

EXECUTIVE

PROJECT TITLE: Provision of Information Technology in Development Control

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Executive Member: Councillor Cliff Bishop

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To help the Council in meeting objectives outlined in the Gershon Review and E-government initiatives this reports seeks approval in principle to:

- ★ Replace the current in-house software package for planning application recording, monitoring and historic data retention.

Subject to a successful bid, our anticipated costs in replacing the Development Control software application would be approximately £80k. Annual revenue costs for licence fees, software and hardware maintenance are likely to be around £15k

1. Project Description

This report seeks agreement in principle to replace the current in-house planning application recording, monitoring and historic data retention software with an established external software package, e.g. Acolaid, CAPSUniform or MVM. Members will be updated throughout the process as necessary.

2. Establishment of Need

- 2.1. The current Development Control processing software was installed in March 2006 and was anticipated to be the “next generation” of the planning application recording, monitoring and historic data retention which was initially developed in-house in 1985. The task undertaken by the IS Unit in producing the PARADISE system was a major challenge and we recognise the dedication of their staff.
- 2.2. With hindsight the in-house upgrade of the system was very adventurous. The national planning system is undergoing significant changes including E-government initiatives and new/upgraded legislation all linked to Best Value, Standards and funding.
- 2.3. In using the existing software, tasks are disjointed and time consuming and often need manual intervention. Management information is difficult to obtain and

interrogate. This includes basic statistical information which would greatly assist in monitoring/enhancing performance.

- 2.4. The quality of the service we are providing our customers has recently declined, not only due to the introduction of the PARADISE system which resulted in major time delay and backlog which is still being addressed , but also the reliability of the information retrieved. Complaints have been received and it is feared that the possibility of errors occurring and resulting in compensation has increased significantly.
- 2.5. Best Value Performance Indicators over the last three quarters have fallen largely due to delays caused by the PARADISE system. This has resulted in a reduction in Planning Delivery Grant received. At times it has taken three weeks to register an application, whilst our target is 2-3 days. This alone has dramatically reduced our ability to reach our overall time taken targets. From being one of the best performing authorities in the south west, we are currently in the bottom quartile.
- 2.6. To incorporate the necessary enhancement to make the system satisfactory to meet the current needs of the Officers and Administration it is anticipated that the time period required would be a minimum of 18 months. This timescale does not take into account new E-government initiatives or legislation changes. In meeting the needs of other services, the IS Unit have already had to delay vital work on the necessary upgrades of the PARADISE system.
- 2.7. The Gershon report is a Review of Public Sector Efficiency. The objectives are to release major resources out of activities that can be undertaken more efficiently, into front-line services that meet the public's highest priorities.
- 2.8. If planning application recording, monitoring and historic data retention software were supplied externally, it would allow the IS Unit to divert more of their resources to the Corporate Efficiency Agenda.
- 2.9. Our capacity to improve delivery of the Planning Service and link to the National Planning Portal will be greatly reduced if we remain with an in-house IT solution. If the current trend were allowed to continue there is a real risk of becoming a "standards" authority. The only other authority in the south west still uses an in-house system is Penwith District Council (one of the worst performing councils in terms of both performance indicators and their ability to provide information electronically).

3. Outline Proposal

The Audit Commission state:

"New technology offers perhaps the greatest opportunities - and the greatest risks. There can be unrealistic expectations that new IT will cure all the weaknesses in the department. But outdated IT is often part of the problem, providing poor response and access, unreliable service and inflexible outputs. Some systems are over 10 years old and cannot readily provide staff with help screens or cope with the full range of central statistical returns. And a profusion of small IT suppliers and in-house developments in the past has made continuing good service difficult to guarantee".

Simply by virtue of their size, external software providers can devote significant resources to improve or amend their software to meet legal and government initiatives before changes come into force.

There are a number of recognised suppliers of planning software packages, including Acolaid, CAPSUniform or MVM, although it is understood that CAPSUniform now supply 50%+ of the LPA software nationally, including a high proportion in this region.

This is an opportunity to get software that will not only allow for improved functionality but will:

- Allow ease of change with new legislation;
- Allow joint working with other Local Authorities as required by Gershon;
- Deliver flexible working in line with the modernising agenda;
- Deploy staff resources in a more efficient way;
- Ease recruitment and training of staff who are familiar with commonly used software packages;
- Give the ability to meet Best Value Performance Standards requirements;
- Give the potential to incorporate other areas, e.g. Building Control and Land Charges
- Meet E-government initiatives.
- Respond to the needs of our customers

4. Link to Corporate Priorities

4.1. The Corporate Strategy for 2005-2008 identifies four top priorities based on what matters to local people:

- Delivering Project Taunton
- Improving transportation and tackling congestion
- Reducing antisocial behaviour
- Promoting affordable housing

In considering the compatibility of this project with the strategic direction of the authority, the links are as follows:

4.1.1. Delivering Project Taunton

To deliver Project Taunton, we need to maximise available resources which requires modern software including the automation of work which minimise errors. It is important that Development Control has full confidence in its software, which is the foundation for providing an efficient, cost-effective service.

