GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION PAPER – "e - GOV @ LOCAL – TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR LOCAL e - GOVERNMENT"

1   SUMMARY

1.1   This report summarises the content of the Government's Consultation Paper on the proposed National Strategy for Local e-Government and contains the proposed response which has to be submitted by 28 June 2002.

2   INTRODUCTION

2.1   The Consultation Paper, which was published jointly by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Local Government Association, aims to provide:-

- A central/local vision of e-government
- A clear route map to its delivery
- A strategy for the use of Local Government On-Line funding.

3   DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

Main Content

3.1   The Government defines e-government as "exploiting the power of information and communications technology to help transform the accessibility, quality and cost-effectiveness of public services and to help revitalise the relationship between customers and citizens and the public bodies who work on their behalf." E-government is therefore seen as more than technology or the internet; the Government believes it is about citizens and customers being at the centre of everything a Council does so that service access, delivery and democratic accountability are organised around them.

3.2   Local e-government will help make local services:
- More accessible
- More convenient
- More responsive,
- More cost-effective.

It will help to make the organisations that provide those services:
- More open
- More accountable

- More inclusive, and
- Better able to lead their community.

3.3   To achieve this, the Government believes that local public services of the future will look different. They will be:-

- Joined-up in ways that make sense to the customer
- Accessible at times and places most convenient to the customer
- Delivered or supported electronically, facilitating faster, more reliable and better value services
- Delivered jointly, where appropriate, by local and regional partnerships and connected to a national infrastructure
- Delivered seamlessly, so that customers should not be asked to provide the same information more than once and service providers are better able to identify, reach and meet the needs of service users
- Open and accountable, so that information will be freely and easily available; complaints will be easy to make, and responded to quickly and effectively; the citizens will be able to participate effectively in local decision-making
- Used by e-citizens through effective promotion of electronic services, information and access to technology (including the internet).

3.4   These seven factors represent a critical test of the success of local e-government.

3.5   The consultation paper recognises that this cannot be delivered by individual organisations acting alone. It requires partnership at local, regional and national level, and between local and central agencies. The Government believes that Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) have a key role to play. LSPs require central government departments and agencies as well as local authorities and others, to commit to partnership working, which should be within a framework that encourages the development of local e-government to deliver joined-up, high quality services.

3.6   Local authorities need to:-

- Exploit the opportunity with e-technology to transform the quality and cost-effectiveness of their own services, and to align and integrate them with those of other public and community bodies.
- Work with education, regeneration and community organisations to ensure that their citizens have access to not only the technology and skills, but also confidence to use it.
- Work together in local partnership, particularly in areas of two tier Local Government.

- Collect and manage information in ways that make it possible successfully to build integrated local e-government.

3.7   The consultation paper then goes on to highlight the progress that has already been made. All local authorities in England have prepared and submitted their Implementing e-Government (IEG) statements. Based on these statements, the Government expects local authorities to reach 45% of availability of electronic services by March 2003, 73% by March 2004 and 100% by the end of 2005.

3.8   The Government's strategy has three key parts:-

- The 'e-organisation'
- Joining it up – priority outcomes
- The national framework.

3.9   At the centre of the strategy is the 'e-organisation'. The blocks making up the 'e-organisation' are grouped into five themes; and these are transactions, access channels, enablers, e-Business and organisational development. The government believes that the themes are inter-related, and that whilst individual organisations may not need to implement all elements, it is important that initiatives are taken within this overall framework.

3.10   The diagram below encapsulates and explains this:-
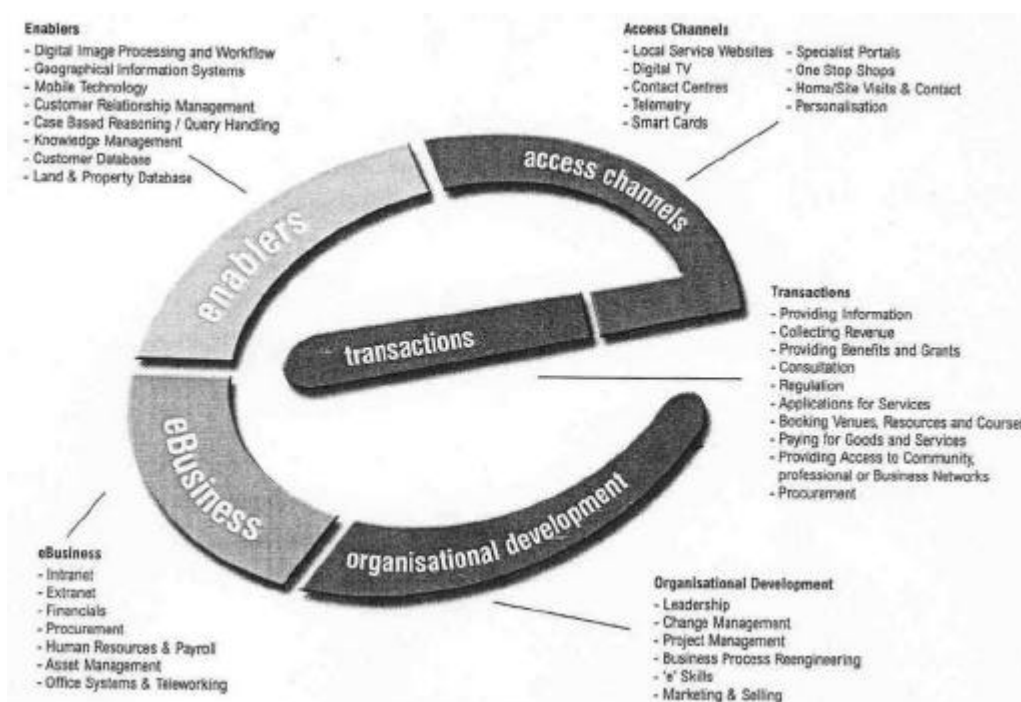
The government proposes to sponsor research in nine key areas identified in the diagram to support future developments.

