



National Audit Office

**January 2014**

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## **Local Government Boundary Commission for England**

Value for money review 2014-15: Website and online consultation portal

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**Key Facts:**

Costs, to end of 2014-15: **£319k**

Savings, to end of 2014-15: **£477k**

Increase in number of  
consultations,  
2011-12 to 2013-14: **212%**

Awards won: **Nominet Digital  
Innovation in Public  
Services**

## Executive summary

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has developed an award-winning business asset in its internet-based consultation portal, as well as a redesigned website. Both are key tools for achieving compliance with the boundary change criteria which require that a new electoral ward should reflect the interests and identities of the area's community.

It delivered both projects to within 3% of total budget, spending £209k on both projects, and although delivery of the portal was delayed, this resulted in a product with improved functionality.

The portal has delivered impressive savings in mapping and printing costs, as intended. LGBCE will now save approximately £178k per year, which offsets the additional maintenance costs it will incur of £47k per year. Over the four years to date it has saved £477k, but spent only £319k, to give a net saving thus far of £158k.

The portal has also resulted in the publication of all review consultation documentation on time since its launch, and the new website has delivered additional capability for communicating with internal and external stakeholders remotely and securely (although this has not yet been put into use).

It is not possible to determine if LGBCE has achieved its other original objectives, as it has not been measuring the projects' performance against all of them. It also has not formally reviewed the objectives since the start of the project, to see if they remain relevant.

Governance processes could be stronger. The skills and experience needed to deliver the projects did not seem to be assessed against the skills and experience within the organisation before the projects commenced (relevant LGBCE staff have now received project management training for the latest large project). Although regular reporting to senior management was undertaken during the delivery phase of the projects, once the portal and new website were launched no further reporting occurred e.g. on realisation of expected benefits. The Commissioners were not shown proposals for the portal, despite identifying the original need for it. Lessons learned during these projects were informally identified but not captured or shared more widely, although again, LGBCE have already made improvements by setting up a method of formally capturing lessons learned during their current major project.

The risks were adequately managed during the delivery phases of the projects, but those that could arise from ongoing reliance on the portal and website or the associated maintenance contracts, such as the risk of supplier failure, have not been considered.

## Conclusion

In delivering impressive savings, LGBCE has achieved value for money through the development of its website and online consultation tool. It is also likely that it has secured wider impacts such as improved information exchange with the public. However, as LGBCE has not measured its performance against all objectives it is not possible to determine the full benefits of the project.

The key recommendations are:

- The original project objectives should be revisited and refined to reflect what the portal and website need to deliver in the future.
- Performance against each revised objective should be measured, and target levels of performance, and by when these should be achieved, should be defined.

- Assessment of the ongoing contract risks should be incorporated into the organisational risk register. LGBCE should also consider if the risk register is complete and up to date for all areas of the business.
- Proposals for major projects should be presented to the Commissioners to give them the opportunity to provide guidance and fulfil their governance role.
- Appropriate and proportionate reporting on projects including subsequent operational phases should be agreed with senior management and the Commissioners.

### Introduction

LGBCE's remit is to ensure internal electoral boundary arrangements in England are fair, to deliver electoral equality for voters, and to keep the map of English local government in good repair. It reports to the Speaker's Committee. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) also reports to this Committee, annually by statute, on an aspect of the value for money achieved by LGBCE. Previous C&AG reports have covered LGBCE's management of its fixed cost base (focussing on its back office services) and the variable costs of conducting reviews.

This review examines LGBCE's investment in developing an interactive internet-based public consultation portal and redeveloping its website since 2012. The focus was on how LGBCE identified its needs and set objectives at the start of the project and whether those objectives were reasonable, but also briefly considers how LGBCE's governance structure supported the projects, how well it managed project risks, and whether delivery was to time and to budget. It then seeks to determine if LGBCE has achieved its objectives. Review methodology involved examining project documents and interviewing key staff.

The portal and website are key tools for use in LGBCE's operations. They help it to gather the views of the general public and local organisations when drawing up and refining proposals for new patterns of wards or electoral divisions which should reflect the interests and identities of an area's communities.

This has been a significant investment for LGBCE. As well as the initial investment in buying the portal and new website (£209k), LGBCE's annual website maintenance costs have quadrupled, from £15k to £62k.

The portal was intended to make the submissions process quicker and easier, and make submissions easier to interpret, by allowing respondents to annotate detailed maps. It was provided and maintained by an external supplier, Informed Solutions, and launched in September 2012. Following the launch, LGBCE implemented a series of enhancements, including the ability for users to draw their own boundaries, and use the portal on tablet devices. The website redesign was intended to improve user navigation, link the website to the portal and increase digital storage space. It was provided and maintained by another external supplier, Squiznet and launched in April 2014. Figure 1 shows a timeline of the main milestones in both projects.

