

Parish Councils Online



A guide to setting up
and maintaining a
Parish Council Website.

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Preface.

This guide has been written by Mike and Sharon Henson.

Mike Henson is a Director of Mike Henson Presentations Limited the parent company of mh-p.net, parishcouncilwebsite.co.uk and cutaways.net. Having originally qualified as an electrical engineer he spent many years on the technical side of the theatre before moving sideways into the production of conferences and product launches. Mike spent eleven years working for Slough Borough Council as Technical Manager of The Fulcrum Centre in Slough as well as a spell at Anugraha (now Savill Court Hotel) as Production and Business Development Manager and with production company Mediatech, before establishing the company in 1987.

mh-p, as it has recently been rebranded, provides corporate communications services to blue chip and multi-nationals in the form of live events management, corporate and training video production, product and regulatory training programmes, interactive computer based training and web design/development. Recently mh-p launched a website hosting service on its own servers together with domain registration.

Sharon Henson is a former motoring journalist, copy writer and Advertising Manager for the Elga Group of Companies and Perkin Elmer has been a Parish Clerk for 12 years, gaining her AQA in 2005. Sharon successfully juggles the running of a home with the needs of three Parish Councils, one of whom has achieved Quality Status.

Introduction.

In this publication we will attempt to help you to either establish or maintain a website for your Parish Council and hopefully avoid the pitfalls that might hinder your progress.

One fact of life that we know to be true is that the majority of Parish Clerks, even if they have the inclination and the ability, do not have the time to maintain what should develop into a busy and active website.

Many of you reading this may already have a website, but for the benefit of those who don't, we make no apology for starting at the beginning.

Choosing Your Domain Name.

The first step towards creating an online presence is to register a name for your website. If we follow the rules of domain name registration we are left with two choices: *yourcouncil.org.uk*. or *yourcouncil.gov.uk*

- .com domains should only be used by companies who operate worldwide.
- .net domains should only be used by companies involved in internet activities.
- .org domains should only be used by organisations operating worldwide.

These are known as top level domains or TLD's.

Next we have country level domains and for the UK:

- .co.uk should be used by businesses based in the UK.
- .org.uk should be used by organisations based in the UK.

Some suppliers may offer you a sub-domain. This is where a name of your choice is established under a TLD or country domain. These can appear to be attractive financially because there is no domain to register or Hosting to rent, but as a sub-domain you will never be found by a search engine (eg. Google, Yahoo, MSN) and your address will be either *http://yourcouncil.theirdomain.com* or *http://www.theirdomain.com/yourcouncil*.

Sub-domains don't present a professional image and unless they are provided by your Internet Service Provider (ISP) there will not be any email addresses on the domain and the facility to provide email addresses to all officers and members will not exist. Having your own domain not only gives you a professional image, it makes you more prominent, easy to find and provides domain level email addresses.

Internet Service Providers.

There are two main types of Internet Service Provider (ISP). You already use the services of one and they provide you with your internet access. Most ISP's also provide Hosting, however in most cases, it's not their core business, it's usually quite expensive and support/help can leave a lot to be desired.

The other type of ISP provides Hosting for web sites; this is their core business and what they do best. To avoid confusion we will refer to these as the Hosting company or "Host"

There is no connection between your ISP and your Host. You do not have to use your ISP as your Host, in fact, there is more to gain by using two companies.

Email and Webmail

Your ISP will provide you with two services; a connection to the internet and one or more email addresses, but your Host should also provide you with email under your domain. There are many reasons why it's good practice to use domain email. If you run a business and have a website at www.mikehenson.com and an email address of "mike@mikehenson.com" looks far more professional than the ISP address of "mike@mhpl.demon.co.uk", the same applies to Councils. Equally importantly, it also allows you to separate your business/council email from your personal email.

The government is working towards an "e-government" environment centred around computing technology where Officers and Councillors communicate electronically between themselves and constituents/parishioners.

Another benefit of having domain email is that the Clerk knows, that because they're on the same domain as all the members, every email gets to its destination because all the accounts are on the same mail server; the Clerk also has the added benefit of being able to revert to the ISP email address in the event of a problem.

Personal email is collected from your ISP whilst domain email is collected from your Host. Email software like Outlook Express (included with the Windows Operating System) or Outlook (part of the Microsoft Office Suite) downloads/uploads your messages to/from your computer and your ISP/Host email server. The software is designed to send and receive email from any number of mail servers. The person responsible for your web design/development should be able to give you step-by-step instructions on setting up the software.

Your domain should also come complete with a WebMail facility. Webmail allows users to logon to your email account from any computer that has an internet connection using Internet Explorer (or another browser) and view/respond to any mail awaiting attention.

Webmail is an 'away-from-base' service, it can be slow and sometimes unreliable so it is not a substitute for sending/receiving email using Outlook Express or Outlook so you should not use it as a standalone email service. Hosts do not back-up mail servers so it is your responsibility to 'download' your emails onto your local computer regularly. Most ISP's and Hosts limit domains to 100mb of Webmail which, whilst being ample for ad-hoc use, will soon be exhausted if, for example, all members of a Council use it in lieu of the proper download/upload procedure using Outlook Express, Outlook or any other email management software.

