

COUNCIL MEETING - 6 AUGUST 2003

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL **COUNCILLOR HALL - RESOURCES**

Somerset Direct

Somerset Direct is 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) is funding 75% of initial project costs but not any ongoing funds.

Each partner has 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 can proceed to live operations.

The Executive has therefore given consideration to whether to -

- adopt the Somerset Direct Model as a Council's methodology for dealing with customer services;
- 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 is remodelled;
- note the legal basis under which Somerset County Council will enter into contracts with suppliers on this Council's behalf;
- note the staffing arrangements and accommodation changes required.

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

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

Detailed consideration has been given to the anticipated improvements in access to services, increased customer satisfaction and the potential for efficiency savings. Each partner will be able to significantly improve their achievement of e-government targets through Somerset Direct.

Details of the finances of the project have also been looked at. A Supplementary Estimate of £231,002 will be required for a remodelled Reception and for Somerset Direct. If Somerset Direct is implemented without a remodelled Reception, the Supplementary Estimate required will be a maximum of £84,638. These costs will be spread over the Financial Years 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 5-year commitment for each partner to meet the project set up and ongoing costs. If any partner withdrew, it has to give 12 months' notice and will be responsible for any resulting cost shortfall.

In Taunton Deane it is intended to establish a new Customer Services Team to operate the project.

There will 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 presents 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. Staff will be fully consulted.

Whilst an improved remodelled Reception is considered essential to realise the full benefits of this project, it is not necessary to commit the finance for this aspect of the scheme at this stage. Somerset Direct can continue to be implemented with a Supplementary Estimate of a maximum of £84,638. Once this commitment has been made, further detailed and careful consideration can 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 2003 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 2003 and December 2005 the Council would progressively perform towards its target of fulfilling 80% of calls within the Customer Services area.

It is therefore RECOMMENDED that:-

- (a) a Supplementary Estimate from General fund Reserves of a maximum of £84,638 be agreed;
- (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.

Councillor T J Hall