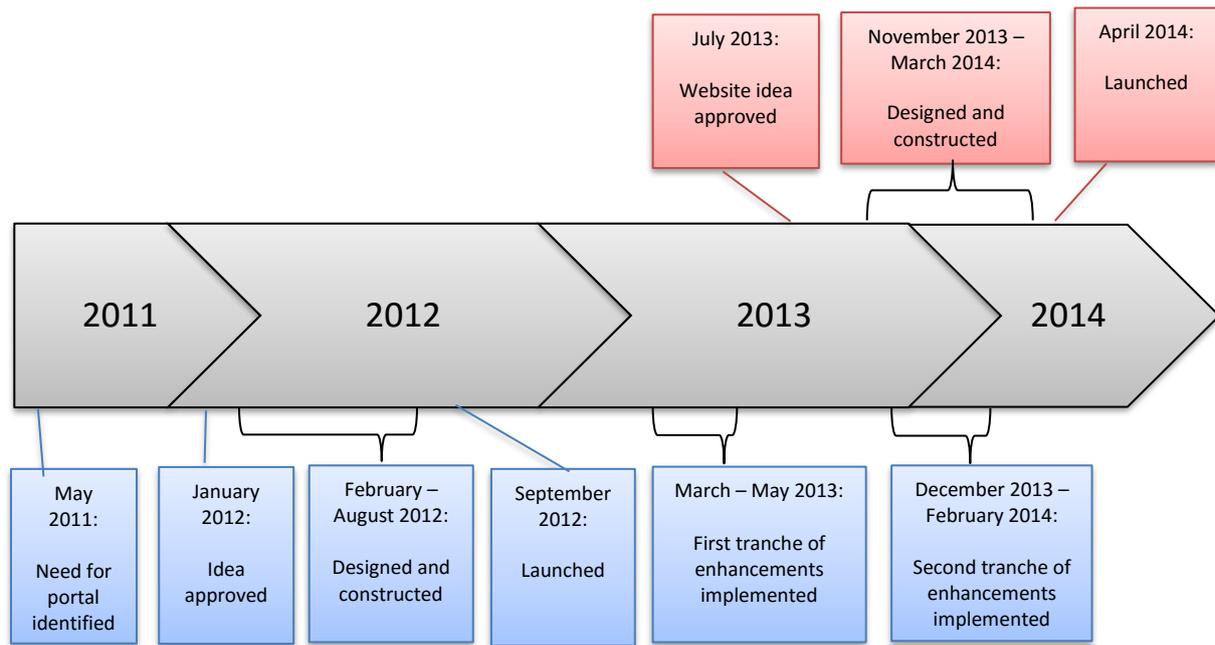


Figure 1: Timeline of consultation portal construction and enhancements, and website redesign.

Key: Blue boxes: portal; Red boxes: website

Source: LGBCE business cases and change request forms

### Identifying organisational needs

LGBCE knew from its customer survey results that some stakeholders found the existing consultation process difficult. Interested parties informed LGBCE in writing of their views on LGBCE’s draft recommendations or proposed alternatives. Describing a pattern of wards in words alone is complex and time-consuming, and can result in misinterpretation. Additionally, maps to accompany proposals were published online as large PDF files, which took a long time to download.

The original identification of the need for the portal came from discussions by the Commissioners, who agreed that: ‘the website must emphasise participation [and] make it easy’.

The website redevelopment also resulted partly from customer survey feedback that the site was not easy to use and did not integrate well with the portal. Digital storage space was also known to be almost full. Since the contract with the existing website supplier was coming to an end, it was a good time to think about alternatives, and what LGBCE and its stakeholders actually needed from a website.

The portal project is continuously developing, due to the innovative nature of the technology, and the enhancements to the portal developed from ongoing discussions with the portal supplier, Informed Solutions.

Business cases were written for both projects by the Communications and Public Affairs Manager, who assumed the role of Project Manager. These set out the strategic context and issues with existing processes, followed by objectives to form the basis of project evaluation, which have been summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of objectives for each project and the portal enhancements.

<p>Portal development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the volume of submissions</li> <li>• Increase levels of customer satisfaction with consultation processes</li> <li>• Publication of consultation documentation on time</li> <li>• Reduce mapping and printing costs over five years</li> <li>• Increase levels of publicity for reviews</li> </ul>
<p>Portal enhancements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide users with more engaging experience</li> <li>• Enable users to provide focussed and specific feedback</li> <li>• Ensure the site content remains up to date and correct</li> <li>• Provide a polished and intuitive experience for tablet users</li> <li>• Enable cost-effective future enhancements for use on smartphones</li> </ul>
<p>Website redevelopment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve LGBCE's reputation as professional and easy to deal with</li> <li>• Create a secure extranet for communications with stakeholders</li> <li>• Make it easier for interested parties to provide better evidence</li> <li>• Increase digital storage space on the site</li> <li>• Make the site cloud-based to improve reliability and flexibility</li> <li>• Allow simple and efficient administration of the site</li> <li>• Promote consultations and direct stakeholders to the portal</li> <li>• Provide information to stakeholders in an easily navigable way</li> </ul>

Source: LGBCE business cases and change request forms.

Cost savings

Reducing mapping and printing costs over five years was just one of LGBCE’s objectives for the project. However, it has delivered impressive savings; reducing printing and mapping costs by £470k over the four years to 2014-15, despite the number of consultation phases trebling in a similar time period. This is set against an overall project cost of £319k, to give a net saving to date of £158k. (Further details on project costs are set out below.)

LGBCE renegotiated the cost of the contract with Ordnance Survey, who now produces one large map, rather than several smaller ones, as the size of the map file is no longer an issue now it is not being downloaded as a PDF. The printing costs have also reduced, as LGBCE now only orders one copy of a map per consultation pack, rather than several, as it can direct interested parties to the maps on the portal. Consequently, annual costs involved in the production and printing of maps for consultation have halved since 2011-12 (Figure 9).