3.11 The consultation document then goes on to identify a single set of priorities for local services which cover education, health and social care, crime reduction, transport, employment, environment, e-citizens and e-democracy, along with the cross-cutting outcomes of customer service, social inclusion, democracy and accountability. The Government believes that defining priority services does not pre-empt local community consultation and priority setting and the work of local strategic partnerships. Instead, it provides a basis for national direction and assessment of progress and identification of areas of potential joined-up initiatives where the application of e-government could deliver significant benefits to customers and communities. Again, the government proposes to sponsor some national projects for local authority involvement in the priority areas.

3.12 The model is completed by placing the e-organisation and its priority outcomes within a national framework of:-

- Standards - which will enable public services to develop integrated e-government solutions by establishing a comprehensive set of technical and non-technical guidance.
- National infrastructure – which are the components to be developed either centrally or locally which remove barriers to local government development and facilitate joined-up government.
- Partnerships – as the full benefits of e-government cannot be realised by local authorities working in isolation.

3.13 The Government is also reviewing the Best Value Performance Indicator 157 which shows the number of types of interactions that are enabled for electronic delivery as a percentage of the types of interactions that are legally permissible for electronic delivery. The Government seeks views on whether the indicator should be supplemented by additional measures to reflect the quality of electronic services, their take-up and customer satisfaction of the outcome.

3.14 The measurement of progress in implementing e-government will be integrated within the Corporate Performance Assessment framework being developed for local authorities by the Audit Commission. The consultation document states that it will be difficult to recognise an Authority as high performing or striving to improve its services which is not also implementing e-government in ways that support excellence in service delivery combined with better choice and access.

3.15 The consultation paper considers the funding required for delivering local e-government. Whilst it will require significant investment of time

and money, the return on the investment will be more accessible, convenient, responsive and cost effective services as a result of streamlining of service delivery and administrative processes. However, in order to realise these benefits, organisations need to invest in leadership skills, core IT capacity, in improving the integrity and compatibility of data and re-organising systems and processes.

3.16   In terms of the specific funding available from the Government, all Local Authorities will receive £200,000 in 2002/3 to pump-prime e-government plans subject to the satisfactory completion of the IEG statement. A similar sum will be available in 2003/4, subject to the demonstration of satisfactory progress against the IEG plan. In addition, partnerships of local authorities and/or local strategic partnerships can bid for additional funding by providing details of benefits that they will obtain through collaborative working and arrangements to manage joint developments and services. £25 million will be available in 2002/3, and it is anticipated that this will increase to around £50 million in 2003/4.

4   OFFICER COMMENTS

4.1   The consultation paper has been published two years after the government announced its commitment to make all services electronically available, legally permitting, by 2005. Whilst it would have been preferable for it to have been available sooner, it does provide a framework for development and the government proposes to sponsor research projects into priority areas of work. However, the selection of these and their timing is key, given the targets that are supposed to be met.

4.2   The development of a national framework of standards, including those in the areas of data sharing and security will be welcome. Again, however, the guidelines for local authority websites are still the subject of consultation and this means that it is difficult for authorities with limited resources to develop their websites too far in case they do not meet the standards when published.

4.3   The review of the best value performance indicator 157 is welcome as a clearer definition is required on what is meant by, and then measuring, the availability of services on-line. The proposed supplementary measures to the indicator about customer take-up and satisfaction need to be clearly defined and straightforward to measure. As part of the development of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework, the government aims to integrate the measurement of progress in implementing e-government, but this needs further explanation as to implementation.

4.4   The strategy also needs to take account of the fact that not everyone has access to the web, and this could be the case for those who use Council services the most, such as the elderly. However, putting services on-line should also improve the delivery of services by other means, for example, by having information readily available when dealing with residents on the telephone.

4.5   Finally, there is too, the issue of resourcing. As outlined below, local government to date has received a relatively small proportion of the funding under this initiative. For any strategy to be effective, it needs to be properly resourced.

5   RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

5.1   The government believes that whilst there will be initial start up costs, the long term should bring improved, more cost-effective services. However, local government as a whole has received only £350 million of the £1 billion made available across government for e-initiatives, and the requirement to achieve the e-government targets in a small district with limited resources and staffing is challenging.

5.2   This Council has been successful in achieving the £200,000 funding in 2002/3 and an update on the implementation of the IEG plan will be reported in the next cycle of meetings, as progress needs to be made to secure similar funding in 2003/4.

6   RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee RESOLVES that the officer comments outlined in the report form the basis of the Council's response to the consultation paper, subject to Members' comments.

John Honey
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Background Papers:
"e-gov@local" consultation paper

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