
- Found website easy enough to navigate.

User 2
Task: to get a Tree Preservation Order

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Tree Preservation Order”. Finds link to Oxford City Council’s page, opens it (2nd from the top).

User’s thoughts:
- Language is ok, but there’s just text “some that doesn’t interest me or feels that is not relevant. This is painful to read”.
- The page is “not very pretty and looks fake” as it is different from OCC’s main page hand has disrupting “rolling” adverts.
- It would be hard for a user with basic a priori information on the topic know what “TPO” stands for.

User 3
Task: Planning permission information (conversion of office to residential use).

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council”
3. Once in “Planning”, looks at “Top Tasks” and clicks on “Apply for planning permission”
4. On this page, he scrolls down scanning for the word “convert/conversion” and does not find it.
5. Uses search facility and types “conversion”. Result: 404 error message shown.
6. Tries a second time with more words and again error message shown (obs. Website does not offer suggestions in case of misspelling).
7. Goes back to Google and types “planning”. When nothing he thinks relevant shows, he types “planning Oxford”.
8. Clicks on “Do I need planning permission” (obs. needed to scroll down a bit to find) and scans for key words.
9. As they find none of the key words the were looking for, they resolve to call in and not bother anymore.

User’s thoughts:
- Would rather call in than try finding information on the website;
- Found information difficult to find.

**User 4**

1st task: To comment on a planning application.

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council, planning applications”
2. Straight to “Search and Comment / Object to Planning Applications” page.
4. Scans the page and goes back to previous page through link at the bottom of the page.
5. Reads the page again and clicks on “I accept”.

User’s thoughts:
- Search confusing. Public access (1st) link looks like is going to redirect to search but it goes to a page about the software.
- Move “I accept” to the top.
- Suggestion: add line that explains what happens if a user clicks on “I reject”.
- A person doesn’t have the time to go through all of this information.
- “Rolling” advert on right-hand-side disruptive.

2nd task: to report a dangerous structure

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council, dangerous structure”
2. Straight to “Dangerous structures” page.
3. Scans above the fold. Clicks on “Report a dangerous structure online”

User’s thoughts:
- Most people would not use the words “dangerous structure” to search for this. Perhaps, they would use the word “building” instead – I would.
- Page is clear and it helps that there is a contact number just in case.
• Perhaps the link to report the problem should be more obvious and closer to the top.

3rd task: how to get a tree felling licence

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council, felling licence”
2. Straight to “Felling License” page.
3. Scans the page. Abandons it.

User’s thoughts:
• Most people would not use the words “felling” to search for this (or know what it means).
• Page does not give any information on how to get a licence. It is very confusing.
• I would have tried environmental services first.

User 5

Task: information on conversion to HMO and apply

Procedure:
1. Google home page, types “Oxford City Council planning”
2. Clicks on “Planning Applications” – taken to “Search and Comment / Object to Planning Applications” page.
3. As did not find what they were looking for, went back to Google and clicked on “Applying for planning permission”.
4. Here, they did not find anything to do with HMO and therefore abandoned task.

User’s thoughts:
• Would rather have face to face interaction.
• Very confused.

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