Decommissioning of Shrop.NET

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1.0   Summary

1.1   The Shrop.NET website has provided free websites to community groups and town and parish councils for over 10 years, but is now outdated in terms of design options, and similar or better functionality is available from other online services

1.2   The ongoing costs to run and support the website could be put to better use providing council services online, in order to make savings through channel shift.

1.3   A large number of the town & parish councils who have previously used Shrop.NET have chosen to create new websites of their own, either through the use of funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), or through the use of other free/paid-for website development services.

1.4   A consultation was undertaken to gauge the reaction of the remaining users of Shrop.NET to the proposed closure of the service this year, starting with the withdrawal of email/phone support that is currently provided by the Digital Services team in the form of advice to current users and creation of new Shrop.NET sites for new users.

1.5   As part of the consultation, advice on the available options and DCLG funding was provided for those that were unaware of them.

1.6   The consultation led to nearly all of the remaining town & parish councils choosing to move away from Shrop.NET and establish new websites.

1.7   Given the dwindling numbers of users, its age and ongoing costs, the proposal is to decommission the Shrop.NET website at the end of its current support and hosting contract on 14 June 2016

1.8   If we are given permission to close the service, we will redirect all traffic to the Shrop.NET domains to a web page on the main Shropshire Council website. This will explain the decision to close down the service as clearly and honestly as possible

1.9   Cabinet agreement is now requested to agree to this proposal

2.0   Recommendations

2.1   Given the age, costs and dwindling usage of the service, Shrop.NET should be decommissioned at the end of its current support and hosting contract on 14 June 2016

REPORT

3.0   Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

3.1   An ESIIA was drawn up and used to assess the impact of this proposal on local communities. Our findings indicated that this would not have any undue impact on vulnerable groups, owing to the availability of similar or better replacement services.

3.2   The ESIIA has been submitted as a background paper along with this report.

4.0   Financial Implications

4.1   Although the amount of officer time spent supporting Shrop.NET is minimal (~2.5 hours per week), the overall yearly costs for maintaining the service is a significant chunk out of the team budget. This could be better invested in new equipment and online services to enable us to drive channel shift, which in turn makes ongoing savings for the council as a whole.

Shrop.NET costs 2014-2015	
Annual Hosting (normally £60 per month, but contained back-payment for a few months as we were late renewing)	£864
Annual Support of the Content Management Environment (the system used to edit and maintain Shrop.NET). NB - contained back-payment as we were late renewing	£2,892.76
Domain renewal fees, covering 2 domains, http://shrop.net (due to be renewed in September 2016) and http://2shrop.net (due to be renewed mid-November 2016)	£75
Staffing requirements (roughly 2.5 hours per week at £11.6205 per hour)	~£1510.67 per year
Total	**£5,173.43**

5.0   Background

5.1   As part of a standard review of Shrop.NET, we looked at the features offered to users along with the ongoing maintenance and support costs, and compared them with costs and features provided by similar "community/build your own website" services.

5.2   It was apparent that the Shrop.NET service was now very outdated in terms of the design of the websites it offers, and that there are plenty of other replacement services with wider, more modern designs options that match or improve on the features Shrop.NET currently provides.

5.3   The annual running costs for the service - which includes hosting and maintenance contracts with the suppliers, domain fees, and council staff time spent supporting users – comes to just over £5,000 per year, which, in the light of ongoing budget cuts, could be better spent on improving digital services within the council and driving savings through channel shift.

5.4   When we looked at the amount of town & parish councils using the service, it was found that a large number (approximately 25%) had already moved away from Shrop.NET onto new websites. Those that were left were eligible for funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to purchase the equipment and/or development services in order to build their own replacement websites.

5.5   As such, an exit strategy was compiled and presented to key stakeholders (George Candler - Director of Commissioning, Cllr Tim Barker, Dianne Dorrell) from within Shropshire Council and SALC, in December 2015 with the following proposals:

- Support provided by Shropshire Council's Digital Services staff for users of Shrop.NET will end on 31 March 2016, unless there is a clear need to extend it
- The Shrop.NET service will be discontinued at the end of its current contract in June 2016, unless there is a clear need to extend it
- Advice will be provided by SALC to town & parish councils who would like to apply for DCLG funding for a replacement website
- Advice will be provided by Digital Services to all existing Shrop.NET users to help them source a replacement website

5.6   The stakeholders agreed that this would be a viable plan of action, and so a consultation letter was sent out to all current users on 8 January, inviting feedback on the proposals with a deadline of 26 February.

5.7   Out of this group, nearly all town & parish councils have reported that they have now moved, or are in the process of moving to new websites, and were happy for standard support to end on 31 March, with the Shrop.NET service to be discontinued in June, as proposed. We had very little response from the ~90 community groups, although those that did respond informed us that they were moving to new websites.

5.8   Of the remaining town & parish councils that did not respond to the initial consultation, further attempts were made to contact them to ensure they were made aware of the situation. Only three of these have yet to respond, and these have been reported back to SALC.

6.0   Conclusions

6.1   In the current financial climate, we cannot justify maintaining this service in terms of the annual fee and the time it takes the Digital Services team to support it. The system itself is now outdated in terms of the features and templates available, which does mean that the sites it provides are also now showing their age, and are not best suited for viewing on modern mobile and tablet devices.

6.2   There are now other web-based services that can offer free websites, with a greater choice of designs and useful tools than Shrop.NET can provide. Having consulted users, there seems to be a near universal understanding that these conclusions are sound, and that the decommissioning of Shrop.NET is a sensible thing to do.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information) Exit Strategy Equality and Social Inclusion Impact Assessment (ESIIA) Consultation letter Shrop.NET mini-site usage analysis spreadsheet (contains consultation feedback)
Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Cllr Michael Wood
Local Member
Appendices