### LGBCE has saved £470k in printing and mapping costs over four years

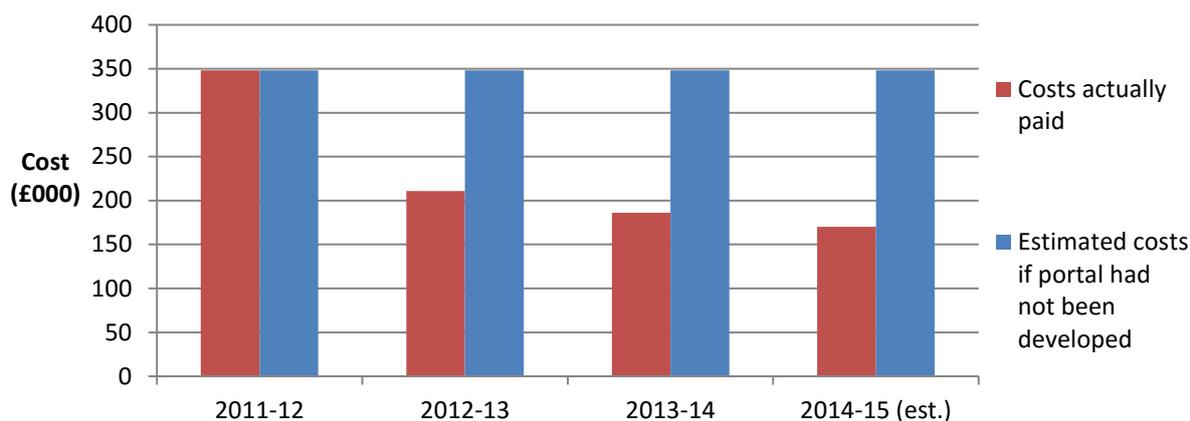


Figure 9: Annual mapping and printing costs, per the annual accounts and 2014-15 budget, compared to what they could have been, had the portal project not gone ahead.

Source: LGBCE's annual accounts and 2014-15 budget

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#### Setting other objectives

LGBCE tried to make its objectives for both the portal and new website 'SMART' (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound), therefore for this review they were compared to the 'SMART' criteria, as well as reviewed for completeness.

The objectives set out in the original business cases were not sufficiently precise, resulting in ambiguity in what LGBCE wanted to achieve. For example, one of the original website development objectives was 'User experience – a better design for the site will make it easier for local people and organisations to interact with consultations and provide better evidence on which we take decisions'. This statement contains two different goals (1. making it easier to make a submission; 2. making the submission better quality), and it does not define what 'better design', 'easier' or 'better evidence', would look like.

LGBCE has achieved some positive outcomes (such as the reduction in mapping and printing costs, noted above); however, it is not possible to say whether it actually achieved what it set out to, since it did not set target levels of performance or deadlines for achieving those levels. No formal measurement of performance against the objectives has been undertaken.

By having objectives that are not specific or measurable, with no targets or deadlines, management has limited assurance that they been achieved, and therefore if LGBCE has gained value from its investment, because 'success' has not been clearly defined.

Additionally, LGBCE focussed on some objectives that did not relate to a need or issue that it had identified, at the expense of some of those that did. This occurred because there is no logical relationship between the needs it described, in its business cases, and the subsequent objectives. For example, there is no objective in the portal business case to capture the need for increased efficiency of processing submissions which was described in that business case. Whereas one of the

portal business case objectives is ‘increased publicity for reviews’ when no issues with publicity were described in that business case.

LGBCE may also now be focussing on achieving objectives that are no longer relevant, or that are divergent from current organisational objectives. It recognised that not all objectives will remain relevant over time, and the Project Manager has informally reviewed them (see Box 4). However, they have not been formally reviewed and refreshed since the start of the projects.

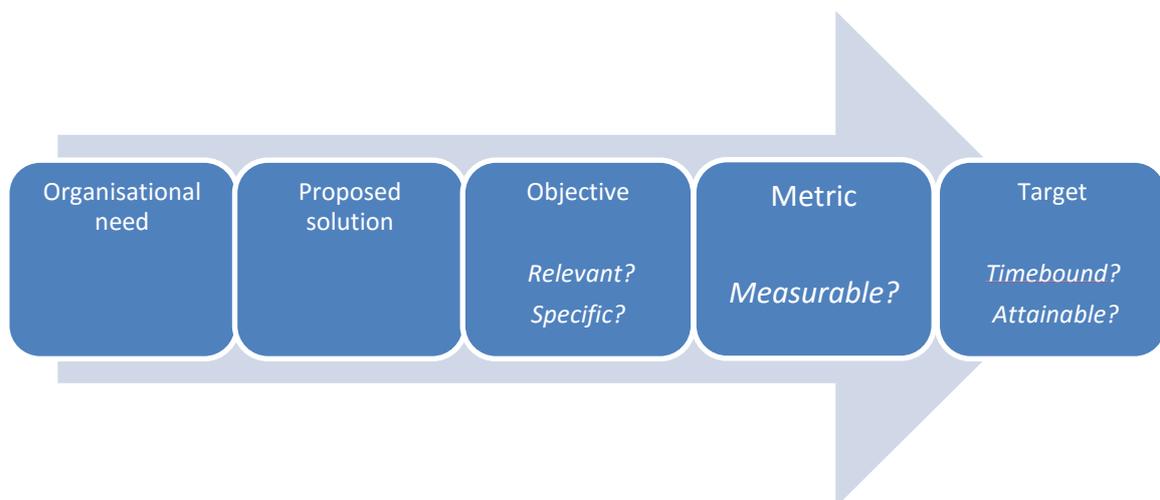
*Box 4: LGBCE recognise that not all project objectives will remain relevant over time.*

LGBCE is no longer pursuing the objective ‘Enable cost-effective future enhancements for use on smartphones’, since its staff participated in a workshop to test the use of the portal on a range of screen sizes, and discovered that it was not feasible to use the portal on a very small screen.

