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| Subject: | Replacing the Northern Ireland Planning Portal |
| Date: | 12 March 2019 |
| Reporting Officer: | Aidan Thatcher, Director of Planning and Building Control |
| Contact Officers: | Ed Baker, Planning Manager (Development Management) Paul Gribben, Head of Digital Services |

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| Restricted Reports | |
| Is this report restricted? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted? | |
| After Committee Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| After Council Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Some time in the future | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Never | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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| Call-in | |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-in? | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

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| 1.0 | Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues |
| 1.1 | To update Members of the Planning Committee on how the Northern Ireland Planning Portal should be replaced. |
| 2.0 | Recommendations |
| 2.1 | That Members of the Planning Committee note the following: i. That Belfast City Council are to remain part of the DfI-led regional project i.e. to replace the Northern Ireland Planning Portal with another shared regional IT system Subject to the following qualification: |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - that BCC must take a lead role in the project, including representation on the Project Governance Board and providing staff resources to the core project team; - that the capital cost to Local Government is split evenly between the 11 councils; and operating costs to be determined in the context of the contract awarded (as agreed by SOLACE); - that the regional project demonstrates clear and robust progress, including commitment from the other councils by April 2019; and - BCC is part of the first wave of councils to implement the new IT system. <p>ii. That Strategic Policy and Recourses Committee agree the additional funding to support implementation of the project as part of the Council's capital contribution. This would include 2 x Grade PO4 posts for a temporary period of 3 years.</p> |
| 3.0 | Main report |
| | <p><u>Background</u></p> <p>3.1 The Northern Ireland Planning Portal (NIPP) provides the public website interface which citizens use to find information and comment on planning applications. It also provides back-office software that the Council's planning service uses to process planning applications as well as supporting the administration of regional property certificates.</p> <p>3.2 The NIPP was implemented by the former Department of Environment in 2010 as a central IT solution and was inherited by the 11 councils as a shared system in 2015 on the transfer of planning powers to local government. The NIPP is provided by a third-party supplier, DXC. The contract for the Planning Portal is managed by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and is due to expire at the end of March 2019. DfI is currently negotiating a contract modification to ensure continued technical support for the NIPP beyond March 2019 until the end of 2020. At the same time, it is leading a regional project that is examining the options for its eventual replacement. The need to replace the Planning Portal by 2019/20 is a critical service risk.</p> <p><u>The need to replace the Northern Ireland Planning Portal</u></p> <p>3.3 The current NIPP is far from fit for purpose and is a significant impediment to the Council delivering an excellent planning service. The NIPP was introduced in 2010 as a hybrid solution based on a COTS product that has been heavily customised for Northern Ireland purposes. This has meant that the COTS element has not followed the natural upgrade path and is several years behind the latest version.</p> <p>3.4 Deficiencies of the NIPP include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inability to receive and process online planning application submissions (England has had this capability since 2002); • limited opportunity for customers to find information and self-serve; • inability for the Council to customise standard customer letter templates or report templates; • substandard functionality including poor case management and GIS; • drives inefficient processes with limited flexibility for process improvement; |

- inadequate performance reporting and monitoring; and
- poor access to data and inadequate integration with other Council systems.

Regional project

Background

3.6 Since 2016, local government has been participating in the DfI-led regional project that is examining the options to replace the NIPP. The Council agreed to participate and contribute to the cost of the regional project. Unfortunately, the project has been delayed whilst the Councils agreed the minimum requirements upon which the Draft Outline Business Case was built, and to agree the funding model, and how much contribution from the Department v Local Government.

Outline Business Case

3.7 DfI published a revised Outline Business Case (OBC) in January 2019. The recommendation is to replace the NIPP with another shared regional system remains and it proposes to fast-track the process with implementation by 2022. The Department's proposals (as agreed with Local Councils) set out in the OBC are:

- that the NIPP is replaced with a single regional IT system shared between the 11 councils and DfI;
- that the IT system will be a "Commercial Off The Shelf" (COTS) product to meet the requirements of the regionally agreed Minimum Viable Product;
- the new system will allow some local configuration to meet individual council needs (e.g. reports, templates, searching etc.); and
- that procurement will follow the Competitive Procedure with Negotiation.

Funding Model

3.8 The revised OBC states that the estimated cost of the project is £26.7m over 11 years of i.e. from 2019/20. This would include £15.1m capital and £11.6m resources. These costs remain estimates at this stage and actual costs will be determined through a competitive procurement process. Final costs and timescales will be captured in the "Final Business Case" following confirmation of the preferred supplier.

