

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER SERVICES AND ICT SCRUTINY STANDING
PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 14 AUGUST 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.25 PM

Members Present:	Mrs M McEwen (Chairman), Mrs P K Rush (Vice-Chairman), Councillor Mrs D Borton, R Church, P McMillan, Mrs C Pond, Mrs P Smith, Mrs L Wagland and J M Whitehouse
Other members present:	Mrs D Collins, R Frankel, Mrs J Lea and S Metcalfe
Apologies for Absence:	M Cohen and Mrs P Richardson
Officers Present	A Scott (Head of Information, Communications and Technology), R Palmer (Head of Finance), V Evans (Customer Services Manager, ICT) and S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer)
Also in attendance:	-

1. NOTES OF THE LAST PANEL MEETING

The notes of the meeting held on 12 June 2006 were agreed.

2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

No substitutes had been appointed.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were made.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted. New Terms of Reference would be prepared for the next meeting.

5. WEBCASTING PILOT

The Panel noted that the Council had decided that, in order to increase public access to its democratic process, a webcasting pilot had been agreed as part of its 2005/6 e-Government Strategy.

The Council was about to begin a one year pilot scheme by entering into a service contract with a specialist webcasting company. The value of this leasing contract was £17,000.

Officers had now:

- (i) negotiated and completed a contract for the pilot;

(ii) overseen the technical installation of the webcasting system including its fixed installation in the Council Chamber;

(iii) implemented officer training for webcast operators;

It was noted that the system is now live and ready to use. It was the intention that "soft" testing would commence in August with a publicised launch in September at a Full Council meeting.

Simon Hill, Senior Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to explain the system to members and to talk through some of the implications for the council in introducing this technology.

Protocol and Advice to the Public

As part of the preparation for the beginning of the webcasts a draft protocol had been developed to set out the main provisions including suspension of webcasts.

Research and Democratic Services would agree with the Chairman that a meeting would be webcast. This was then "booked" with the service provider Public-i. the webcast would then proceed with suitable warning notices placed on the agenda for that meeting and inside and outside the meeting room. Additionally, the Chairman would make an announcement at the start of the proceedings.

The Chairman would have the discretion to terminate the webcast as set out in the protocol. Additionally, the Monitoring Officer would have a role in determining whether webcasts were subsequently removed from the archive of available meetings.

It was also noted that as part of the pilot would webcasting of Planning Subcommittee(s) a revised advice sheet had been developed particularly aimed at avoiding defamation at meetings.

Members queried:

(i) What announcement the Chairman would make. It was noted that the statement was set out in full in the protocol.

(ii) Whether the cost in future years would be the same. In reply S Hill indicated that the contract would conclude in August 2007 unless extended and would be subject to further negotiations.

(iii) How long webcasts would be stored and who owned the intellectual property. It was noted that webcasts were stored for a period of six months on the public-i server and then returned to the Council. Officers agreed to review intellectual property issues.

Agreed:

(1) That the progress report on the Webcasting Pilot be noted;

(2) That the proposed protocol on the Webcasting system be adopted;

(3) That the proposed measures to be introduced for planning meetings be

agreed; and

(4) That the Panel receive an evaluation of the pilot at the Panel meeting on 12 December 2006 with view to considering options for any continuation of the webcasting contract for further periods.

Members were also invited into the chamber at the conclusion of the meeting for a demonstration of the webcast system.

6. REPLACEMENT OF THE LOCAL TAXATION AND BENEFITS ICT SYSTEM

The Panel received a draft report to the Cabinet on proposals for the replacement of the Local Taxation and Benefits ICT System. B Palmer reported that the agreed Corporate ICT Strategy required the systems replacement. The current system did not meet Government requirements and Epping Forest was now the only English authority using the software.

The existing contract expired in 2008 and officers were now actively considering its replacement using Catalist, a catalogue based procurement scheme that had been originally established in 1997 to provide public sector organisations with a simplified means of procuring a wide range of ICT services from a variety of providers. This system was managed by the Office of Government Commerce. This process would provide a quicker and more efficient way of procuring a system than traditional tender processes.

It was noted that it was proposed to utilise £240,000 of IEG Grant Budgets to assist in the procurement of the new system whose cost was thought to be in the region of £800,000. Following the 'tendering' process through Catalist it was proposed to report further to members on the award of the contract.

Members queried:

(i) Whether there was a 'value' to the current system and if so, could it be sold on? It was noted that the Council had a specific licence agreement for a fixed term for the current system and this could not be sold on.

(ii) Was this therefore a complete replacement? Yes and included software procurement, data conversion, staff training and purchase of hardware.

(iii) Did Catalist provide quotes? It was noted that there were only four main providers of such systems but that they worked through a number of companies to provide solutions. There were 12 such companies in this category on Catalist.

