

## **Questions to Ask Potential Web Designers.**

This document is a brief guide to the topics we have come across during discussions with internal departments, external partners and local groups, about web site design and procurement. It is not a complete list of the questions you should ask, but a guide to the areas we feel may be overlooked when comparing one company or designer with another. It is also relevant for any existing web sites, as the laws and guidelines mentioned will still apply.

Barrow Borough Council will not be held responsible for any agreement or contract based upon the contents of this document.

### **1. Who will own the domain name?**

This is the address people use to find your site on the Internet.

e.g. [www.barroworganisation.org.uk](http://www.barroworganisation.org.uk)

You can use an ".org.uk" name to show that you are a non-profit organisation.

<sup>1</sup> This should be registered to the organisation secretary, or other responsible person within the organisation. If the web design company registers in their name you may have problems taking the Domain Name if you move the site to another company.

If the design company insists on registering in their name, ask for written confirmation that you can take the name if you move your site elsewhere.

### **2. Who will own the design?**

You need to state in writing that your organisation retains ownership of all designs, logos, content and images produced under your name, so that you can take the whole site to a new company, if necessary. Ask for copies of your site at regular intervals, on a c.d. if possible, to make this easier.

Ensure that the designer adds a copyright notice to all pages, stating your organisation name. There should be contact details for your organisation, in plain text - not as an image, available from every page.

### **3. What are the registration and maintenance fees?**

Web sites work better when they are kept on a computer that has been specially designed for the task. This is because of the extra security and computer resources needed to run a web site that will be viewed by large numbers of the general public. Most design companies use a hosting service <sup>2</sup> for the web site and the domain name registration. The fees for this may be separate to the design fee and will probably incur an annual charge.

If you are going to be selling goods and services over the Internet, or handling sensitive information, then you will need a more secure service. These cost more but are essential to avoid misuse of your data and your customer's payment details.

#### **4. How will updates be made?**

Remember that all web sites need regular updates to keep them fresh and interesting.

Many design companies now offer sites where you can have access to add content yourself, although this may affect the price. Anyone familiar with the Internet usually has the skills to add content to these systems.

If the design company will be updating pages you need to agree in advance how many regular changes they will make for a set price.

e.g. Change the content of x pages in a month for y amount.  
Or a fee that will allow a monthly update to agreed pages, such as meeting times, agendas and minutes, or news.

A site will quickly appear outdated and irrelevant without regular updates, so you will also need to agree a timescale for changes to ensure that new information is uploaded promptly.

#### **5. Does the design fee include image editing/scanning/manipulation, or is that extra?**

Some companies charge separately for image work.

Is there a limit to the number of images that can be changed regularly to go with text that has been updated?

What will they charge for changes after the site is live? E.g. you find that an image is inappropriate or under copyright, and needs to be changed/replaced.

#### **6. What do they know about web standards and guidelines that will make the site usable<sup>3</sup> and accessible<sup>4</sup> to as many visitors as possible?**

This is important as many designers are unaware that is illegal, under the Disability Discrimination Act<sup>5</sup>, to create a site that has made no consideration for disabled users. Although there have been no prosecutions so far, the law should not be ignored, as there are simple steps that can be taken to avoid these problems.

Some design companies may try to use excuses for not providing you with an accessible web site.<sup>6</sup> This is often because they are unaware of the issues and laws about designing for everyone. Alternatively, they simply choose to ignore them. Do you want a web site designed for some of your visitors, or most of your visitors?

You should tell them that web site users who cannot access traditional sources of information, because of physical, psychological, or social barriers, are a fast growing sector.

An accessible site is not just for the visually or physically impaired. A lot of these design techniques make web sites easier to use for those with low literacy skills, language interpretation needs, age-related impairment, or just an old computer.

Also, a lot of sites only look good on certain computer systems, and you should ask if they design and test for computers that use alternatives to Windows and Internet Explorer. A good check for this is to ask if they have heard of the W3C <sup>7</sup>, and do they design sites that can pass their code validation. It may not be crucial if they can answer this question positively, but when choosing between designers it could be a deciding factor on who is the most knowledgeable about current and future standards.

As a general rule you should ask the designer not to use Flash, JavaScript, Movie or Audio files without providing an alternative for people who do not want to, or cannot, use those technologies. <sup>8</sup> This issue is covered under the Disability Discrimination Act mentioned previously, but also affects people with older computers and slow connections to the Internet.

Flashing animations should be avoided as they can trigger epileptic fits in some, are distracting to people with visual or cognitive impairment <sup>9</sup>, and are just annoying to many others.

Text should not be made into images unless it is a logo. Search engines, and technologies that help disabled users, cannot "read" images. Many sites have important information like contacts and prices built into an image. To some people all they see, or hear <sup>10</sup>, is "Image, Image, Image..."

Using plain text also means that the font size and colour can usually be changed by the site visitor to suit their own needs or preferences. This kind of adaptability is crucial for many visitors.

Ask the designer if they know what "Alt" and "Title" tags <sup>11</sup> are.