Volume of submissions is also no longer considered a relevant objective. Levels of public interest fluctuate; some reviews are more contentious than others, which tends to result in large volumes of submissions. It would require a disproportionately large time investment to analyse the data to give useful results. LGBCE wishes its consultation process to be accessible to anyone who is interested in its work, even if they do not wish to participate. It would therefore prefer to focus on increasing the number of people who visit the portal, and therefore are able to make their views known, rather than the number of people who actually do make a submission.

Recommendation: LGBCE should revisit its original project objectives, and decide what it needs the portal/website to deliver in the future. All revised objectives should directly link to a current or future organisational need and be ‘SMART’. All organisational needs should have a corresponding objective.

Figure 3 sets out a suggested framework for setting objectives, to ensure they address organisational needs and are ‘SMART’.



*Figure 3: Recommended objective-setting process.*

### Governance of the projects

The Commissioners were not provided with an opportunity to ensure that the issues and objectives described in the portal business case were as they originally envisaged, as it was not presented to them. With their breadth of experience they could also have provided useful guidance to ensure that the proposals were sound. In contrast, the business case for the website redevelopment was presented at an all-staff strategy planning event (which included the Commissioners), which allowed feedback and challenge from all areas of the business, and approval by the Commissioners as well as senior management.

**Recommendation:** Proposals for major projects should be presented to the Commissioners for information and to give them the opportunity to provide guidance and fulfil their governance role.

The projects, and subsequent maintenance contracts, were managed mainly by the Communications and Public Affairs Manager alongside his existing role, which has brought a stakeholder focus to the projects and given them a clear owner. Since he was responsible for all stages of the projects, from procurement through to maintenance, continuity has been assured and allowed him to develop a detailed knowledge of the projects.

Having only one staff member with a detailed knowledge of the projects presents a risk that LGBCE might not be able to effectively manage them if that person leaves the organisation. This was mitigated to some extent by the Project Manager having frequent informal discussions with other senior managers to share his knowledge, and lessons learnt. However, LGBCE could strengthen this process by conducting a formal lessons learnt exercise. Such exercises should be viewed as an ongoing continuous improvement process; ideas for improvement can be identified and captured at any time during the project, including during delivery, and for LGBCE's current major project this improvement has already been made, by use of a lessons learned log.

The skill and experience requirements for managing and staffing the projects did not seem to have been assessed against the skills and experiences in place at LGBCE prior to the start of the projects. The Project Manager had no prior experience in managing projects (or maintenance contracts). His performance in in this part of his role did not feed into his appraisal and so could not inform the consideration of his training needs, and it is not clear how much training or guidance was made available to him during these projects. Improvements have already been made, as for the latest major project key staff have received project management training.

The Accounting Officer and management receive limited assurance that the projects are performing as intended. The Project Manager reported to senior management during the delivery phases of both projects on progress against the project plans, but since the launch dates has not provided any further formal updates on how the projects have delivered against their objectives.

The incoming Chief Executive has plans to improve the reporting process. Showing senior management (and the Commissioners where necessary) formal performance indicators will improve the challenge and feedback that the Project Manager receives, and will also assist with knowledge sharing and capturing, and provide assurance to the Accounting Officer and senior management.

**Recommendation:** The Project Manager should agree appropriate and proportionate reporting methods and frequencies with senior management and the Commissioners.

LGBCE has implemented some good practices with regard to managing the maintenance contracts. The Project Manager has built mutually beneficial relationships with the suppliers, who have provided named contacts and continuity of key staff, with whom he maintains appropriate regular communication. The two suppliers have a good knowledge of LGBCE's business, so they are able to provide products and services tailored to LGBCE's needs.

The Project Manager ensures operational effectiveness of the portal and website by regularly monitoring supplier performance against the targets in the Service Level Agreements (SLAs). He also conducts annual performance appraisals, with feedback being provided to the suppliers' senior management, so improvements can be made where necessary. There are clear processes in place to resolve operational problems, via the SLAs. These good practices could be strengthened by reporting supplier performance to senior LGBCE management.

### Project risks

Contract and supplier risk management is particularly important for LGBCE since it relies on single suppliers to deliver key aspects of its business. Project risks were assessed at start of each project, and considered regularly during the delivery phases, although the risks associated with the ongoing maintenance contracts have not been assessed since the launch dates.

**Recommendation:** LGBCE should incorporate assessment of the ongoing contract risks into its organisational risk register to ensure that contract risks are regularly monitored and that the contract risk assessment, monitoring and reporting processes align with its wider organisational risk processes. It should also consider if the risk register is complete and up to date for all areas of the business.

