

## **Executive - 23 July 2003**

Present: Councillor Williams (Chairman)  
Councillors Bishop, Mrs Bradley, Mrs Bryant, Edwards, Garner and Hall  
Officers: Mr S Fletcher (Chief Executive), Mr J J Thornberry (Director of Corporate Resources), Ms S Adam (Head of Finance), Mr D Gary (Somerset Direct Project Manager), Mr M McLaughlin (E-Government Manager), Mrs N Heal (Public Relations Officer), Mr G P Dyke (Member Services Manager)

Also Present: Councillors Gill, Henley and Lisgo

(The meeting started at 6.00 pm).

### 31. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 25 June 2003 were taken as read and were signed.

### 32. Apologies

Councillors N Cavill and Mrs Lewin-Harris.

### 33. Somerset Direct

Reported that Somerset Direct was a Government sponsored Invest to Save Budget Project, designed to improve the handling of enquiries by the public to all Somerset Councils. The Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) was funding 75% of initial project costs but not any ongoing funds.

Each partner had now been asked to commit to the benefits, savings and costs of the project to allow the County Council to sign contracts with suppliers on behalf of the Partnership so that the Council could proceed to live operations.

Consideration was therefore given whether to:-

- (1) adopt the Somerset Direct Model as a Council's methodology for dealing with customer services;
- (2) request a Supplementary Estimate from General Fund Reserves to fund the costs of either £84,638 or £231,002, depending on if the reception area was remodelled;
- (3) note the legal basis under which Somerset County Council would enter into contracts with suppliers on this Council's behalf;
- (4) note the staffing arrangements and accommodation changes required.

Total project size was estimated to be £3.8m. Individual Councils would be responsible for sourcing on-going costs and realising savings.

The ODPM representative for e-government in the South West had recently re-stated keen interest in the project and the benefits it would bring to the people of Somerset. ODPM expected each partner to reflect the project and the resulting meeting of e-government targets in its CPA assessments.

All five district Councils and the County Council had previously committed to the ISB bid and had been working together to bring the benefits to fruition. The Partnership was now at the stage of appointing a key technology supplier.

Progress made so far with the proposal was reviewed. Detailed consideration was given to the anticipated improvements in access to services, increased customer satisfaction and the potential for efficiency savings. Each partner would be able to significantly improve their achievement of e-government targets through Somerset Direct.

Details of the finances of the project were submitted. A Supplementary Estimate of £231,002 would be required for a remodelled Reception and for Somerset Direct. If Somerset Direct was implemented without a remodelled Reception, the Supplementary Estimate required would be £84,638. These costs would be spread over the Financial Year 2003/04 and 2004/05.

The agreement between the partners indemnified Somerset County Council as the Lead Authority and each other as partners in connection with the financial and contractual arrangements. It contained a five year commitment for each partner to meet the project set up and ongoing costs. If any partner withdrew, it needed to give 12 months notice and would be responsible for any resulting cost shortfall.

In Taunton Deane, it was intended to establish a new Customer Services Team to operate the project. There was still a great deal of project management and development work to be done and David Gary would therefore continue as the Project and Implementation Manager. Operational management would be carried out by a Customer Services Manager. This post would be filled from within the existing staff establishment. Customer Services Advisors would also be appointed from within the existing establishment.

A phased approach over a period of 12 months from April 2004 was to be used, bringing all services provided by the Council into the system of dealing with public enquiries.

There would be a need for all of the Customer Services Team to be in one place related to the face-to-face facilities in the Reception area. This presented an opportunity to revamp the area and present a modern customer-friendly area with proper sound management and a 'Meeter and Greeter' to provide both security and greeting to members of the public. It was intended that, apart from a cashier position, staff would be consulted on how the area could be made more customer friendly.

Whilst an improved, remodelled Reception was considered essential to realise the full benefits of this project, it was not necessary to commit the finance for this aspect of the scheme at this stage. Somerset Direct could continue to be implemented with a Supplementary Estimate of a maximum of £84,638. Once this commitment had been made, further detailed and careful consideration could be given to any remodelling of the Reception area.

Part of managing the project was to identify and analyse risks and to instigate preventative actions. The Somerset Direct Risk Register was therefore regularly reviewed.

The technology for Somerset Direct was planned to go live on 1 April 2004 with the ability to handle all types of enquiry to a specified service level. Advisors would be able to fulfil some enquiries in depth, whereas others would be passed to the back office. Between April 2004 and December 2005, the Council would progressively perform towards its target of fulfilling 80% of calls within the Customer Services area.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council be recommended to agree a Supplementary Estimate from General Fund Reserves of a maximum of £84,638;
- (b) the Somerset Direct Project be adopted;
- (c) a further report be submitted with full details of design and costing for a remodelled Reception area.

(The meeting ended at 6.45 pm).