## **7. Do they know how to use keywords and descriptions within the code of a site to help with search engines?**

Some designers may mention search engine services to increase your visitors, but they need to get the basics right first. Using keywords, to highlight your sites content to search engines, will help it get listed. Descriptions help search engine users decide if your site is worth visiting.

## **8. Do they know about data protection, copyright and disclaimers? <sup>12</sup>**

The design of the site needs to respect the privacy and copyright of others, as well as your organisation and its members. You should be wary of designers who fill their pages with images of celebrities, or content and images from other web sites.

Barrow Borough Council will not be held responsible for any agreement or contract based on the contents of this document.

Your organisation needs to be aware of the legal requirements for data publishing because you will be held responsible for any errors or breaches of regulations.

### **In Summary:**

A web site that cannot be viewed by someone because of ignorance and laziness by the designer, no matter how pretty the design, reflects badly on your organisation and the information you are trying to convey.

If the web designer you are considering has no idea about the majority of issues mentioned <sup>13</sup>, or disagrees with the sources attached without providing similarly corroborated material, then maybe you should take your site and your money to someone who cares about your information more than their design.

Barrow Borough Council has a policy of continuous improvement for our own web site, and aims to provide a design that is suitable for the majority of visitors. We follow guidelines provided by the Government <sup>14</sup>, Web Accessibility Initiative <sup>15</sup> and specialist advisors such as the RNIB <sup>16</sup>. Occasionally our web site may fail to meet these guidelines, but we try to at least be aware of the problems so we can plan improvements to address them.

---

The following sites are provided for reference only and do not infer any bias or preference for the associated services. Other sources of information and services are available. Barrow Borough Council is not responsible for the content or use of these web sites. Links are correct as of 15<sup>th</sup> May 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Read <http://www.nominet.org.uk/registrants/sld/> "The .org.uk Second Level Domain"

<sup>2</sup> Renting space on a computer specially designed to make web sites available, safely and securely, over the Internet. These computers, known as web servers, are located in secure premises with controlled environmental conditions. The hosting company may provide backup and maintenance tools for your web site.

<sup>3</sup> Read <http://usability.gov/basics/index.html> "Usability Basics"

<sup>4</sup> Read <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/benefits-of-accessible-websites-1.shtml> and <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/benefits-of-accessible-websites-2.shtml> "Benefits of an Accessible Web Site – parts 1 and 2".

<sup>5</sup> Read <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/uk-website-legal-requirements.shtml> "Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) & web accessibility".

<sup>6</sup> Read <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/myths.shtml> "Web Accessibility Myths".

<sup>7</sup> The W3C is the World Wide Web Consortium. They hold the guidelines and standards that designers can use to ensure that their web site works for most people on most computers. <http://www.w3.org/>

<sup>8</sup> You do not need to understand what these technologies are, just ensure that the designer knows you have concerns about their misuse, and would prefer to avoid them. Alternatives include text

descriptions of image, video and audio files, and plain text navigation in a list.

<sup>9</sup> Read the Introduction from <http://juicystudio.com/cognitive-impairment.asp>  
“Juicy Studio: Developing Sites for Users with Cognitive Disabilities”

<sup>10</sup> Some users have technology called Screen Readers that reads aloud the content of a web site. They can have problems with sites that call all hyperlinks using “Click Here” or “More”. Imagine 20 links on one page all saying “Click Here, Click Here, Click Here”. How will the user tell between them, or where they lead?

<sup>11</sup> An Alt Tag is code that contains a short description of an image. A Title Tag describes a link. This should be meaningful and relevant and not repeat the words “Image” or “Link”. You can see if alt and title tags are in use by hovering your mouse over images and links on a web site. A small box should appear with some text describing the image or where the link leads.

<sup>12</sup> Read <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/> for regulations and guidance. In general, you should not reproduce information or images from any newspaper, magazine, book or web site without consent from the owners or publishers of that information.  
You should not reproduce a photograph of anyone without his or her permission. When children are involved you need parents or guardians consent, and should avoid showing the child’s face unless it is directly relevant to the content. Never provide the child’s address or contact details.

<sup>13</sup> As well as asking questions, go to the design companies or designer’s web site and check for things like alt tags on images by hovering over them, links that describe the content they link to, important information as text – not images (try using the mouse to select text – if it can be selected as individual words it is text). Does the company/designer mention standards, accessibility or usability in their information? Do the sites in their portfolio follow any of the guidelines mentioned in this document?

<sup>14</sup> Government web standards: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/resources/handbook/html/htmlindex.asp> . Local Authority web site designers are more aware of accessibility and usability needs than their commercial counterparts because the Government has had these standards in place for some time, and enforces them through funding and e-government protocols.

<sup>15</sup> The Web Accessibility Initiative (<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>) is part of the W3C. They host the guidelines that relate specifically to web site accessibility, which some people may recognise as A, AA and AAA. All other standards, including Bobby and RNIB, are based on the guidelines produced by the WAI. There is an overview with links to useful sections on this page:  
<http://www.w3.org/WAI/gettingstarted/>.

<sup>16</sup> Organisations such as the RNIB are starting to highlight good and bad practice in web site design through their own testing and accreditation scheme. <http://www.rnib.org.uk/>