AUDITOR GENERAL
Halifax Regional Municipality

Audit of HRM's New Website Project

January 2020

January 3, 2020

The following audit of **HRM's New Website Project**, completed under section 50(2) of the Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, is hereby submitted to the Audit and Finance Standing Committee of Regional Council.
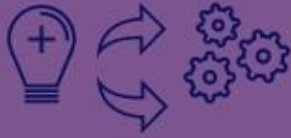
Respectfully,

Original signed by

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Auditor General
Halifax Regional Municipality

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Halifax Regional Municipality

Table of Contents

HRM's New Website Project Audit

Website launched before outstanding issues impacting functionality were addressed

- Broken links
- Project progress monitored
- Parking ticket payment problems
- Missing pages
- Vendor selection fair

www.halifax.ca

Parking ticket payment feature not adequatley tested

- Testing was limited
- Did not confirm payments processed properly
- Did not test large number of transactions

Planning and Monitoring

- Good job of planning
  - Identified roles and responsibilities
  - Documented potential risks
- Monitored project progress
  - Regular reporting

Background

- 2014 – HRM decided new website needed
- $2.5 million approved – 2015-16 Capital Budget
- Launch Date – www.halifax.ca – June 28, 2017

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Conclusion

HRM's new website was launched before outstanding issues, which impacted the website's functionality, were addressed. While HRM effectively managed many aspects of the website project, management did not resolve important issues before the new website went live. Management told us they believed it was necessary to get public feedback by launching the new site. Known outstanding issues included: problems with the online parking payment feature, broken links, missing pages, and problems with website forms.

HRM did a good job of planning the new website project and project committees regularly monitored progress. However, the steering committee was not involved in the final decision to launch the website; the Program Sponsor responsible for the project approved this.

Key Take-aways

- Outstanding issues at website go-live
    - Parking ticket payment feature not adequately tested
    - Broken links, missing pages
- Good job of planning new website project
    - Clearly-defined program goals, scope, and roles and responsibilities
    - Identified project risks at the start of the program
- Regularly monitored progress
- Website vendor selection process fair, consistent with HRM Procurement Policy

Audit Results

Website Launched with Outstanding Issues

HRM's new website went live in June 2017 with outstanding issues which management did not consider significant enough to delay the site's launch. However, these issues impacted functionality and user experience. Paying a parking ticket did not work as expected and many pages had links which did not work.

HRM user testing identified issues

Three business areas with significant website content identified issues to be corrected before the website launched. The concerns included:

- broken links to other HRM web pages
- missing pages
- online fillable forms yet to be completed
- images not uploading

Two senior managers had not signed off website testing for their area when the website launched.

HRM's Information, Communication and Technology division (ICT) could not confirm whether the issues identified during testing were addressed before the website launch date. Staff

> ### *User Acceptance Testing*
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> Business areas with significant website content were to test the following before the website went live.
>
> - website is functional and search feature works
> - web forms work as expected
> - confirming links take user to correct web page
> - web content is accurate
>   - no grammar or spelling mistakes
>   - pdf links are correct
>   - images are correct
>   - basic navigation works

who completed testing told us some issues were resolved while other concerns remained. Additionally, business unit staff told us there were still issues with broken links and difficulty finding information on the website in 2019.

ICT address broken link issues based on complaints received. Management told us they recently started checking for broken links by running software used to detect potential problems.

Steering committee not involved in final approval of website launch

The project steering committee did not sign off on the launch of the new website. The Project Sponsor, a member of HRM senior management responsible for the project, approved the website to go live. The Project Sponsor told us the outstanding issues were not considered critical to delay the website launch. HRM also wanted feedback from external website users rather than internal users only. While this is a reasonable approach at some point in new website development, the HRM site had issues which impacted functionality. We expected many of these to be resolved before going live. We also expected the steering committee, which made key

decisions throughout the project, to approve the website launch, particularly given the significance of the project to HRM and the outstanding issues after HRM staff tested the new website.

Parking ticket payment service not adequately tested

The new website launched without adequately testing the parking ticket payment process from beginning to end.

- Did not get report to reconcile tickets with payments processed
- List of paid tickets was incomplete
- Did not test large volume of transactions

Errors identified during ticket payment testing were not fixed before the website went live. These included credit card processing errors which prevented payments from going through.

Management told us HRM plans to replace the existing parking ticket payment system; they expect the new system to be operational in 2020.

Recommendation 1

HRM should design and execute adequate testing plans for its new parking ticket payment system.

Management Response

Agreed. The implementation of the new parking payment solution includes a comprehensive end to end test plan with clearly defined outcome to validate the expected operation of the payment solution.