The risks identified at the start of both projects fall into four broad areas:

1. Technical unreliability
2. Accuracy
3. Usability
4. Value for money

LGBCE adequately addressed the risks of inaccurate information, and had some good practices for the other risks it raised. For example it used the Government Procurement Service framework agreements to find suppliers, and sought testimonials from other organisations that had used its proposed suppliers. It made sure that the products were technically sound before commencing user testing.

It could have been stronger in certain areas:

**Technical unreliability:** LGBCE did not explicitly consider if the standard SLA terms its suppliers offered were aligned with its own needs, and therefore actually mitigated the risk of technical faults or down time, as intended. It formally considered how it would provide its main website services in

the event of significant down time, but not how it would provide digital consultation services if the portal was unavailable.

**Recommendation:** LGBCE should ensure that future SLA terms and contract incentives (such as service credit arrangements) align with its needs, and should ensure that it has adequate contingency plans to handle a supplier failure.

**Usability:** User testing was conducted only by review staff, who may not have been representative of the full range of users LGBCE was trying to encourage to use the portal, and therefore may not have identified all potential problems with the product. Informed Solutions advised LGBCE that members of the public should be involved in testing, but LGBCE decided against this in the interest of completing the project quickly. Using staff for initial user testing is a good idea, as if they have difficulties with the product then real users likely will as well. However, even if staff find a new product easy to use, this does not mean that the full range of different users will as well.

**Recommendation:** LGBCE should consider testing future developments on real users, or ensuring testers are genuinely representative of the expected user types.

**Value for money:** Although LGBCE used Government Procurement Service framework agreements to procure both the portal and the website it did not test the market in great detail, and therefore accepted the risk that other suppliers might exist who could provide more cost effective solutions. It did consider some alternative options for both projects. As the portal is a niche product, and the consultation functionality is crucial to LGBCE's operations, the other supplier that was approached could not provide exactly what LGBCE needed. There is also some value in the certainty resulting from prior knowledge of its website supplier (Squiznet hosted the previous LGBCE website), who also offered LGBCE a better financial deal than the alternative suppliers that were approached.

LGBCE is already planning to test the market before the current contracts come to an end, and plans to weigh the potential cost savings against the ability of alternative suppliers to provide the type and level of service required.

#### Delivery of the projects

The portal was delivered with a short delay, but LGBCE obtained a better product than if they had rigidly stuck to the original project plan. It recently won the Nominet Digital Innovation in Public Services award, which recognised its contribution to promoting digital democracy and political engagement, and to the use of the internet to improve access to public bodies whilst saving public money. The launch date was originally scheduled for May 2012, but this was delayed until September 2012 due to substantial additions to the design brief after the project had commenced. As an emerging technology this is not unexpected, as it was not clear what functionality was available at the start of the project.

The two projects were delivered with a small cost overrun, but received some extra functionality for this extra cost. The purchase cost of the portal was £150k, and the new website cost £59k, a total of £209k paid over four years (Figure 5). LGBCE agreed fixed-price contracts with its suppliers, so the only unexpected cost was due to some additional functionality agreed during the delivery phase of the second tranche of portal enhancements, the need for which was not originally anticipated. This functionality cost an additional £5k which is less than 3% of the total original portal and website purchase costs of £204k.

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### The portal and new website cost £209k to purchase

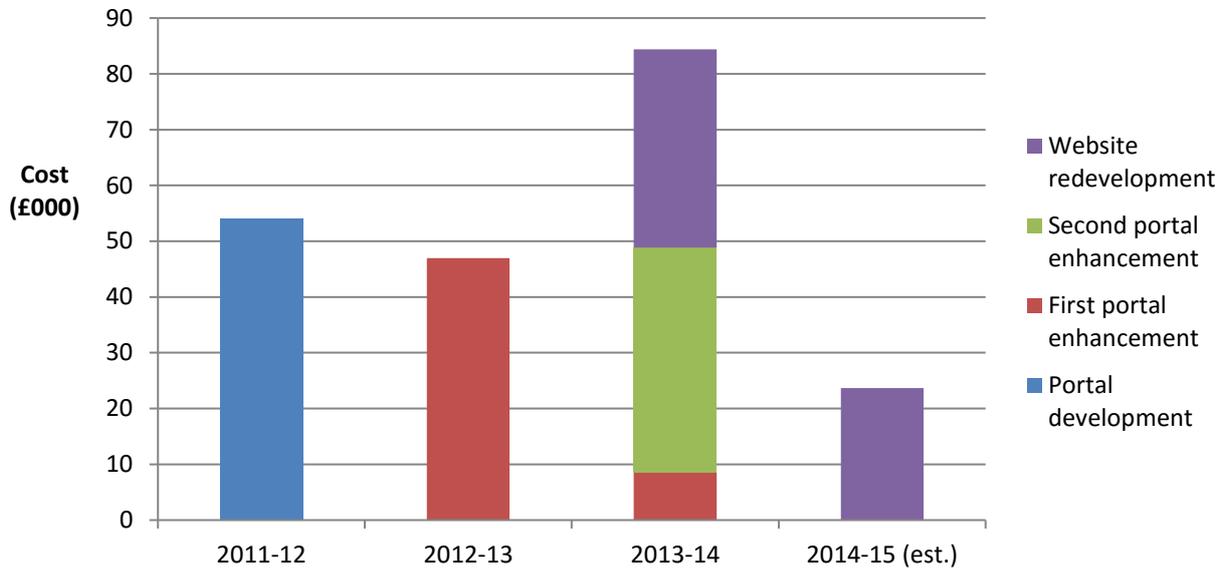


Figure 5: Portal and website purchase costs over the four years 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Source: LGBCE annual accounts, business cases and quote/change request forms.

