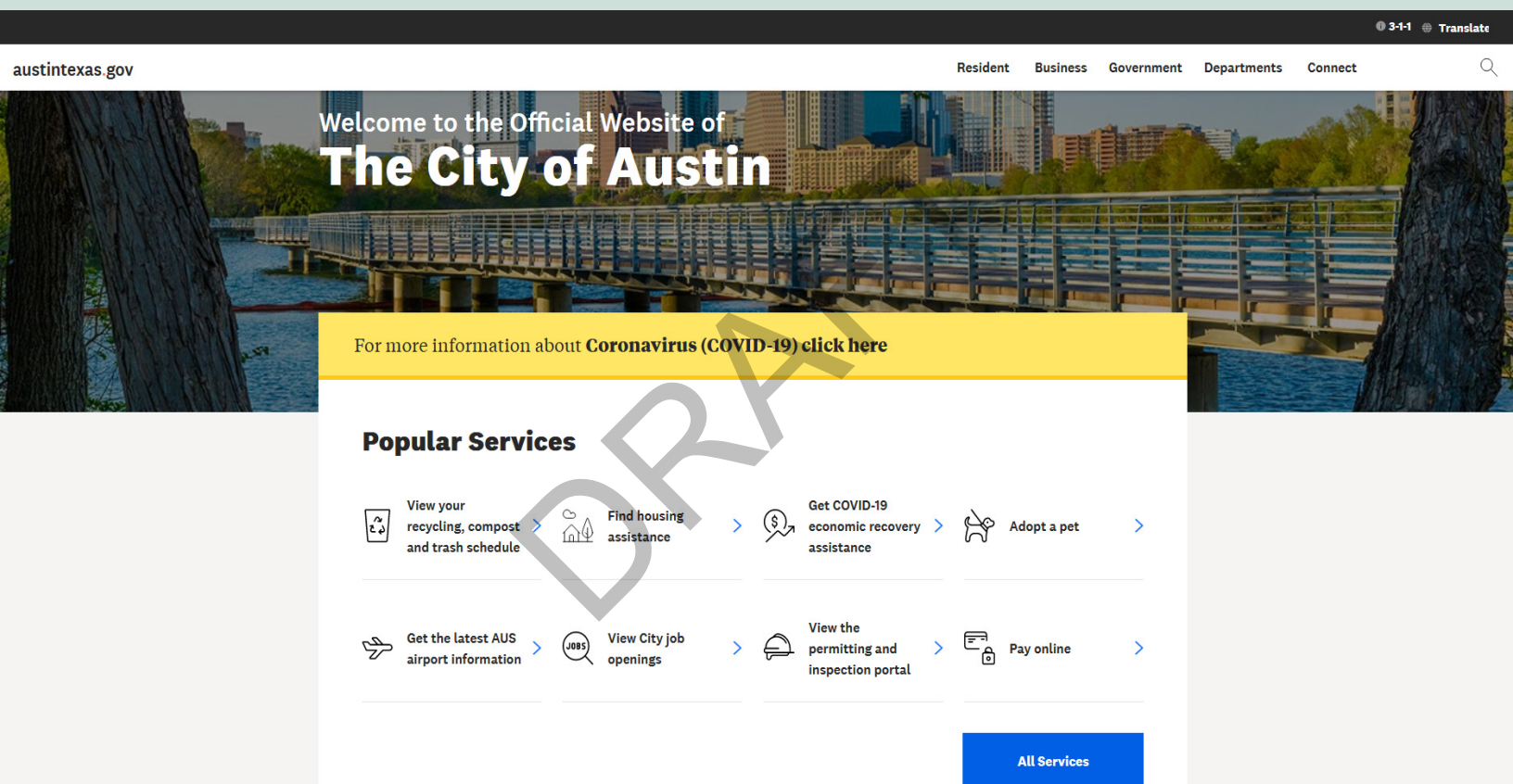


Special Report

Online Resources Follow-Up

May 2022



This is a special report to follow up on six recommendations from two audits we issued to address concerns about web structure and online access to city services. The City has taken many actions to address online services offered to the public, such as making payments. We found that more work needs to be done to make sure services offered online are quick to find and easy to use for people of all abilities.

Contents

Objective and Background.....	2
What We Learned and What the City Has Done.....	3
Looking Ahead.....	6
Appendix A - Findings Issued.....	7
Appendix B - Implementation Status of Recommendations.....	8
Scope and Methodology.....	9

Cover: City of Austin website, <https://www.austintexas.gov/>

Objective

The objective of this special report was to follow up on the City's actions to implement recommendations from the AustinGO: Website Governance and Management and Online Access to City Services audits.

Background

We conducted two audits related to online resources in 2013 and 2017. The specific topics we focused on were related to the web structure and content management of the City's external website ([austintexas.gov](https://www.austintexas.gov/)), and online access to city services. We focused on these topics because they were important to community discussions and could have significant impact if not working well.

