

Gloucestershire County Council – maintaining website availability during an emergency

Gloucestershire County Council provides services over an area of 1,025 square miles including the largest Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the country. Essentially a rural county, it has been known since Roman times for farming, forestry and horticulture with an industrial history featuring the wool trade.

Geographically, it splits into three areas, the Cotswolds, the Royal Forest of Dean and the Severn Vale with a total population of around 582,600.



The Gloucestershire County Council Website (www.gloucestershire.gov.uk) provides a comprehensive directory of information about council services in the area, from transport and environment through to education and learning. The website contains over 8,000 pages of information and is managed and updated by a team of five full time equivalent staff.

Maintaining availability

As use of the site developed and began to be a key element in delivering services to the public, the council started to experience problems with the resilience of the website.

The availability targeted by the Government, and the level of availability that the web team expected was over 99 per cent. However, it had been dipping as low as 63 per cent at times and, whilst members of staff could access the site internally, service users were increasingly facing difficulties.



The following figures were recorded by an external tracking service during May and June 2007:

Date		Availability	
From	Until	% Available	% Un-available
30 April 2007	06 May 2007	97.0	3.0
07 May 2007	13 May 2007	88.0	12.0
14 May 2007	20 May 2007	69.0	31.0
21 May 2007	27 May 2007	63.0	37.0
28 May 2007	03 June 2007	78.0	22.0
18 June 2007	24 June 2007	89.0	11.0

It was apparent that in order to fulfil the council's commitment to a high quality service, a solution to the problem had to be found. An additional driver for improvement was Gloucestershire County Council's aspiration for 'Beacon Status' for the Emergency Management Service. The Beacon Scheme is a prestigious award scheme that recognises excellence in local government and the bid included the provision of reliable access to the website in times of emergency.



Outsourcing to GOSS Interactive

In order to address this issue, Gloucestershire County Council took the decision to outsource the hosting of the website. In mid July 2007, the management and hosting of the website was taken on by GOSS Interactive, a web content management specialist with a track record of working with local authorities and public sector organisations.

GOSS Interactive had been providing the content management system for the website since April 2003 and it was felt that, not only would the hosting provide more resilient access, but it would also facilitate more efficient development and upgrade of the site – and this has proved to be the case.

Robert McCarthy, managing director, GOSS Interactive explains,

“We have been hosting mission critical transactional websites and intranets for our clients for many years. Our clients benefit from a robust managed hosting service housed within our facility that is monitored 24/7. Full security measures are implemented as well as regular reporting and analysis. Service Level Agreements offer at least 99.5% up time as standard, with more available on request.”

The user-friendly nature of iCM means that staff need little training to be able to upload and manage content. The system can, for example, copy from Microsoft Word and Excel directly to the website. In addition, it offers e-mail-to-web and mobile-to-web publishing so that content can be updated from any location at any time.

Within iCM, powerful administration tools provide a means of uploading mass web content and media files while providing a full audit trail of changes. iCM allows authority for contribution and administration to be delegated so that alternative administrators can be empowered at short notice. Web analytics, web standards and accessibility validation are also enabled via iCM. The above features were designed and developed by GOSS Interactive specifically for use by local government organisations and continue to evolve through regular updates and upgrades.

The website availability statistics recorded during the month of July show a clear difference between the time during which the site, hosted in house at Gloucestershire, was experiencing problems, and the time when the hosting was transferred to GOSS.

Date		Availability	
From	Until	% Available	% Un-available
25 June 2007	01 July 2007	86.1	13.9
02 July 2007	08 July 2007	80.6	19.4
Hosting switched to GOSS			
09 July 2007	15 July 2007	99.7	0.3
16 July 2007	22 July 2007	99.7	0.3
23 July 2007	29 July 2007	99.6	0.4
30 July 2007	05 August 2007	100.0	0.0

