

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION LINKS

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' approval to the further improvement of 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 a fixed 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.
- 2.3 This Committee considered an outline report on 8 July 2003, and endorsed the principle of the further improvement of the Council's electronic communication links, subject to detailed proposals being available. This report contains a detailed proposal for consideration.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There are a number of practical applications that would benefit from a further improvement to 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 Currently, there are only four standard phone modems that can connect to the Council's network at any one time which limits application for users in remote locations. In addition, anyone with ADSL broadband is not able to connect at all. The successful bid to the Department of Works and Pensions to provide a network of drop-in centres for local residents at sheltered accommodation schemes and the Civic Suite requires each centre to be equipped with PC access to the benefits computer system. This network will assist the Authority to meet the required performance standards by improving benefit claims processing time and overpayments management, as well as providing a better and more consistent customer service.

- 3.3 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, and six months into 2003/04 there have already been around 20,000 visits. 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 projects contained in the Corporate Plan. These include the IDEA marketplace e-procurement solution, access to Committee minutes, agendas and reports on-line, and the implementation of software to enable local residents to check on the progress of planning applications, previous planning decisions, property history and maps.

4 DETAILED PROPOSALS

Links Between the Council's Office Sites

- 4.1 Officers have investigated the options available in order to identify the most cost-effective solution to links between the Council's office sites. As outlined in the Council's IEG 2 (Implementing Electronic Government) statement, the use of 'virtual private network' (VPN) technology has been considered, as well as a combination of VPN and hard wire connectivity.
- 4.2 The feasibility of increasing the existing hard wire bandwidth (to enable faster data transfer) between Rochford and Rayleigh has been assessed. This is technically possible, but may not solve the performance issues. The costs of this were quoted at £43,000 one-off and £55,000 annual costs. There would also be additional one-off and annual costs of installing VPN software to enable each remote location to be connected.
- 4.3 Instead, an alternative way of delivering a solution is by implementing a 'thin client' model. This would involve installing a terminal server at Rochford which will undertake all the processing and data transfer currently carried out at the remote PCs at, for example, Rayleigh. Therefore only limited information has to be sent across the Council's network, meaning that the existing bandwidth will not need to be increased. The server can support 30 thin client users at any one time.
- 4.4 Implementing a thin client solution would have the following benefits:
- software applications are run on a central server which will reduce the level of resource required from Vivista, the I T contractor, to support users;
 - new applications can be deployed more quickly as they only have to be installed on the central server, and not on every PC at every location;
 - applications can be run on older specification PCs, as the PC is acting as a dumb terminal with all processing taking place on the thin client server;

- a low bandwidth is required per user and so the current infrastructure will not have to be upgraded;
 - thin client provides a means of introducing hot-desking capabilities;
 - thin client provides an environment for an improved back-up and disaster recovery system;
 - the solution can be extended to apply across the Authority, with the introduction of additional servers.
- 4.5 Initially, it is proposed to implement the thin client solution to improve the links with Rayleigh. The following software applications will be available through this solution – the CAPS uniform system (property database, geographical, information system, planning, land charges, land terrier, environmental health and trees), Academy (Housing Benefit and Council Tax), Langdales parking system, Diamond Taxi Licensing system, Microsoft Office products, Internet Explorer and the Council's intranet. This will also enable the link from the Rochford offices to the depot to be enhanced by the same technology.
- 4.6 The introduction of this system will provide the opportunity to meet the requirements of access by individuals at other remote sites without a fixed link, such as the sheltered schemes, from Members' homes, and to facilitate home working.
- 4.7 This remote access can be achieved by securely connecting users over the Internet, by making use of the in-built VPN capabilities of the terminal server to encrypt data.
- 4.8 It is proposed in the first instance that the effectiveness of remote access is piloted in sheltered schemes, to enable the implementation of the project approved by the Department for Works and Pensions. It would then be possible to roll-out to Members who already had PC access at home and any staff undertaking home-working (subject to the server capacity).

Links to the Internet and the Website

- 4.9 The traffic on the link to the Internet will be kept under review as more services go on-line. It is likely that the link will need to be upgraded in the next year to support these developments.
- 4.10 The Corporate Plan identifies the need to continue to develop the website to provide information relevant to residents in the District. This is becoming an important source of information, as can be seen from the increased number of hits on the website. The Society of Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) assesses local authority websites, and in their 2002 survey Rochford's came 95th out of 350+ local authority websites. However, whilst our site meets some of the standards, it currently is rather wordy, there is difficulty in finding information about key services, there is no search function, and it lacks visual impact and a local news page. SOCITM's analysis of the

most popular websites indicates that users want the following from the website – news about local events and people, a what's on page, job vacancies, and up-to-the-minute information about local issues, such as flooding. To enable the implementation of the Corporate Plan priorities, such as enabling access to planning decisions, and Committee minutes on line, the website needs to be updated.

- 4.11 To address this, a number of alternative systems have been viewed and quotations sought. The preferred, and most competitive, solution is provided by the company Immediacy/Diagonal and meets the requirements outlined above.

5 RISK IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Operational and Information Risk

The Council needs to ensure the effectiveness of its electronic links, as these are crucial to service delivery. If the links are not able to run the key software packages, the availability of services to local residents could suffer.

5.2 Reputational Risk

With the additional services being placed on-line via the website, the Council could suffer reputational damage if these services are not available to residents.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Thin Client

- 6.1 The one off costs of implementing the thin client, comprising consultancy, Vivista support, licences and hardware are £22,500.
- 6.2 The annual support costs for the thin client are £11,300.
- 6.3 To implement the thin client at a remote location without a fixed link, such as a sheltered scheme, requires in addition to a client access licence, either a broadband package for an existing telephone line, or a new dedicated telephone line for the PC link with a broadband package. This will incur both a start up fee and annual fee. In respect of the sheltered schemes, this will be met from the grant funding received from the Department for Works and Pensions, and the ongoing cost via the housing benefits administration budget in the General Fund.

Internet Link

- 6.4 The cost of enhancing the link to the internet will be a one-off cost of £3,613, and a net additional annual cost of £6,830.

Website

- 6.5 The one-off cost of the preferred new software for the website, its installation, hosting and firewall is £38,800. The net annual costs are £15,100. The justification for this level of expenditure is because of the need for a high level of firewall security, and to have a 24 hours a day 7 days a week support service. Members will be aware from recent press coverage of an ever increasing risk from computer viruses, with any downtime having cost implications in direct salary costs, backlog of work, cash flow and reputation to the authority.

Summary of Resource Implications

- 6.5 The total one-off cost of the 3 initiatives is £64,913. This can be met from the IEG Capital Grant and provision in the Capital Programme.
- 6.6 The total annual revenue cost of the 3 initiatives is £33,230. The funding will be met by allocating part of the IT upgrades budget within the current 2003/04 estimates.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**
- (1) To approve the upgrading of the Council's electronic communication links as set out in paragraphs 4.1-4.8.
 - (2) To approve the upgrading of the link to the internet as set out in paragraph 4.9.
 - (3) To approve the upgrading of the Council's website as set out in paragraphs 4.10 – 4.11.

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Background Papers:

Proposal from BT for VPN solution.
Proposal from Insite for thin client solution.
Proposal from Vivista for thin client solution.

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