We identified several areas of needed improvement in these audits. Some common areas of concern included a need to develop a plan to make sure web content is designed and managed to allow people of all abilities to find and use City services offered online. A list of all findings from these audits is included in Appendix A.

If you are interested in following the City's progress to implement recommendations from audits on other topics, you can visit the [City's open data portal page about audit recommendations](#).

What We Learned Summary

We issued six recommendations through the online resources audits from 2013 and 2017. We verified the City implemented three of these recommendations, and three are underway. Although the City has made improvements to services offered online, more work needs to be done to make these services quick to find and easy to use for people of all abilities.

Exhibit 1: City has implemented three recommendations related to online resources

AustinGO: Website Governance and Management Audit



1 recommendation implemented



1 recommendation underway

Online Access to City Services Audit



2 recommendations implemented



2 recommendations underway

Source: Auditor analysis of CTM's actions to address prior audit recommendations, April 2022

What has the City done to address the issues we identified?

The City has taken many actions to address online services offered to the public, such as signing up or paying for services. However, more work needs to be done to make sure services offered online are quick to find and easy to use for people of all abilities.

AustinGO: Website Governance and Management, August 2013

In the 2013 audit, we found the City has started several initiatives to offer services online, such as mobile applications to provide City services and a data portal where the public can view information on the number of City services used or provided. However, City management had not approved a Citywide strategy or designed the City's website to offer services online to people of all abilities, as directed by [2011 Council resolution](#).

The City implemented one recommendation and one is underway with an alternative solution.



We recommended the City:

- Develop, document, and implement a strategic framework and an implementation plan
- Ensure that a complete web governance structure is developed, documented, implemented, and monitored to address gaps

In 2020, we confirmed the first recommendation was implemented. The City Manager's Office approved a Citywide strategy and created a plan that included steps, clear roles, and duties to offer services online per 2011 Council resolution. Our follow up work focused on what department management has done to implement the second recommendation. Even though Communications and Technology Management (CTM) management said this recommendation was outdated, they agreed the intent of the recommendation was still relevant.

In 2020, CTM management upgraded the City's external website to improve the web design and how online services are offered. CTM developed guidance on site management, security, privacy, access, and writing style. We reviewed current guidance, but did not find any information within the guidance on how the department plans to monitor the City's website to address gaps as recommended.

CTM management said they are working to address gaps by using software tools to improve monitoring efforts. City executives also approved an agreement between CTM and Communications and Public Information Office (CPIO) to outline roles and duties for the City's digital services program. This program was created to improve the City's public and employee websites and increase teamwork between City departments. Currently, City staff meet twice a month to discuss website content and ways to improve.

The City has made progress to address the issues noted in this audit, but departments are still working on creating a website that is easy to use for people of all abilities. The City can continue to improve guidance to ensure the current website is monitored and easy to use.

Online Access to City Services, October 2017

In the 2017 audit, we found the City offered the public online transactions ranging from information downloads to online payments. However, barriers prevented departments from offering some services, and there was still no citywide strategy for offering services online.

We recommended the City:

- Develop and implement a strategic plan for offering online services
- Assign responsibility for the City's website
- Work with departments to increase the number of services offered online and ensure they are quick and easy to find
- Work with stakeholders to implement a plan to ensure the City's online services are accessible for people with all abilities

The first and second recommendations were implemented by adopting a [strategic plan](#), updating service requests, and creating guidance to improve online service offerings. CTM management said online services are tracked and the total number of online services done can be viewed in the City's open data portal by the public. City staff use SiteImprove to track website improvements and Google analytics to monitor use of online service offerings.

The City also created a group that includes staff from the City Manager's Office, CPIO, and CTM to coordinate resources and make sure website content looks the same across different City departments.

The third and fourth recommendations are underway. CTM launched a paperless initiative to inventory online services in fiscal year 2019. CPIO monitors the external website to see which webpages have the most visitors. These metrics are available on the City's open data portal

The City implemented two recommendations from this audit and two are underway.



that shows the number of online services offered online and the number of online services improved to make them easy to use for people of all abilities.

Federal law requires online information to be easy to use and locate for people of all abilities with the use of four principles below.

1. Perceivable – A user can spot the key information and data shown on a webpage such as links, lists, pictures – by sight or with the use of a tool or device to assist people of all abilities.
2. Operable – Components of a website allow users to easily navigate content.
3. Understandable – The information and how a website is setup must be easy for all users to understand.
4. Robust – A website must be usable with current and future tools or devices to assist people of all abilities.

Similar to the 2017 audit team, we used these guidelines to retest websites reviewed in the original audit to determine how easy it was to find and use the 13 popular online services offered¹. When we retested the City's website, we found that all online services retested can be done online compared to 75% in 2017. We also found that some of the online services still are not easy to find or use. While the City's website still comes up short in meeting the requirements of three of four principles including perceivable, operable, and understandable, some improvements have been made to make it usable with current and future tools or devices to assist people with all abilities. The only transaction retested that met all accessibility guidelines was the Human Resources job application portal compared to none in 2017. Exhibit 2 shows the 2017 test results compared to the 2022 retest results.