Agreed:

That the following recommendations to Cabinet be supported:

(1) That, in accordance with the Corporate ICT Strategy, an in principal decision is made to replace the ICT system for the Local Taxation and Benefits service;

(2) That, quotations be obtained using the Catalist system that is managed by the Office of Government Commerce; and

(3) That a detailed report covering the financial implications of replacing the ICT system is submitted to Cabinet after quotations have been obtained.

7. E-GOVERNMENT

The Panel noted that the Government e-Government initiative had originally commenced in October 2001. The main focus for this initiative was to use modern information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the quality, efficiency and accessibility of public services.

Central Government, in order to monitor progress with the e-Government initiative and assess the required level of capital grants to support it, had placed a duty on all local authorities to produce an annual IEG Government return that set the Council's current status for electronically enabling 100% of all interactions with the Public by March 2006. The return process was completed electronically online in a prescribed format.

The IEG Government return had in the past been the mechanism that allowed all local authorities to gain access to Central Government funding by way of the IEG capital grant. These grants and the e-Government initiative had now come to an end at the end of the 2005/6 financial year and the Council would not be required to submit any further IEG returns. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was now using the IEG6 return as a key reference document in the audit process for assessing how related grant funding had been used.

The two major elements of the IEG return were the Best Value Performance Indicator 157 (percentage of e-enabled interactions) The number of interactions now measured under BVPI157 totaled 550.

The Council had, as of the 31st March 2006, electronically enabled 98% of these interactions. The remaining 2% (13 interactions) that remained outstanding were being considered for enabling by the service areas responsible for delivery.

The second major element of monitoring was the "Priority Service Outcomes" for e-Government. This was a list of some 78 e-Government priorities that were focused on direct outcomes. This list set out how Central Government saw e-Government being implemented in Local Authorities.

This list was broken down into 3 categories; Required, Good and Excellent. The DCLG expected Local Authorities to deliver all the "required" and "good" categories by December 2005. The Council had made good progress in addressing many of these priority outcomes. However, with the e-Government initiative coming to end it was unclear if any further monitoring of priority outcomes would be undertaken by central government.

The Panel noted the current IEG6 Government return which included the Councils current progress with "Priority Service Outcomes" and the BVPI 157 performance indicator.

Transformational Government

In November 2005 the Cabinet Office had published a report entitled 'Transformational Government (TG) enabled by Technology' (previously circulated). Transformational government was effectively about transforming public services as citizens received them and demonstrating how technology could improve the corporate services of government so more resources could be released to deliver 'frontline' services. This central government vision was almost identical to the e-

Government vision introduced 4 years ago. However the focus had changed from introducing new technology, to using the now established technology to deliver a real improvement of both service delivery and the efficiency of administrating the whole organisation. Also, there was clear message within the strategy that the real benefits would only be achieved through more joint delivery of services and the use of other service providers such as voluntary 'third sector' services.

In March 2006 the Government had also published the implementation plan to support the TG report. The plan included a timetable for various actions to be undertaken by central government departments as well as other public bodies including Local Government. Although at this stage it was unclear what the direct impact this would have on District Councils, it was clear that the TG agenda would have direct links to the Local Government White Paper due for publication in the autumn.

To support the main service improvement aims of TG the DCLG had been working closely with the IDeA to produce a set of Local Government e-Service Delivery Standards (NeSDS). The DCLG and IDeA believed that any Local Authority that was able reach the 'excellent level' defined in the NeSDS would have taken their organisation through a 'transformation programme' to achieve it and would be ready to engage fully with the TG agenda.

The first draft of the NeSDS's had now been published and was being considered by the Council's Website Development Board (Officer group) that reported to the Management Board. The date for the final version of these standards had not yet been confirmed. The Head of ICT would report back to the panel with an impact assessment of adopting these standards after the final versions were published.

Agreed:

That the following be noted:

- (i) submission of the IEG 6 Government Return to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on 10th April 2006;
- (ii) the Council's progress in delivering the requirements of the priority service outcomes and the BVPI 157 as reported in the IEG return;
- (iii) the outstanding 'priority service outcome' and BVPI indicators;
- (iv) the Council's e-Government Strategy; and
- (v) the introduction from Central Government of the National e-Service Delivery Standards and the introduction of the recently announced "Transformational Government" strategy.

8. CORPORATE CONTACT CENTRE - PROGRESS REPORT

Councillor Metcalfe reported that the Customer Services Transformational Programme Board would be meeting on 16 August 2006 to consider actions following consideration of the main report by the Cabinet. Specifically the Board would be looking the staffing implications of the programme, the Boards response to issues raised previously by the Panel, the new timescale for the programme and proposals for identifying the individual savings aspects and programme 'chunks'.

The Panel asked that the portfolio holder provide written reports for future meetings.

9. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

None for report

10. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next scheduled meeting was now scheduled for 27 November 2006 at 7.30 p.m. in Committee Room 1.