

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To update the Committee on the preparatory development work on the Council's Information Management Strategy.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The Information Strategy preparatory work reported in this paper is the first step down a path which will radically change the way in which the Council communicates with its public and, more importantly, how the public interact with the Council. While 'e-communications' are being strongly advocated by central government, it is also clear that there are substantial advantages to local councils in implementing such changes. There are very real constraints in the current lack of resources for this work, but Milton Keynes is well placed to take advantage of 'e-government' given the good basic Information Technology (IT) systems and the well developed processes for working with partners and the public already in place.

3. Background

- 3.1 The 'Modernising Government White Paper' published in 1999 made it clear that the increasing use of e-commerce and e-communications across the world requires a radical change in the way local government and other public sector bodies provide services and information to the public and partner agencies. The **Annex** to this report sets out some examples of what this might mean for some services in the future.

Over the last three years Milton Keynes Council, as a new unitary authority, has concentrated on learning about, delivering and developing its wide range of services. The IT service, working with client services, has delivered substantial improvements to the systems used across the Council and dealt successfully with the Millennium issue. As a result, the Council now has a far more robust data network and modern systems which provide a good platform to move into the electronic information age.

The Council's draft Economic Development Plan points out that, in 1998, over 75% of local residents had access to a computer and one in six had Internet access at home. Two years later, the numbers will surely have grown considerably. The local population is young (38.5% under 25's) and therefore the pressure from the local community to deal with the Council and other agencies through e-commerce can also be expected to grow exponentially over the next few years.

However, the IT systems are only the tool of the Information Management (IM) Strategy. The Council now needs to develop an IM strategy for the next 3-5 years, and this paper reports on some of the preparatory work.

Why have an Information Management Strategy?

Managing information effectively and efficiently is core to almost everything a council does. In order to make the best use of scarce resources, the Council must collect and analyse information on hundreds of different subjects. Members of the Council cannot make decisions on policy without being given information about the options, what the facts about a case are, what the factors to be considered are, etc. Officers cannot carry out services competently without being trained and given the procedures to follow – many of which involve collecting information.

Because there is so much information collected and held by a complex organisation, such as the Council, having systems that help manage the information is vital. They can be manual or electronic systems - the principle is the same. The aim is to help provide a better, more focused, and accountable service to the public. Often that can only be done by combining information from a number of different sources and making sure that information can be retrieved quickly and accurately. For example, the ability of both the Council Tax and Benefits staff to access a common database and the same files on-line has substantially improved the Council's ability to process applications for benefit rapidly.

As technology improves, it is important that the Council has a corporate approach to managing its information. The links between services are becoming ever more complex and allowing each service to develop its own approach to information management is wasteful, inefficient and ineffective. However, such corporate approaches must be set within the context of the importance of front line services, and the systems must make the service easier to manage and more effective in its delivery. The aim of any IM strategy must be to deliver that result – a flexible approach that delivers positive improvements to information management across and between services, and also to the public.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, members of the public increasingly expect their services to be delivered on-line. Bank accounts and shopping, buying cars and houses, booking holidays and keeping in touch with family members in other parts of the country or the world, can all be done over the Internet now. Many of us expect to be able to access such services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Government, both central and local, has fallen behind in this electronic revolution and, in order to remain relevant and helpful, it must catch up with what is happening. Some fear, rightly, that this could result in

social exclusion of those without the ability or knowledge to access the technology. However, it is also true that, for many housebound people, accessing services and information quickly and easily over the Internet has opened up a new world of contacts and communication that can overcome physical mobility constraints.

4. Issues and Choices

4.1 Central Government Requirements

4.2 The Government intends that all services which can be electronically delivered should be. It envisages that services will be thus delivered through the Internet, mobile phones, digital TV, call centres, and personal computers. This will allow services to become much more individually friendly. The basis of this approach is the ability to access, in a coherent, joined-up, way, all the many databases of information that public sector bodies hold, and make such information available for use to individual members of the public and other partner agencies. By definition, this will also result in more efficient and effective internal communications within organisations as information is held corporately but accessed and used differently for each service. Local Government will be expected to positively embrace the electronic age and develop systems and services that take full account of it.

