ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION LINKS

1 SUMMARY

1.1 This report seeks Members' endorsement to the principle of further improving the electronic communication links between the Council's office sites, and also providing links for remote sites/workers, including Members, to be able to access the Council's information electronically.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Currently, the Council's offices in Rochford have an electronic link with the Civic Suite at Rayleigh, a link to the internet, a connection to the depot in Rochford, and also a limited facility to enable, for example, a member of staff working at home to be able to dial up to link into the Council's network.

2.2 With the increasing use of information technology systems, the volume of data being transmitted in this way, and the potential for more officers and Members to access information from the Civic Suite at Rayleigh, consideration needs to be given to the further improvement of these links to enhance service delivery.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 There are a number of practical applications that would benefit from a further upgrade of the link between Rochford and the Civic Suite at Rayleigh. For example, this would give improved speed of access to the Council's systems for both Members and officers at Rayleigh (including the Transportation Team that is now based there). An upgraded link would also enable the direct transference of data from Rochford to the Civic Suite for use on the projection equipment in the Council Chamber. It would also ensure that officers at Rochford can view CCTV images from the Civic Suite via the link when necessary.

3.2 In addition, the current link to the Internet is attracting heavier use as the Council makes more services available on its website. In 2001/02 there were 4865 hits to website; in 2002/03 this increased to 25,503 hits. Already, local residents can pay certain bills on-line, view details of their own accounts, and submit land charge searches and planning applications. The use of the internet to provide services will be extended during this year to enable the implementation of the IDEA marketplace e-procurement solution, access to Committee minutes, agendas and reports on-line, and checking on details of the progress of planning applications.

3.3 To ensure that all these applications can be implemented on schedule and be available on a reliable basis, the link to the Internet would benefit from being upgraded at this time.

3.4 Currently, it is difficult to connect to the Council's network from home or any other location, such as sheltered accommodation, as only four standard phone modems can connect to the system at any one time. In addition, anyone with ADSL broadband is not able to connect at all.

3.5 Investigations are proceeding into the most cost-effective solution to these problems. In particular, as outlined in the Council's IEG2 (Implementing Electronic Government) Statement, the use of 'virtual private network' technology (VPN) is being considered. However, there are several options, including a combination of VPN and hard wire connectivity to be considered and costings from Vivista, the Council's I.T. Contractor, are not available in final form at the time of writing this report.

3.6 It is recommended that officers report to the Finance and Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 22 July 2003 on preferred options, provided that full information on costs is available at that time. That Committee has particular responsibility for overseeing I.T. and, if proposals are acceptable to it, can make a recommendation direct to full Council.

4 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The upgrading of the links as outlined above will have resource implications of both a capital and revenue nature. It is envisaged that the capital costs can be met from the Council's IEG2 grant from the Government. The revenue implications will need to be assessed once they are known, and will be reported to the Finance & Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

5 RECOMMENDATION

5.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

(1) To endorse the principle of the further improvement of the Council's electronic communication links.

(2) To request the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee to review detailed proposals at its next meeting (subject to the full information being available) for recommendation to Council.

Sarah Fowler

Head of Administrative & Member Services

Background Papers:

None.

For further information please contact Sarah Fowler on:-

Tel:- 01702 318135
E-Mail:- sarah.fowler@rochford.gov.uk