Just in time

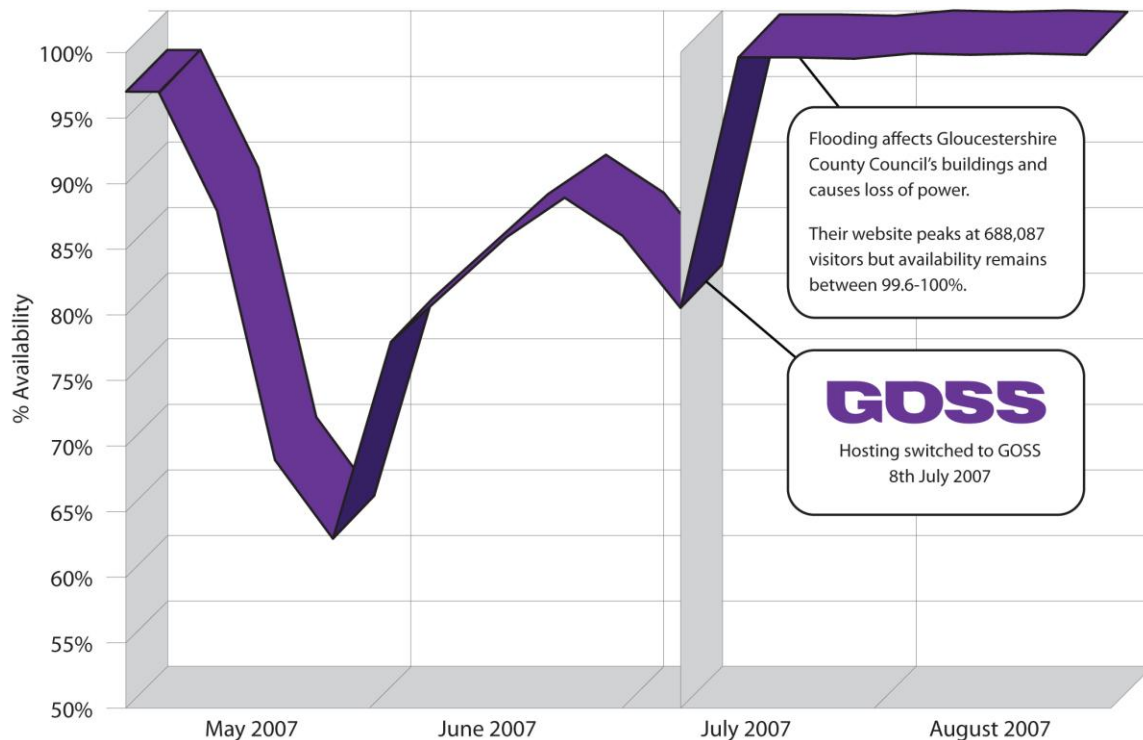


Mid July 2007, Gloucestershire experienced some severe weather which led to the worst flooding on record in the region. The flooding impacted on the entire county wrecking homes, cars and severely disrupting local services. From a local

perspective, flooding affected the County Council server cluster and caused a sustained loss of power to both the Council offices in addition to many of the local services.

During this time, the website was a critical tool for keeping the local community up to date in real time. The homepage was cleared to provide information just about the floods and communicate with both staff and the community providing instructions and information.

Gloucestershire County Council's website availability May-August 2007, Britain's wettest since records began



Angela Frodin, web manager at Gloucestershire County Council comments, ***“Had the website not been hosted externally, the flooding would have had a direct impact on its performance. The remote hosting meant that the interruption in power did not impact on the availability of the website. The web team could access and update the website remotely – even from their homes. So when staff were isolated in their own homes and unable to get into the office they were still able to ensure***



that critical information was updated and maintained offering the best possible service to the local community and staff.”

During the month of July 2007, the Gloucestershire County Council website received 688,087 unique visitors, a greater number than the population of the county, and this was during a period when the 340 public access computers were unavailable.

The number of unique visitors to the website fell slightly during August 2007 to 468,871, with the rains subsiding, and the availability was maintained as through July at values targeted by the government and expected by the web team.

Date		Availability	
From	Until	% Available	% Un-available
06 August 2007	12 August 2007	99.9	0.1
13 August 2007	19 August 2007	100.0	0.0
20 August 2007	26 August 2007	99.9	0.1

Planning for the future

In addition to maintaining consistent availability over a sustained period of time, Gloucestershire County Council has learned valuable lessons which can be applied in any future emergency situation. From having the website hosted off-site, to enabling mission critical staff to work remotely during times of crisis, technology has had a positive impact on the Council's processes for disaster planning. Angela Frodin concludes, ***“With the Website becoming the focal point for communications between the Council, its staff and service users, the role of the web team and our partners such as GOSS Interactive becomes critical.”***

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About Goss Interactive

GOSS Interactive facilitates the delivery of business goals in the online environment, enabling organisations to keep their websites agile and relevant. Through its Intelligent Content Management (iCM) software suite, GOSS Interactive provides websites and the technology to maintain them, hosting services for websites, intranets, extranets and e-commerce tools.

GOSS Interactive supplies solutions to an impressive portfolio of central and local government authorities, as well as high-tech industries and professional services including Brittany Ferries, Virgin Trains, Wrigley and GMTV.

For further information visit www.gossinteractive.com