Current Position in Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes Council is well placed to take advantage of the electronic age. It is an innovative Council with good basic systems. In the wider community, the Council is involved in developing the Milton Keynes Web, and in implementing the National Grid for Learning (NGL) through schools and educational establishments. The New City part of the borough is fully cabled. There is an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Strategy for Milton Keynes and North Bucks which the Council supports and which seeks to position the area as a centre of excellence in the development and application of IT.

The Council is currently carrying out an Office Space Strategy Review and is developing a management development programme. Both of these will impact on, and will be affected by, an IM strategy. Use of technology to enable employees to work from home, or to share desks, or to spend their working time out of offices delivering services but linked back to an information database by mobile telephones – all these will reduce the need for permanent office space in the future. Similarly, management training to manage staff who work in these ways rather than based all together in one building will be essential.

The Council's greatest potential difficulty in becoming a leading-edge e-organisation is its lack of funds to develop in this area. However, innovative ways of developing partnership working with other public sector bodies and investigating the use of public finance initiatives (PFIs) will help to overcome this problem.

The Need for a Vision Statement

The Foundation for Information Technology in Local Government (FITLOG), strongly recommends that the starting point for any IM strategy within an organisation needs to be a vision statement of what is intended to be achieved with IM/IT developments. An overall policy statement and criteria against which future development can be judged are important in managing this process. This needs to be developed in consultation with members and partners but could look something like this:

“As part of the Council’s strategic approach to delivering continuous improvements in all its services, Milton Keynes Council is committed to transforming the ability of its community to access services and information, using electronic technology. It will achieve this by working in partnership with the community, other agencies and businesses, and by developing internal systems that co-ordinate and facilitate the seamless management of information flows and databases. The aim is that, within 3-5 years, the Council will be part of a common network of management information systems encompassing its own services, those of central government and other relevant public sector bodies, and those of other partnership bodies both local and national. Members of the public, service users, and service providers, will have easy access to these systems to carry out transactions of all kinds.”

The criteria used to judge the priorities for all information management developments also need to be developed but could include the following:

- (a) it meets one of the Council’s core business and service objectives
- (b) it will assist the service by improving the quality and accessibility of all relevant information for the public, partner agencies and internally;
- (c) it will increase the capacity of the Council to co-ordinate and cross reference information;
- (d) it will allow transactions within the service area to be carried out electronically as well as by more traditional methods;
- (e) it will deliver efficiencies in service delivery so that resources can be released for other uses;
- (f) the technology to support the development is robust and tested;
- (g) the financial costs and service benefits can be clearly set out
- (h) any changes necessary to the current methods of service delivery can be detailed, including working methods of the staff involved.

Factors influencing the way forward

The priorities of the Council are being refined and tested through the development of the Community Plan and the Best Value Performance Plan. The impact of new democratic structures on how priorities are identified and tested through the political process could also be considerable.

Since January 2000, IT staff, working with service managers, have drawn up lists of the current outstanding demands for IT development, and have been able to show, in some detail, how much resource is necessary to keep current

systems going. The results of this clearly show a major imbalance between service priorities and expectations and the Council's ability to deliver supporting systems. Work is continuing to refine these lists and the results will be reported to Members early in the new political year as necessary.

The Council has already approved a programme of providing all Members with a personal computer and printing facilities at home, and support to Members in their use where necessary. This will substantially improve Members' ability to communicate with officers and other bodies, and will provide the basis for linking Members to other aspects of e-government as they are developed.

Any new developments should grow out of and develop further the work that has already been undertaken to improve the IT infrastructure of the Council. An audit of where the Council is now will be an essential element in evaluating options for the future. But there may also be more radical options available through identifying partners to work with – from either the public or the private sectors.

