IMPLEMENTING ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT – COUNCILLOR WEB PAGES

1   SUMMARY

1.1   This report addresses the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) e-government requirement R6, which relates to the provision of Councillor web pages.

2   BACKGROUND

2.1   Requirement R6 is one of the 54 e-government priority outcomes to be achieved by the Authority against which the allocation of future IEG Capital funding will be assessed and released.

2.2   A report detailing the nature and overall status of the 54 requirements was considered by the Committee at its last meeting when the Implementing Electronic Government Statement (IEG4) was approved for submission to the ODPM.

2.3   The specific definition associated with requirement R6 is as follows:-

> "Providing every Councillor with the option to have an easy–to-manage set of public web pages (for community leadership purposes) that is either maintained for them, or that they can maintain themselves."

2.4   In addition to the specific definition, Improvement and Development Agency guidance indicates that Councillor web pages can be operated as a separate system or as part of the main Council website. They can also be operated as part of a community portal. If Councillors are to update their own content, a secure login must be provided. Normal content might include contact details, a diary showing times of surgeries, an "ask your Councillor" style discussion forum, and the ability for the Councillor to upload articles they feel would be of community interest. Care should also be taken to ensure content uploaded by Councillors adheres to Members' Codes of Conduct and corporate guidelines on website style and content.

2.5   The guidance also states that in two tier areas, the two tier structure should be explained on the Councillor web pages so that citizens understand which Councillor (District or County) to contact on which issues. As many Councillors in two tier areas are both a District Councillor and a County Councillor, Counties and Districts should collaborate in these cases to provide either a single web space for the Councillor, or at least to link his/her County page with his/her District page.

3   DISCUSSION

3.1   The comment against Requirement R6 in the Council's IEG4 Statement is as follows:-

"The options are currently being evaluated. These include use of the Authority's own website; consideration of the results of the feasibility study carried out by the Essex Online Partnership; and the pilot using www.councilloruk.co.uk being carried out by Colchester Borough Council."

External Solutions

3.2   There are a number of solutions that should be capable of meeting Requirement R6. The Essex Online Partnership has currently considered three external project options, summarised below:-

The Councillor.info Project

3.3   This project is an initiative from the Local Government Association (LGA), which aims to make it easy for local Councillors themselves to set up and maintain a web presence. There are currently over 600 Councillors in 12 "pilot" Councils participating in the project. It is considered that councillor.info provides a proven low risk method of providing Councillors with their own easy to manage website. The solution requires little effort to set up and, with the backing of the LGA and a firm contractual framework to minimise its misuse, should be mostly risk-free.

3.4   Councillor.info is the most expensive of possible external solutions. Participating Councils must sign-up to the project to provide a website for every Councillor regardless of whether or not they want to use the facility. There would be a one-off set up fee of £975 (£25 Per Councillor) and an annual charge of £9,360. Reductions would be available should a number of Councils across Essex choose to join in partnership. Maximum reductions are achieved with five or more partners, when the one-off set-up fee would be waived and the annual charge would be £7,020.

The Councillors.uk Project

3.5   This project is run by the Municipal Journal and Web Labs and is a searchable online directory of all Councillors in the UK. Councillors themselves can add additional information to an entry (such as contact details and a photograph). Councillors.uk provide a set of terms and conditions that Councillors must agree to before they use the facility but these do not appear to be as comprehensive as Councillor.info, and do state that the service may include advertisements that cannot be opted out of. Councillors can sign-up individually to get their own website at a cost of £100 per annum, or a whole Council can sign-up at a cost of £5,000 per annum for the first 50 Councillors.

The Basildon Project

3.6   Basildon District Council has a system that can be used for Members' websites that they can easily update from home using a web browser. There would be a charge £1,000 for initial set-up and £1,000 per Council per annum on an ongoing basis. The option does not necessarily provide all the

functionality that comes with the other two options and there is currently no contractual framework in place to minimise the risk to an authority of Councillors maintaining their own websites.

3.7   In giving consideration to these external solutions, both the Online Partnership and the Council's officers have concluded that high weighting should be given to the legal implications for a Council with regard to the liabilities that could arise from:-

- Inappropriate use of the facility by individual Councillors, for example, breaching local government legislation or the Members' Code of Conduct.

- Using a site for political campaigning - Council funded resources cannot be used for political purpose.

- Councillors presenting themselves in a way that fails to impress the public, and thereby damaging the standing and reputation of Councillors and the Council.

3.8   Notwithstanding cost, from the liability perspective the councillor.info project can be seen as the preferable external solution, providing legal support and a contractual framework along with "report and take down" facilities to ensure that relevant regulations are adhered to and that risk to the local authority relating to Councillor communication is minimal. It includes functionality that would ensure use of the site complied with relevant local government legislation and data protection law. All Councillors establishing a site would be required to consent to an "acceptable use policy" as part of a sign-up licence agreement.

In-House Solution

3.9   Consideration has also identified the possibility that the Councils Committee Management Information System (CMIS), which already provides Councillor information to the on-line public, should meet Requirement R6.

3.10   The development of projects such as councillor.info and councillors.uk has, initially, been in the context of the objective of promoting democratic renewal and encouraging all Councillors to become active online, rather than Requirement R6 specifically. One other authority in Essex has already concluded that its own website Councillor pages already meets the needs of R6.

3.11   Current benefits associated with CMIS include:-

- The provision of Member photographs and contact details - names, addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses (which facilitates direct on-line interaction between Councillors and their constituents).

- Detail on when Members were elected and their party affiliation, Committee appointments and appointments to Outside Bodies.

- Linkages to existing Member websites (with an appropriate disclaimer).

3.12   It would be possible to include Councillor surgery details on CMIS and to achieve the requirements detailed in paragraph 2.5 of this report regarding linking to details about County Councillors, where appropriate.

3.13   By using CMIS, Members would not have to update their pages themselves, but any amendments to web pages could be made on request to officers.

4   CONCLUSION

4.1   From the perspective of cost, it would seem appropriate to develop CMIS for the purposes of Requirement R6. This would not preclude the Authority from revisiting the possibilities associated with other on-line projects as appropriate in the future.

5   RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

5.1   Continuing with CMIS would be at nil additional cost. Likely costs associated with other options are identified in the body of the report. Any one-off costs of these options could be met from the IEG grant, but any annual costs would be an addition to the revenue budget.

6   RECOMMENDATION

6.1   It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to develop the Council's Committee Management Information System for the purposes of complying with Implementing Electronic Government Requirement R6. (HAMS)

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Background Papers:-

Essex Online Partnership Feasibility Study/IEG4 Statement.

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