Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-059-2010/110
Date of meeting: 31 January 2011

Epping Forest District Council

Portfolio: **Legal & Estates**

Subject: **Government Connect Secure Extranet (GCSx)**

Responsible Officer: **David Newton**   **(01992 564580).**

Democratic Services Officer: **Gary Woodhall**   **(01992 564470).**

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1)   **To agree the proposed changes, to allow continued access to the GCSx connection, at no additional cost to the Council.**

Executive Summary:

GCSx provides an accredited, managed network to connect all English and Welsh local authorities, central government, the NHS and the criminal justice communities into a trusted secure community. It provides a secure email service and enables secure data sharing. Some Government organisations will now only communicate data using this network, for example the DWP and the Council's Benefits Division. It would therefore be impossible for the Council to function effectively without being connected to the GCSx.

This Council was the first in Essex, and possibly the Eastern region, to comply with the Code of Connection and gain access to the GCSx. External security audits conducted by Government agencies have been very positive and confirmed the robustness of the system and its associated protocols and interfaces.

Initial connection to the GCSx was free but from April 2011 Government will charge for this facility and the following report identifies the options available to the Council.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The Government has announced that they intend to charge approximately £16,000pa for individual connections or approximately £7,000pa for an aggregated (shared) connection. The recommendations contained within this report allows continued connection to GCSx at no additional cost to the Council.

Other Options for Action:

Allocate an additional £7,000pa of Continuing Services Budget (CSB) growth for the GCSx connection.

Report:

1.   Currently, this Council is a member of the Essex On Line Partnership (EOLP). It would therefore be possible to opt for the shared solution at a cost of £7,000. The

membership fee for the EOLP is £16,000, which makes a total cost for this option of £23,000. However, there are a number of issues with this course of action. Firstly, migration from the Council's own connection to a shared one would inevitably involve some interruption to the service and may require other configurations and systems to be altered. Secondly, switching to the shared connection would leave us reliant on others for the provision of this key service. This raises issues in terms of the service reliability and also the future cost, as similarly to the Government, EOLP may decide that once organisations are left with effectively no choice over service provision this is something that could be charged for (on top of the basic EOLP fee).

2.   EOLP is a partnership sponsored by Essex County Council. Historically, this Council has benefited from membership, due mainly to hardware savings made available through bulk buying auctions negotiated by this group. However, recent changes in this Council's ICT Strategy have resulted in much cheaper technology being adopted, such as server virtualisation and thin client desktop terminals, meaning that volumes and supplier profit margins have been greatly reduced. Also, recent tenders using the independent Buying Solutions Frameworks have identified very similar pricing to that available through the EOLP portal. Accordingly, there is no longer any financial benefit to remaining as a member of the EOLP.

3.   The service sharing aspirations of EOLP group have failed to produce any tangible results and the chance of anything favourable for this Council arising in the near future, is unlikely. As such, the fee of £16,000 for the EOLP provides poor value for money. As the EOLP option does not represent either best practice or best value, it would seem prudent to re-allocate the EOLP membership budget to pay for the continuation of the Council's own GCSx connection.

4.   This situation will be reviewed on an annual basis and if the EOLP changes to provide better value for money or offers practical shared service opportunities, it may be worth re-joining. The Council will continue to explore all partnership working opportunities where they can be demonstrated to represent best practice and provide best value.

Resource Implications:

No additional resources required.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

None

Consultation Undertaken:

None.

Background Papers:

None.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management
There is no risk involved in discontinuing EOLP membership. However, losing GCSx connectivity would seriously impact on the ability of services to function effectively.

Equality and Diversity:
Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?   No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?   N/A

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
None.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
N/A.