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In addition, in the four years to the end of 2014-15, LGBCE will have spent £110k more on maintenance costs than it would have done had this project not taken place (£60k) (Figure 6). This assumes no further enhancements are undertaken during 2014-15. The portal now has annual maintenance charges of £38k, and the new website costs £24k per year to run. This total annual charge of £62k is four times the previous website annual maintenance charge of £15k.

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**The portal and new website cost an additional £110k to maintain over the four years to 2014-15**

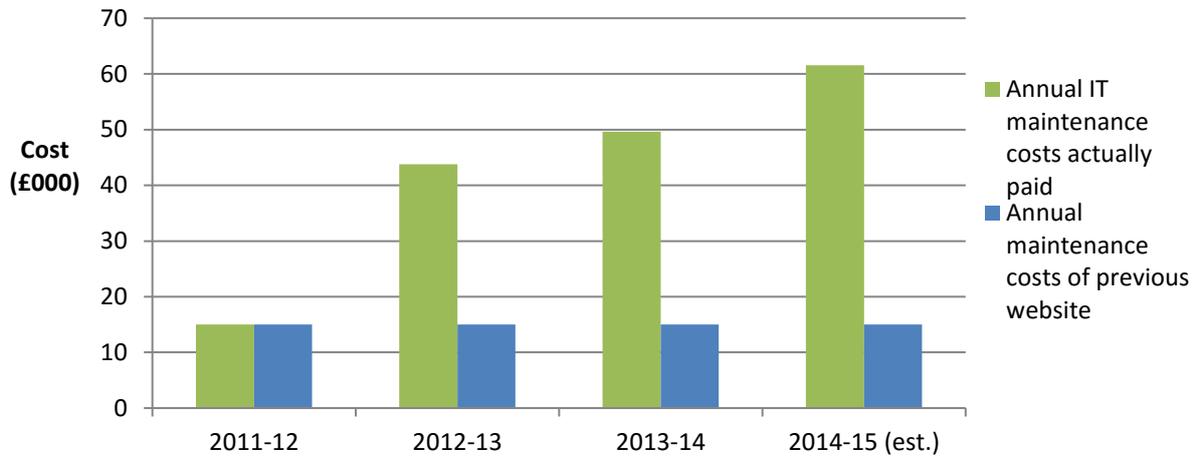


Figure 6: Comparison of what the annual website maintenance charges would have been, had the projects not gone ahead, and the website/portal maintenance charges actually paid, over the four years 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Source: LGBCE business cases, quotes and change request forms.

The total of the purchase costs and additional maintenance costs is approximately £319k over the four years to 2014-15 (Figure 7).

**LGBCE has spent £319k in purchase costs and additional maintenance costs over the four years to 2014-15**

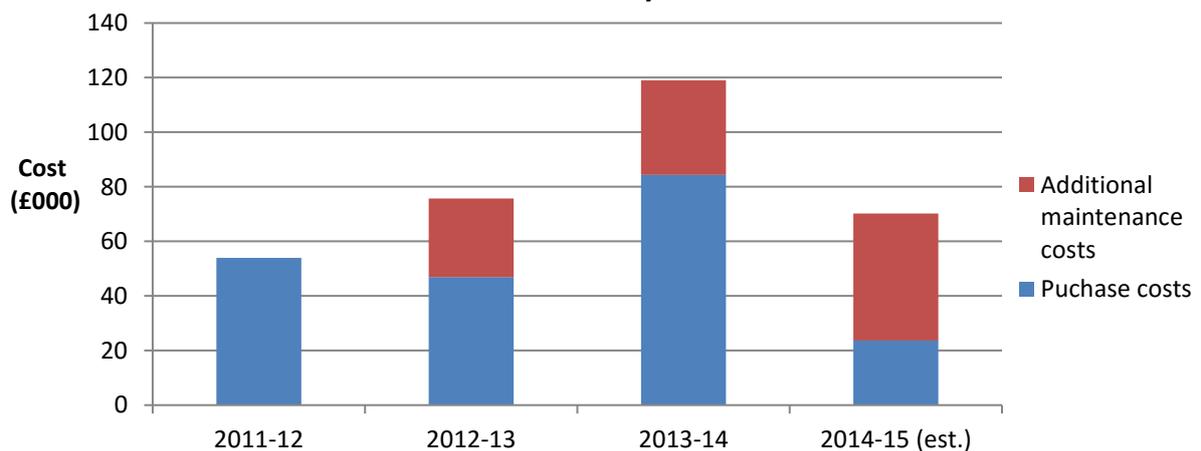


Figure 7: Total additional spend on the portal and website, over the four years 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Source: LGBCE annual accounts, business cases and quotes/change request forms.

Achievements of the portal and website

LGBCE has some data which could potentially indicate how well the portal and website have performed. This includes visitor numbers, publication dates, mapping and printing costs, time spent on the portal, customer survey data, the additional functionality of the website and data on referrals from other websites.

*Number of visits to the portal:*

While average visitor numbers fluctuate, the overall trend since the portal went live is an increase in monthly visitor numbers (Figure 8). Between April and June 2014 the portal received an average of 3040 visits per month, which is more than double the average figure for October – December 2012.