3.9 SOLACE have agreed to a funding model where 45% of the costs would be funded by DfI, with the remainder to be funded by Local Government, which if divided equally would be **£1.34m per council** over 11 years (or **average of £122k pa**). SOLACE have agreed to an even split of capital costs between the 11 councils with operating costs to be determined in the context of the contract awarded.

3.10 A report to cover the capital costs of the programme will be going to SP&R for consideration on 22 March 2019.

Proposed timetable

3.11 The estimated timeline for delivery of the regional project is set out below. The Council would need to be in the first wave of implementation, therefore, circa January 2022.

| Phase | Start no later than (beginning of) | Estimated duration | Complete no later than (end of) |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mobilisation | January 2019 | 6 months | June 2019 |
| Procurement | January 2019 | 12 months | December 2019 |
| Design | January 2020 | 18 months | June 2021 |
| Build | July 2020 | 18 months | December 2021 |
| Implement | January 2022 | 6 months | June 2022 |

Option of BCC procuring its own standalone IT system

3.12 An alternative to BCC agreeing to the Department's regional solution is for it to procure its own standalone IT system. Officers have undertaken market research to establish the availability and cost of planning IT solutions in the market place. This has included research on planning IT systems used in the UK and Irish local authorities; discussions with UK councils on IT and surrounding processes; study visits; and discussions and demonstrations from potential suppliers. This research has concluded that there is no impediment to the market place providing a suitable and fit for purpose planning IT solution for the Council.

Data migration

3.13 The Council's planning service has not previously recommended procurement of its own standalone IT system is due to the complexities and unknown costs of data migration. The NIPP is provided by a third party, DXC, on behalf of the Department, and obtaining access to this is likely to inflate the costs of data migration and limit the Council's ability to migrate to its preferred supplier. This is a major risk if the Council were to choose to procure its own standalone system.

Costs

3.14 Based on market research, the estimated cost to BCC of procuring its own standalone system is approximately £1.36m over 11 years, compared with £1.34m for the regional solution.

3.15 DfI has previously confirmed that it will not provide any assistance or make any financial contribution to any council who goes it alone.

Regional solution vs BCC standalone

3.16 Officers consider that, on balance, the Council should support the DfI-led regional project. Whilst the need to replace the NIPP from an operational point of view is pressing, a BCC standalone solution would likely only be implemented 12 months sooner. The costs of both options are likely to be similar, although there is a greater costs risk around data migration if BCC were to go alone. The BCC standalone option would also require significantly greater up-front capital investment and staff resourcing.

3.17 The regional option provides greater capacity to deliver and there would be a significantly reduced level of risk overall. BCC procuring a standalone IT system would likely result in political fallout with the Department and other 11 councils as it would be a serious setback to the regional project. It would also likely impinge on NI customers who would have to use two different public website interfaces, which is far from ideal in terms of consistency across the region.

3.18 As such the Council proposes to support the DfI-led regional solution subject to the following:

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BCC must take a lead role in the project e.g. in the areas of procurement, finalisation of the specification, design, build, implementation and Governance. This will include representation on the Project Governance Board and providing staff resources to the core project team; - the full Minimum Viable Produce is required (not a “MVP-light option). This would deliver all of the functionality that would enable critical service improvements, particularly online submission functionality; - the cost to local government is split evenly between the 11 councils in terms of capital for the product, and operating costs to be determined in the context of the contract awarded; - the regional project demonstrates clear and robust progress, including commitment from the other councils, by no later than April 2019; and <p>3.19 BCC is part of the first wave of councils to implement the new IT system.</p> <p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>3.20 The Council will need to make financial provision for replacing the NIPP. The cost of the regional project is £1.34m over 11 years (average of £122k pa), starting 2019/20.</p> <p>3.21 In addition, funding is required to backfill x2 FTE PO4 project posts to support the project (£106,750, 2018/19 costs), as part of the Council’s capital contribution. This resource is crucial as it will enable BCC to take a lead role in the implementation of the project and mean that the new IT system best meets the Council’s needs. The Department has confirmed that the greater staff resource it contributes to the project, the less cash contribution it will need to make.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>3.22 No adverse impacts identified.</p> |
| 4.0 | Appendices – Documents Attached |
| | None. |