The need for manual intervention with current software leads to errors and delay. Our software relies on staff being vigilant and often double checking processes which should be automated.

This is a high profile project for Taunton and the software we use will be the foundation in demonstrating a professional Development Control Service which can provide accurate, relevant and quick information to the General Public, Developers and investing Companies.

4.1.2. Improving Transportation and Tackling Congestion

Software facilitating home and remote working will help us in tackling congestion. There is scope for staff to perform more tasks remotely and provide more efficient and responsive services.

In developing our services towards the e-Government agenda, we need to encourage customers to communicate with us electronically thus cutting down on motor transport to Deane House.

4.1.3. Promoting Affordable Housing

Affordable housing is delivered predominantly through the planning process and in particular s106 agreements. It is essential that Development Control Officers time is freed up to allow greater negotiation to achieve the affordable housing targets set.

5. Outcomes

- Accurate statistical returns to maximise income, forecasting and Best Value Performance Indicators;
- Automation of tasks currently needing manual intervention;
- Performance within top quartile of relevant BVPIs
- Pro-active approach to IT development to ensure software changes are in place and tested before legislation implementation;
- Decrease of Planning Admin staff involvement in IT development;
- Staffing savings through efficiencies achieved.

6. Risk Identification

6.1 *Current Risks*

6.1.1 Planning legislation is complex. The authority faces significant risk should it misinterpret or wrongly apply this legislation. Legislative changes prove labour-intensive for Development Control staff as they must interpret and specify how the IS Unit should change the software. If we buy software from a large external provider, we could minimise such a risk, as it would be reasonable to conclude any misinterpretation would be identified early on.

6.1.2 There is a very limited number of staff who are familiar with the whole PARADISE system which is an unnecessary risk.

6.1.3 Use of a standard Planning Application processing package would increase the potential recruitment of staff

6.2 *Future Risk if Project is to Progress*

6.2.1 Procurement of new IT and migration of data presents notable risks as well as opportunities for improvement. It is essential we manage the project effectively, as both the continuity and timing are critical to success.

6.2.2 The experience of the previous migration of data from the in-house system was damaging, both in staff morale and in a sharp decline in service delivery. If there is a decision to buy external IT software, the risks are as follows:

- The overall project will be subject to a financial constraint. Inadequate finance could mean the project would not go ahead or be delayed;
- Alternatively where incomplete finance is available it will mean the project will incur higher risk as staff will need to undertake more tasks rather than paying for external support;
- Suppliers fail to deliver any of the procured systems on time. The strength of the contract between all parties could lessen this particular risk. Any contract developed would have financial penalties for non-delivery;
- Implementation could be affected by lack of project resources. We would ideally employ external help for Project Management and software training, to mitigate this risk;
- Moving away from a fully integrated back office operation may create a drop in performance in on-line postings due to interfaces.
- Overall costs of in-house IT may not change in the short or medium term for the Development Control service, as support and hardware would still be required. However, staffing levels and knowledge of staff would have to be reviewed in line with new technology.
- IT costs for other services may rise as the income lost from Development Control would need reallocation.
- Potential backlogs during the changeover period.
- The loss of a flexible and adaptable approach towards improving existing IT - we would have to compete with many other authorities in user groups in getting software amendments.
- The cost of interfacing external IT with other in-house software. While external providers will give guide estimates for this, it is important we stipulate this area is stipulated tightly and release funds to an external provider only on successful completion to standards we determine.

7. Project Evaluation and Preferred Course of Action

The project would progress through initial stages in preparing detailed specifications and finding out accurate costs. Demonstrations will be arranged as well as site visits to other authorities using external IT provision. After demonstrations and site visits, various choices can take place.

7.1. Monitoring

Throughout the procurement and installation stage of this project regular monitoring will take including regular reports to the Head of Development and Members.

8. Resource Implications

The current PARADISE system relies on staff double checking many functions of the system – this increase the possibility of errors not being detected. We want the technology to allow well trained and experience staff to use their time efficiently and effectively. This would have an additional outcome of staff having a positive experience and increase moral.

9. Timescale

A detailed project plan and timescale will be developed with a target period of 4 to 6 months from purchase to full installation of system and staff trained.

10. Recommendations

- 10.1. That agreement in principle to replace the current in-house software applications for planning application recording, monitoring and historic data retention is granted.
- 10.2. That full Council is requested to support a supplementary estimate from General Fund Reserves of £80,000. That the ongoing revenue costs be funded from within existing Development budgets.

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