Registering A Domain Name

Now you're probably wondering, what about .gov.uk?

Registering a [.gov.uk](#) domain is not easy and there are many hoops that you will have to propel yourself through in order to gain registration. However Parish Councils, being non-political, prefer to avoid .gov.uk domains because of the connotations and assumptions which are made by the general public.

Once you have decided on your name and checked its availability you, or your chosen web designer, can register the name. Try to keep the name brief, appropriate and easy to spell, then people won't forget it; *yourcouncil.org.uk* is preferable to *yourname+parishcouncil.org.uk*

Sometimes your chosen name may not be available. In some areas, voluntary community websites sprang up like weeds, but often they wasted away when the originators realised the amount of time and effort involved to keep them fresh and interesting and the domains become available; whilst you might initially be forced to use *yourname+parishcouncil.org.uk* it's possible that a more appropriate domain can be registered at a later date. If this happens it is a simple task for your web developer to move your site to the new address and place web-forwarding onto the old address so visitors are moved seamlessly from one to the other.

UK domains are managed by Nominet and are registered for a minimum period of two years. The cost should be around £6 per year. Question your supplier if they attempt to charge more.

Although you may not need them, we always recommend to our clients that they (or we on their behalf) purchase the whole set of domains (.com, .net, .org, .org.uk and .co.uk) because this prevents other parties from using what is effectively your name. It could be embarrassing if a resident, disgruntled with the Parish Council, launched an internet attack using the same domain name!

In most cases Top Level Domains are more expensive than country level domains, often double the price and a figure of £10/£12 per year is more likely. TLD's can also be registered for up to 10 years.

It's best to let your web designer to register and manage your domains because they should then renew the registrations on your behalf, set-up your email accounts and carry out any changes at server level which might be required.

Who do you choose to Host and build your site.

We suggest that you let the person/company who designs and builds your site to take care of the Hosting.

Most Parish Council websites don't make huge demands where Hosting is concerned and a suitable Hosting package should cost no more than £60 per year.

How you choose your web designer depends on how you plan to update and maintain the site. There are several options:

The Clerk Updates The Site

Generally speaking there are not enough hours in the day for the Clerk to contemplate taking on the additional work. Websites can be complex in their structure and the smallest of errors can break the page/site. The site could be built using a Content Management System (CMS) but the cheaper varieties have accessibility issues and the cost of the more professional models would be impossible to justify. This option, in our opinion, is only workable if the Clerk already has knowledge of websites and how they work.

A Councillor/Member Updates The Site

This seems to be a solution favoured by a lot of Parish Councils. There is a member who has suitable knowledge and is happy to undertake the work. Unfortunately websites tend to grow and Members tend to come and go and it's not unusual for the Council to be without a website because the member is no longer elected or the job has become too much for them.

A Friend Of A Friend Updates The Site

This scenario generally has a short shelf life when the individual concerned gets fed-up with looking after the site. Such arrangements are usually based on a very low amount of income for the person concerned, which often results in it becoming a non-viable proposition. It's also impossible to 'chase' someone who is supplying the service as a 'favour'.

A Local Business Offers To Update The Site

The potential dangers here are probably quite obvious. The business may expect certain "favours" from the Council or people may read more into the relationship than actually exists. It's no good being clean; you have to be seen to be clean.

You Appoint A Company To Manage The Site

Whilst this is the obvious answer it's often overlooked or passed over on cost grounds – even before potential suppliers have been given the opportunity to provide a quotation! The Council needs to do its homework and research, decide exactly what's required on the site and which parts need to be updated and the frequency. Given this information a potential supplier should be in a position to provide a costing for the annual updating of the site together with a guarantee of the level of service.

Compliance

There are several areas where certain regulations need to be met and it is the responsibility of the web designer/developer and/or the person updating the site, to ensure compliance.

Some of these requirements are based on the guidelines laid down by the W3 Consortium (the body responsible for the standards of the world wide web) and best practice which includes accessibility and cross-browser compatibility, whilst others can be found in Government Legislation including the Disability Discrimination Act and the Data Protection Act.

Some of these regulations are quite complex and the people involved with your site should be qualified, experienced and have Professional Indemnity Cover in order to protect the Council.

The Government has produced a start-up kit for councils wishing to produce their own website and a template set with support documentation can be found on the [Cabinet Office Website](#).

[The National Association Of Local Councils](#) (N.A.L.C.) have a simple set of criteria for their annual Website of the Year Award:

- Provides a list of council members and officers with contact details
- Access to the Annual Report
- Minutes of meetings
- Newsletters and news items available
- Shows councils at centre of community life, shows the benefits of the website to the community
- Vehicle for local people not clerk/councillors
- Good quality images
- Dates and venues of next meetings
- Simple to look at
- Site map
- Easily identifiable address
- List of events
- Up-to-date
- No excessive scrolling

Briefing Your Web Designer

First, establish that those individuals and companies on your short list will meet with you and provide a proposal and quotation at no cost. If they charge for meetings or speculative designs look elsewhere.