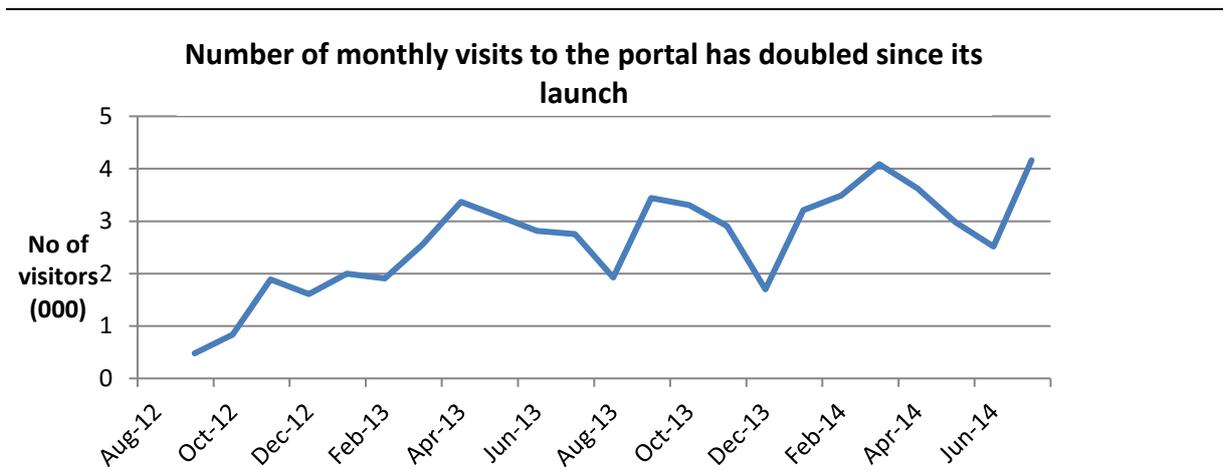


Figure 8: Number of visits to portal per month, since the portal went live in September 2012, to latest data at July 2014.

Source: Informed Solutions’ six-monthly progress reports.

*Publication of consultation documentation:*

Publication of all supporting documentation has occurred on the consultation launch dates since the portal launched in September 2012. Previously there was often a delay between a consultation launch and the availability of the supporting material, as hard copies of review documents took weeks to be printed, published and despatched to interested parties. Since the portal has been launched Informed Solutions has uploaded the documents to the portal, and its SLA sets out targets for doing so, tied into LGBCE’s review schedule. The Project Manager monitors informed Solutions’ performance against these targets, and there have been no target failures to date.

*Time spent on the portal as a proxy for ease of use:*

Portal users are spending less time on the site and viewing fewer pages per visit than they were immediately after the launch, potentially suggesting that they now find it easier to use. The Project Manager is using data on average visit length and number of pages viewed per visit to gauge how easy users are finding the portal to navigate and find relevant information on. Initially, visitors to the portal spent an average of 15 minutes on the site and were viewing around 9 pages per visit (Figure 10), but this came down to an average of 4 minutes and 3-4 pages per visit after a few months. The first portal enhancement went live in May 2013, which enabled users to draw their own boundaries on the map, and the second enhancement went live in February 2014, which made adjustments for easier use on tablet devices. The average length of a visit is now around 3 minutes and users are viewing 2-3 pages per visit.