The Government is still developing the details of its e-government initiative. However, some targets are clear – by 2008, all key government services will be electronically enabled. By 2002, many of the building blocks will be in place. It is clear that local authorities will be expected to follow a similar timescale. The Government will be developing common standards and infrastructure to enable full cross-referencing between services. It will also have to clarify the legal framework within which all of this happens. The Freedom of Information Act requires public sector bodies to make a lot more information available to the public in an easily accessible form. The Data Protection Act sets out the constraints and controls necessary to protect the public from misuse of such information. The Electronic Communications Bill will establish the acceptability of electronic signatures as evidence in court.

There will need to be a cultural change across the organisation to take account of central government's demands, the public's wishes and the needs of the local community. An example of this will be the increasing pressure to deliver many services 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. This will fundamentally affect employees terms and conditions and working practices.

The Council will need to take account of all these factors and others in deciding on the details of its Information Management Strategy. But it is certain that such developments will be required to be a high priority for the Council for the foreseeable future.

Future Work

More detailed exploratory work on the options available and the necessary budgets will be carried out over the next few months and a report made to an early meeting of the Executive on the outcome of this. This work will be led by the Chief Officer Finance and Corporate Services but with detailed input from the Head of IT and the Corporate Policy Unit. The Strategic Director Resources will continue to support this work until her departure in early May.

5. Implications

5.1 Environmental

Greatly increased electronic communication could have many positive implications for the environment, for example, reducing the use for paper to record transactions, and reducing journeys to offices by employees and the public.

5.2 Equalities

The possibility of social exclusion by those not able to take full advantage of the electronic age is something to which the Council must remain sensitive and sympathetic. However, wider use of electronic information will also increase the ability of the public to feed into and influence the policies of the Council.

5.3 Financial

It is too early to identify the detailed budgets necessary to carry out this programme. There is no doubt that substantial resources will be necessary to achieve the 3-5 year programme but innovative ways of accessing other funds may limit the pressure on Council funds.

5.4 Legal

Innovative ways of accessing support to carry out this programme will need reviewing to make sure the Council continues to meet legal requirements. This will be helped by recent legislative changes to the powers of local authorities.

5.5 Staff and Accommodation

Accommodation needs for staff may change radically as a result of this programme as more flexible working is possible with e-government. There is also no doubt that a cultural change will be necessary to implement changes to working practices, and terms and conditions to match the new working methods. These changes are taking place across the working population of the country so they are not unique to this Council.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 The Information Strategy development work discussed in this paper is the first step down a path which will radically change the way in which the Council communicates with its public and, more importantly, how the public interacts with the Council. While it is being strongly advocated by Central Government, it is also clear that there are substantial advantages to local councils in implementing such changes. There are very real constraints in the current lack of resources for this work, but Milton Keynes is well placed to take advantage of e-government given the good basic IT systems and the well developed processes for working with partners and the public already in place.

Background Papers: Getting IT Right; a guide for councillors and senior managers – Foundation for Information Technology in Local Government

Modernising Local Government – Leading the Information Age (1); Exploiting the Information Age (2); Moving towards e-democracy (3) – all published by the Society of Information Technology Management.

Using new information management ways of delivering services in the future could mean members of the public being able to use the Internet, mobile phones and/or digital television to, for example:

- a) register on the electoral register or make changes to their address as they move house.
- b) submit a planning application
- c) register a death or a birth
- d) vote in national or local elections
- e) complain to the Council - which could also be done through a call centre
- f) ask for a service from the Council – also possible through a call centre
- g) tell the Council about a loose paving stone or a pothole – also possible through a call centre
- h) pay their Council Tax or Housing Rent
- i) seek advice from the Council on a wide range of issues – also possible through a call centre

The Council will be able to use the same technology to, for example:

- a) subject to Data Protection requirements, share individual, or summary, information with other public sector bodies so that an individual does not need to contact a number of different agencies about the same matter eg registering a death
- b) link performance data from a range of services, without manual intervention, so that summary tables can be produced for eg District Audit when it reviews the Best Value Performance Plan
- c) send orders and payments for goods and services to outside suppliers
- d) provide statutory returns to central government
- e) call up copies of committee papers and minutes and/or other public documents
- f) have telephone conferences instead of face-to-face meetings