Exhibit 2: Accessibility and ease of use 2017 test results compared to 2022 retest results

Web Content Management Principle	2017 Test	2022 Test	Improvement Made
Perceivable	68.75%	61.54%	No
Operable	93.75%	89.74%	No
Understandable	72.22%	71.79%	No
Robust	66.67%	84.62%	Yes

Source: Auditor analysis accessibility and ease of use 2017 test results compared to 2022, April 2022

¹ The 13 popular online services offered include the City's main webpage, parks activity registration, pay utility bill, pay municipal court, vaccine registration, submit police report, file complaint with 311, apply for building permit, apply for City job, adopt a pet, apply for homebuyer assistance, view recycling schedule, and pay library fine.

The City has made progress on addressing the issues noted in this audit, but full implementation of last two recommendations is still underway. The City can continue to improve the number of services offered online to ensure they are quick to find and easy to use. The City can also continue to work with stakeholders to implement a plan to ensure the City's online services are accessible for people with all abilities.

See Appendix A for more detail on the findings we issued as part of these audits. See Appendix B for more detail on the recommendations we issued as part of these audits, including the implementation status of the recommendations.

Looking Ahead

The City has taken many actions to improve online services offered to the public by adopting a strategic plan, creating guidance, and updating online service request forms in response to past audit recommendations. As the City continues to improve services offered online, the implementation of the remaining recommendations is important. The City must ensure that services offered online are quick to find and easy to use for people of all abilities. This will help reduce the number of steps to complete a service offered online and make it easier for people of all abilities to sign up or pay for a City service offered online.

We will continue to follow-up on these important recommendations until they are fully implemented.

Appendix A - Findings Issued

AustinGO: Website Governance and Management, August 2013	
Finding 1	The lack of a defined strategy is impacting the City's ability to successfully implement the Open Government initiative, as directed by Council resolution.
Finding 2	Governance of the City's website does not ensure that all City web content is managed in accordance with best practices, which may impact the quality of the information provided to citizens.

Online Access to City Services, October 2017	
Finding 1	The City offers residents online transactions ranging from information downloads to online payments. However, barriers prevent some departments from offering services such as online registrations and applications, and there is no Citywide strategy for offering services online.
Finding 2	Austin residents can perform the same basic online transactions as residents in other cities, although finding the services on the City's website may require additional steps to complete.
Finding 3	The AustinTexas.gov website does not meet accessibility guidelines that would help users of all abilities find and use online City services.

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Appendix B - Implementation Status of Recommendations

We issued six recommendations from our online resource audits. We verified that the City implemented three of these recommendations and three are underway.

AustinGO: Website Governance and Management, August 2013		
Recommendation 1	The City Manager's Office should develop, document, and implement a strategic framework and an implementation plan, which includes milestones and clear roles and responsibilities, to effectively implement open government as per City Council resolution 20111208-074.	Implemented in January 2018 and verified by auditors in 2020
Recommendation 2	The City Manager's Office should ensure that a complete web governance structure is developed, documented, implemented, and monitored to address current gaps.	Underway with alternative solution

Online Access to City Services, October 2017		
Recommendation 1	To ensure there is a coordinated effort to offer City services online, the Chief Information Officer should work with the City Manager to develop and implement a strategic plan for offering online services.	Implemented
Recommendation 2	To better coordinate the City's resources and improve consistency, the City Manager should work with the Chief Information Officer, the Chief Communications Director, and other key stakeholders to assign responsibility for the City's website content and design to a single individual or group.	Implemented
Recommendation 3	To take advantage of reduced costs of service, the Chief Information Officer (or other designated officer if the second recommendation has been implemented) should work with departments to ensure that the City offers as many city services online as practical by developing an inventory of services that should be offered online. In addition, the City should ensure popular online services are quick and easy for residents to find using the website's search functions.	Underway
Recommendation 4	The Chief Information Officer (or other designated officer if the second recommendation has been implemented) should work with the Chief Communications Director and the ADA Program Manager to develop and implement a detailed plan to ensure that the city's online services are accessible for people of all abilities. This includes webpages that are created for the City by third party consultants and contractors.	Underway

Scope

The project scope included actions taken by City Management to respond to the recommendations in the Online Access to City Services and AustinGO: Website Governance and Management audits.

Methodology

To complete this special report, we performed the following steps:

- Communicated with City staff in Communications and Technology Management, Communications and Public Information Office, and the City Manager's Office
- Reviewed City strategic plans, performance reporting tool, memos to Council, budget information, and other relevant documents
- Reviewed 13 department and office websites or webpages to determine what services are offered online or through mobile apps and tested for accessibility
- Evaluated City actions to respond to relevant recommendations

Audit Standards

This project is considered a non-audit project under Government Auditing Standards and was conducted in accordance with the ethics and general standards (Chapters 1-5).

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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