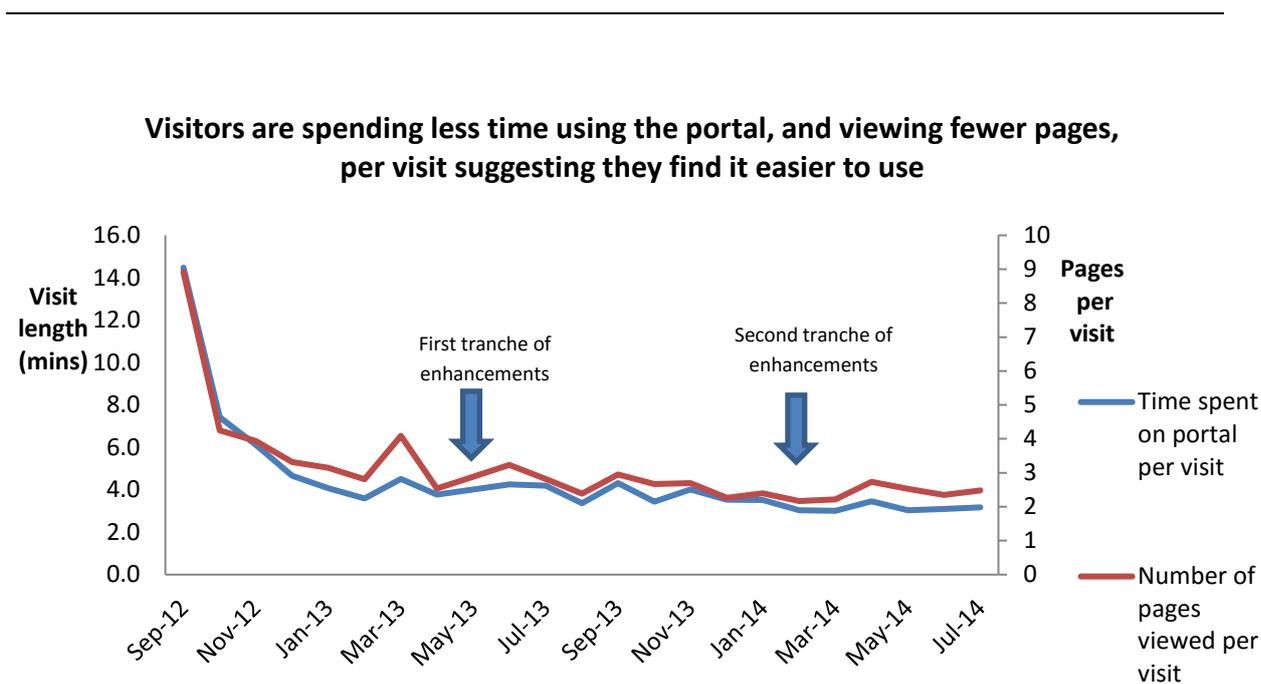


Figure 10: Average time spent on the portal per visit, and average number of portal pages visited per visit, since the portal launch date. Arrows indicate the implementation dates of the enhancements that were intended to improve ease of use.

Source: Informed Solutions’ six-monthly progress reports.

It could be that this data conveys the opposite message, that users are finding the portal increasingly difficult to use so give up before making a submission. LGBCE currently conducts only limited quantitative analysis on the responses from the customer survey that could be relevant to the objectives around ease of use. Questions regarding review processes get a low response rate compared to questions regarding the outcomes of reviews, but LGBCE does monitor the free-text comments, which sometimes give useful insights. LGBCE should consider the visit data in conjunction with the customer survey feedback, to aid interpretation of the visit data.

**Recommendation:** LGBCE should consider how it can encourage responses to questions regarding review processes, and refine the questions to separate out satisfaction levels with review outcomes

from satisfaction with review processes, and use the customer survey data in conjunction with the visit data.

*Adding functionality to the website:*

The website now contains a secure area that Commissioners can use remotely, and which will allow LGBCE to make confidential information available to parish councils and other organisations. However, this functionality is not yet in use.

**Recommendation:** LGBCE should plan how it will put the secure area into use to fully utilise the functionality of the website and obtain more value from its investment.

*Referrals from other websites:*

The projects, and ongoing contracts, complement the other stakeholder engagement activities and fit into the overall strategy. This is because they have been managed by the Communications and Public Affairs Manager rather than by an IT or project management specialist.

During the period January to July 2014, 43% of visitors to the portal entered via the LGBCE website (Figure 11). Part of the reason the website was redeveloped was to improve the channelling of users towards the portal. Unfortunately LGBCE does not have any prior data to show if the redesigned website is any more effective at channelling interested parties towards the portal than before the redesign, but it does plan to continue collecting this data to measure the success of future improvements.

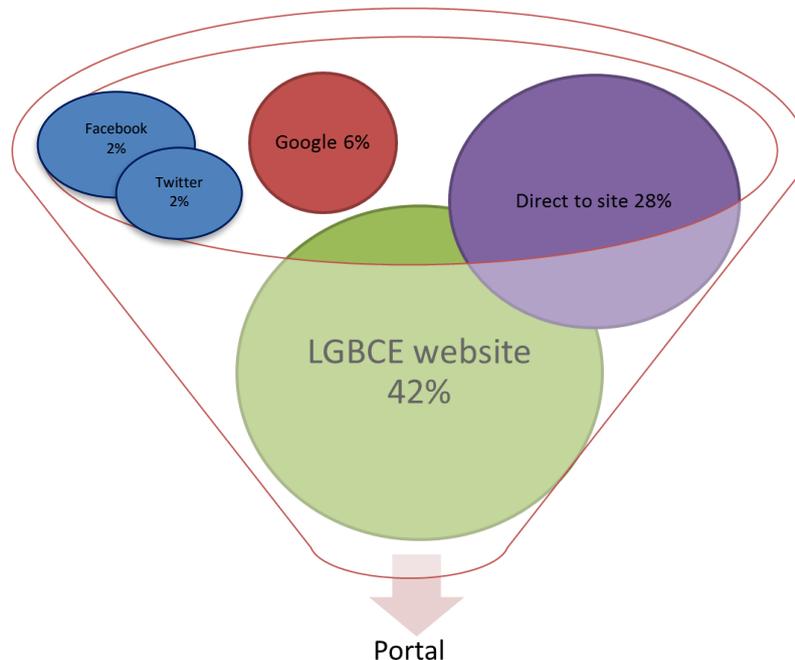


Figure 11: LGBCE’s channelling strategy, and the common websites portal visitors were referred from, between January and July 2014.

Source: Informed Solutions’ six-monthly progress report, August 2014.

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LGBCE now has plans to build its social media presence so that it can implement its channelling strategy better. It has data which shows that despite not having its own Facebook page it is receiving visits to its website and to the portal referred from Facebook. A high proportion of visits referred from Facebook end on the first page that the visitor sees, compared to visits referred from other websites. This could mean that because LGBCE does not have its own Facebook page, people are coming to its website from Facebook pages not related to LGBCE, and they are therefore not being guided to the best possible place in the LGBCE website. Building the portal and new website first was an integral part of the communications strategy, so that visitors had a useful page to land on. Now LGBCE intends to work on directing people to the portal from social media sites more effectively.

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