

1 Common ICT Infrastructure

1.1 Network Infrastructure

We have been exploring the potential for councils to have a common internet infrastructure. NIRAN (Northern Ireland Regional Area Networking) have provided cost estimates for network infrastructure for five potential pilot installations through the IT Officers Group (Banbridge, Ballymena, Limavady, Craigavon and Cookstown). The Cookstown pilot has been excluded because of substantial set up costs, which result from lack of current BT infrastructure in the area. The other four have installation costs ranging from £23k to £34k and annual rental costs from £5k to £7k. Because of the importance of the development of network infrastructure, it is proposed to centrally fund 75% of the installation costs, ie £90k approximately, with Councils meeting the other 25% installation costs and the annual rental costs. Councils are considering the proposals, but if accepted installation would be from may 2008.

NIRAN are responsible for the NI use of the JANET high speed internet network used in further and higher education throughout the UK. North Down and Derry Councils have already contracted with NIRAN on network infrastructure, with resultant cost savings.

1.2 Microsoft Unified Communications

Discussions with Microsoft are continuing on the potential for the Microsoft Unified Communications application to be used in Local Government, which would facilitate enhanced communications around Councils and enable the deployment of collaborative working, video conferencing, VOIP telephones, instant messaging etc. The development of underlying network infrastructure is key to this. Plans for an event to demonstrate the system are under ongoing discussion.

1.3 Local Authority Customer Relationship Management (LA CRM)

Further to the first Modernisation seminar in November 2007 the LA CRM system (through Belfast City Council) has been demonstrated to Newtownabbey and Omagh Councils, and a number of others have also shown an interest. We will continue to monitor developments.

1.4 Customer Service Events

The second Modernisation seminar in December 2007, "Concentrating on Customer Services – Implications for councils, councillors and customers", was very successful with over 70 attendees and a very positive response.

The consultation exercise on the Customer Service Strategy is still in planning, as it proved impossible to start it at the busiest time of the year for Councils. The latest updated version is attached to the papers for this meeting.

2 Procurement

2.1 Procurement Professionals

A further meeting with Local Government procurement professionals took place in January 2008 and common procedures are being developed in order for all councils to procure collaboratively. These draft procedures are expected to be developed by mid-February 2008. Consideration is still being given to what initial items could usefully be collaboratively procured and grass cutting equipment seems to be a possibility. Once draft procedures are finalized it is intended to hold an event for Chief Executives, Finance Officers and members (if required) to consider and approve common procedures and thus move forward with collaborative procurement.

2.2 E-Procurement

Discussions continue with First Derivatives (successfully in use in Newry and Mourne) and Consilium (finance systems in 21 of 26 councils) about the potential to integrate their applications and offer Councils a very competitive E-procurement solution, which would run on their current Consilium platforms.

3 Finance, Payroll and Assets

Consilium provide finance systems (including payroll) to 21 councils, Environmental Health systems to 15 councils and a Dog Licensing hosted solution for four councils. They are also involved with the mobile working pilot with NILGA E-Government Working Group. Following a substantial discussion Consilium are considering options for providing the services on a hosted basis or through one or more servers, as well as costs for such services and for the modules that councils are currently not deploying eg budget modeling (in only 4 councils), purchase ordering (in 10 councils), stores (7 councils), e-purchasing (2 councils), asset register (5 councils). Subject to discussions on costs, events will be held to demonstrate the use of some priority modules, such as assets register and budget modeling.

4 NI Direct

Within the Department of Finance and Personnel a new director, Tom Kennedy, has been appointed to take forward NI Direct. A meeting with the new director has been requested. A public tender for Phase 1 of the programme has been issued. This tender has been released to increase the number of seats in the Civil Service call centre in order to deal with specific issues in some government departments. Following an initial meeting with Tom Kennedy a formal liaison group will be established to ensure Local Government participation in NI Direct is maximized and to finalise DID funding for the exercise that will need to be undertaken to gather and prepare information. At the NILGA full members meeting on 25th January it was proposed that Cllr Sean Kerr and Cllr Eddie Rea represent the local government sector on this liaison group.

5 ERNACT/EU

ERNACT have advised that there is likely to be funding available from previous bids they have made and that projects with the councils in the north-west could possibly be funded. A meeting is to be arranged to get more details and consider what projects might attract funding.

6 Donegal County Council

The offer of their hosting visits to their Public Service Offices in Donegal still stands.

7 NILGA e-Government Working Group Update

The most recent NILGA eGovernment Working Group considerable progress on a number of fronts.

7.1 IS Strategy

This strategy will outline the framework for councils for their Information Management. This will outline the high level principles that will lead on to the development of ICT Strategies providing for joined up and collaborative working where appropriate.

Terms of Reference to recruit consultants to produce the IS Strategy are currently with councils to give them an opportunity to comment on them and to engage with the process. This consultation period will end on 28th February.

7.2 Mobile Working Pilot Projects

There are 2 pilot projects underway to explore the benefits of mobile working.

1) Down District Council Building control officers are using digital pen technology to record their inspections. Data is then transferred from the Digital

Pen device to the back office system in the council. Inspectors fill in paper forms that can be kept as a permanent written record, while also transferring the information to the IT system without having to input data separately.

2) The Southern Group of Environmental Health Officers are piloting the use of mobile devices as part of their complaints handling process. The project involves staff from Newry & Mourne and North Down District councils being able to pick up work assignments via mobile devices, carry out visits and fill in assessment forms on line without having to visit the office. This saves time and unnecessary travel, increases the productivity of council inspection staff and removes the need for the same information to be entered on multiple occasions in to the council's IT system.

Both pilot programmes will be subject to an independent evaluation to examine if the projects merit extension to other councils.

7.3 Local Citizen View

Local Citizen View is a way of providing geographical information through the council website. North Down Council already use this service which enables users to find their nearest community facility. Local View has also been used by the Education and Library Board to determine the nearest school for some families to help in the allocation of school places. 3 councils are participating in this project.

7.4 Other Networks

The eGovernment Working Group consists of representatives from elected members, chief executives and IT Officers, Staff Commission and central government. The group also receives updates from other networks in order to help build the capacity of the group. At the most recent meeting this included an update on the IT Officers Group. It was explained that the IT Officers have agreed to provide mutual support to colleagues in other councils if a need for disaster recovery emerges. There has also been recent training in drawing up contingency plans in the event of a flu pandemic.

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