New Website Project was Effectively Planned, Progress Regularly Monitored

ICT adequately planned HRM's new website project

We found ICT effectively planned the website project. Goals, objectives, and scope were established. Roles and responsibilities for the website project governance team were clearly defined in the project charter and possible risks were identified.

We found the contract with the website vendor included terms and conditions to protect HRM.

Website project regularly monitored

Despite the issues noted with the website launch, we found project progress was monitored. The project manager prepared weekly progress reports detailing project status, issues, timelines, and cost. The committees responsible for project oversight reviewed these progress reports.

Project objectives established

HRM established five objectives for its new website. Two related to developing and implementing a new site and are mostly complete. Management told us the remaining objectives are part of upcoming work related to online services and ongoing website management.

Website Project Vendor Selection Process

Selection of website vendor fair and consistent with HRM Procurement Policy

In 2016, HRM selected a vendor to develop a new website, as well as host and manage the website once it was up and running. We reviewed the request for proposal process and found it was fair and consistent with HRM's Procurement Policy.

ICT consultant selection process

For various website-related projects, ICT selected consultants from a standing offer generated from a 2014 request for qualification to provide professional services for ICT projects. In one instance, ICT awarded a contract to a vendor without giving other standing offer consultants opportunities to bid on the work. ICT staff told us the consultant was selected for its knowledge of the project. This procurement did not follow a competitive process and may not have represented the best value-for-money. Other consultants may have had similar knowledge but did not have an opportunity to bid on the project. During our 2018 Procurement Audit, we found instances when a competitive process was not followed. Procurement staff told us this practice has been discontinued. The revised Procurement Policy does not permit ICT to select vendors from a separate list.

> ### *Website Vendor Responsibilities*
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> In October 2016, HRM signed a master service agreement with the vendor to:
>
> - Develop a flexible, robust and easy-to-use website
> - Host, and make available, the website in a secure environment
> - Manage website content after launch

Performance Targets Established, Some Monitored

ICT monitored vendor operating performance after the website was launched. The contract between HRM and the vendor identified four service targets for the new website. Two of the four targets were adequately monitored and HRM reduced payments to the vendor for periods the targets were not met. ICT began monitoring the third target five months after the website launch date. Management could not give us a reason for the five-month delay. The fourth target was not monitored.

HRM's contract required the website vendor to provide HRM with two performance reports after the website launched. Management received:

1. Annual payment card industry report – This confirms HRM has internal controls in its payment services to secure card holder's data.
2. Monthly service management reports – These reports describe online service outages and website performance measures.

Other Matters

The audit also dealt with other matters included in an appendix to this report which will not be released publicly. It will be presented in-camera to the Audit and Finance Standing Committee.

Background

In 2014, the Municipality felt a new website was needed. Management identified 16 projects to update HRM's online presence and better serve citizens and businesses. In 2015, a program charter and governance model were developed to help the project stay on track and ensure a successful outcome. A program office was also established to manage the project.

In the 2015-16 capital budget, Regional Council approved $2.5 million for the new website. Ultimately, management decided not to proceed with one of the 16 projects and told us there are plans to complete the two remaining projects over the next two fiscal years.   Work completed to late 2019 totaled $1.9 million.

The new website (www.halifax.ca) was launched on June 28, 2017.

In 2019, HRM did not exercise its option to renew the contract with the website vendor.

About the Audit

We completed a performance audit of HRM's management of its new website project.

The audit objective was to determine if HRM effectively managed the new website project from planning, through implementation and operational phase.

We developed criteria for this audit. These were discussed with, and accepted as appropriate by, HRM management.

1. Program goals and objectives should be established.
2. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined.
3. Program scope should be adequately defined and monitored.
4. Program risks should be identified and adequately addressed.
5. Vendor selection processes should be fair and consistent with HRM procurement policy.
6. Vendor contract terms should protect public interest.
7. Contract terms should be adequately monitored to ensure vendor performance issues are identified and managed.
8. Website performance targets should be established and monitored.
9. The new website project should meet established success evaluation criteria.

Our audit period covered the start of the new website project in 2014 to current operations up to October 2019.

Our audit approach included: reviewing internal policies, procedures and programs; interviewing management; and examining documentation.

This audit was conducted in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001 Direct Engagements published by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada.

We apply CPA Canada's Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1. Our staff comply with the independence and ethical requirements of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Nova Scotia Code of Conduct.

Appendix 1 – Recommendations and Management Responses

Recommendation 1

HRM should design and execute adequate testing plans for its new parking ticket payment system.

Management Response

Agreed. The implementation of the new parking payment solution includes a comprehensive end to end test plan with clearly defined outcome to validate the expected operation of the payment solution.

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