Draw up a shortlist of potential suppliers and invite the one with the highest profile for a meeting. Look at the sites they have built for others and draw up a list of the sites you like as well as the sites you dislike. Also, look at other Parish Council sites and add those to the list – good and bad. If you have a logo, colour scheme, typeface and photographs of the Parish, have them all available.

Plan out the pages that you want on your website based upon other sites and have these available at the meeting.

A number of decisions will be made during the meeting, make a note of them as you may need to refer to them at a later date.

Some of the less obvious matters that need to be resolved are:

1. Is the web designer well established with a good track record?
2. What happens if you don't like the design they produce?
3. What is the turnaround on site updates?
4. Can they undertake all the work that is required?
5. It is important to remember that you are a Council and that you have responsibilities so ensure that the web designer has at least £2m Public and £10m Employees Liability and most importantly, because they are acting for the Council, at least £50k Professional Indemnity.

When the web designer comes back to you with the design and costing study it carefully, make sure that it meets all your requirements and if you're unsure send your query by email so you have a written response.

At this stage you may be happy to instruct the web designer to proceed or you may wish to meet with others from your shortlist. Because you have met the supplier with the highest profile it maybe that their quotation is higher than you expected. Use all the information gathered from that meeting to brief the others on your short list, that way you will be able to compare like-for-like.

Your Site Goes Live!

Publicise your site.

Your web designer should be part of the Google Webmaster Scheme and take the necessary steps to ensure that your site gets indexed and crawled quickly. However, it does take time for word to spread so use any and all local publications and exchange links with other websites. The more inbound links that a website has from sites that are ranked higher in Google the more the ranking of your site will increase. Also produce posters and place them on notice-boards, in shops, libraries, the village hall and anywhere else that residents of the area frequent; like pubs! Your web designer should be able to help with this even if a small extra cost is involved.

Your web designer should carry out basic optimisation by completing alt-tags and meta-tags (unseen information to assist accessibility) and uploading an XML site map (to assist search engine robot crawlers to search the site). This, in our opinion, is sufficient for a Council website, because people searching for a Council site will search for the name of the area rather than a generic description negating the need for any more complex search engine optimisation (SEO).

Google is now the de-facto search engine and the site's design should take this into account. There are only five main search engines and two of the other major players Yahoo and MSN, have their "robots" crawling the web indexing and ranking sites and pages. In addition there are hundreds of smaller search engines and internet directories however these receive all their information from the top five so it is not necessary to inform all these of your sites existence.

Add the website address to the signature on all your emails and make sure your District and County Councils are updated too. If you have space on your District Council site ask them to take it down and put web forwarding onto the page.

Send your Agenda's and Minute's through to your web designer promptly to ensure they are displayed on the site at the due date. Currently there are no hard and fast rules about when Minutes should appear. Some Councils wait until the Minutes are confirmed at the next meeting, whilst others put up un-confirmed Minutes. We believe that this is an important decision which should be taken by the Full Council.

Your designer should have provided a facility for you to view the statistics of your site; who has visited, where they came from, what pages they viewed, how long they stayed and a lot more information should be available to you. Statcounter is a good, free service and an alternative to whatever facility is provided by the Host.

Website statistics gathered from the Host, Statcounter or Google Analytics not only provide a fascinating insight into the behaviour of the visitors to the site they also tell you what you're getting right and what you're not – your visitors vote with their mouse!

Some designers use software like IPWatch to monitor your site. IPWatch accesses your site on a regular basis (anything less than 15 minutes is overkill!) and alerts the designer if the site fails to respond. Such notifications can also be made available to the clerk in the form of an email, if required.

Periodically domain name registration and Hosting fees will become due for renewal and this should be handled by your web designer but you should monitor this as the failure to renew will result in the site being removed by the Host and possibly even the loss of the domain name to a third party.

Don't forget to notify your designer when Councillors retire either by choice or election. The designer should react quickly to update the information and terminate the email accounts of those no longer elected and establish new accounts for their replacements.

Encourage the site to grow and develop. Invite local organisations to take part by giving them pages of their own which your designer can produce and update on their behalf.

Provide and maintain maps and plans of the Parish.

Provide information on the background of the Parish and the Council, its responsibilities and the work it undertakes on behalf of the residents.

Organise local events and competitions on the website; local businesses are usually happy to provide prizes in return for publicity.

If you want to develop a true community spirit, add a Forum to your site where residents can exchange views, buy and sell goods and chat about their hobbies; you can even create a private section where Councillors can communicate with each other in private.

All of these things will encourage a community spirit and raise awareness of the work done by the Parish Council.

Good luck with your website.