Committee:	E-Government Task Group
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Agenda Item No:	5
Title:	Saffire Grant Funding
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Summary

1   This report seeks the Task Group's views on the options available for long-term funding of the Saffire community website.

Background

2   The Saffire website was set up, initially on a voluntary basis, in 1995 by Dr Stephen Willoughby. It was the first community website in the UK. It now provides information on a range of subjects connected to the Uttlesford area, including business, clubs and societies, tourism, travel, what's on and news. It has also promoted discussion on local issues such as housing, history and the expansion of Stansted Airport.

3   The website has won national awards for its community content and has been well used by the public. It is presently receiving around 2,000 visitors a month, drawn from both the local community and further afield. At least 10% of visitors to the site are from overseas.

4   In 1997, the Council agreed a grant to Dr Willoughby in return for a commitment to support and develop the site and meet the associated running costs. Originally, the site content was restricted to the Saffron Walden area. However, a condition of grant aid was that the site should be extended to cover the whole Uttlesford district. The annual grant is £10,000, payable quarterly in advance. The Council is not committed to provide grant support beyond the November 2003.

Reasons for the review

5   Over the past two years the Council has invested heavily in its own website. Further substantial development work is taking place during 2003/04. Despite the advances made, the website still scores poorly in surveys, mainly due to the difficulty in locating basic information about the Uttlesford district. Clearly, visitors to the Uttlesford website would expect to find this information.

6   This problem is partly due to shortcomings in the design of the Council site, which are being addressed. However, it is also because a lot of this information is held on the Saffire website. Consequently, all Council-related

information is being transferred from Saffire to the Council's website. This includes:

a) What's On in Uttlesford (this is an electronic version of guide published by the Tourism Service).

b) Walks around Saffron Walden (data provided by Committee Services).

c) Accommodation (electronic version of guide published by the Tourism Service).

d) Parish data (collected by the Tourism service).

e) Uttlesford Agenda 21 (provided by Planning Services).

f) Air Pollution reports (provided by Environmental Services).

7   Once this work is complete, the existing Saffire website will be somewhat depleted of content. This therefore raises questions about the value of continued Council funding. Consequently, a review has been carried out to determine the future funding options available to Members.

Options for consideration

Option 1 - Cease to provide support to Saffire

8   With much of the existing content of Saffire being transferred to the Council website, it is questionable whether continued Council funding is required. There would be savings of £10,000 per annum were grant aid to cease.

9   Dr Willoughby has indicated that Saffire would probably cease operating if funding is withdrawn. An analysis of the content of Saffire has identified that the following areas would be lost, as they are unlikely to be replicated, at least immediately, on the council website:

a) The Business Directory.

b) Clubs and Societies database. However, the IT Section has recently produced an online version of Council for Voluntary Services, Uttlesford's Elderly Persons' Directory. This directory provides details of clubs, societies and organisations providing services to elderly people in the Uttlesford area. It may be possible to extend this to include a wider range of clubs and societies.

c) Latest news. However, to some extent, this duplicates information on some of the local newspapers' websites.

d) Discussion forums. It is likely however that the council will develop some form of discussion forum in the future.

As can be seen, the amount of community information that would be lost is relatively small.

Option 2 - Update Saffire website, with continued Council funding –

10   Discussions have been held with Dr Willoughby regarding the possible future direction of Saffire. He has proposed a complete overhaul of the site's design, the introduction of content management technology, and the following new content:

   a) Car share scheme – the use of interactive databases to match those offering journeys to those seeking them.

   b) Improved business directory – the introduction of search facilities and electronic access to businesses in the directory.

   c) Supporting home workers (teleworkers) – provide online facilities to enable local home workers to get in contact with each other and form teleworking groups (to overcome the isolation often felt by lone workers).

   d) LETS (Local Exchange Trading Schemes) and Time Bank schemes – LETS use a system of community credits, so that direct exchanges do not have to be made. People earn LETS credits by providing a service, and can then spend the credits on whatever is offered by others on the scheme: for example childcare, transport, food, home repairs or the hire of tools and equipment. Time Banks are similar to LETS: Such schemes can be managed through a website, such as Saffire.

   e) Citizen's Initiatives – Extending the use of Saffire to promote community initiatives through the use of message boards, polls, surveys, closed user groups and file sharing.

11   In order to affect the proposed changes, Dr Willoughby would require additional one-off development funding from the Council, calculated to be £8,000. In return, and in recognition of the lower workload resulting from the introduction of content management, he would reduce the annual charge to £6,500 per annum.

Option 3 - Develop a community related area within the Council's website and cease funding Saffire.

12   A third option would be to create a stronger community 'channel' within the Council's upgraded website, which is due to be launched within the next two months. The channel could be used to bring together community-related initiatives taking place across the Council. For example, it could pull together work being done in areas such as the Uttlesford Youth Forum, the Saffron Walden initiative, the Dunmow Town Strategy Group, as well as any initiatives arising from the recent appointment of a Community Development Officer.

13   It is estimated that development costs would be in the region of £10,000 to £15,000, dependent upon the scale of work required.

14   Probably the only significant drawback with this approach would be the loss of the independent community 'voice' that Saffire enjoys. Input from the local community would therefore need to be encouraged, possibly through the development of a 'community forum', drawn from interested volunteers and local community groups.

15   Maintaining a community channel would also be an additional workload that could not be absorbed by existing staff. It is estimated that about 15 hours a week would need to be spent on this work. A part-time member of staff would need to be recruited to carry out the work, at an estimated cost of £9,200 per annum.

Conclusions

16   Saffire has been a popular community website for a number of years. If it is to continue then it requires development of new content and an overhaul of the site's design and the introduction of new technology.

17   The views of the Task Group are therefore sought on the various options identified. These views will then be forwarded to the Resources Committee for consideration as part of the 2004/05 budget setting process.

Background Papers: None