WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET CAPITAL ASSETS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19th April

Subject:	**Replacement of Simdell Housing Management IT System**
Cabinet member:	**Councillor John Brady – Economic Development, Planning and Housing**
Key Decision:	**Yes**

Executive Summary

The current Simdell housing management application was procured from Simdell Ltd (latterly Aareon UK Ltd), and was implemented in 1998. Simdell was a dedicated housing product designed to support business areas of:

- Rent accounting
- Rent arrears
- Responsive repairs
- Property sales/Right to buy
- Lettings/Void management
- Multimedia/Mail-merge

The Simdell application has reached the end of its useful life. The product design is outdated and is no longer available to new customers.

The outmoded design of Simdell does not enable the council to demonstrate that Wiltshire meets many of the Audit Commission's performance indicators. This key shortcoming was underlined when housing failed to be awarded zero stars for performance by the Audit Commission inspection in February 2010.

There is no upgrade path from Simdell to Aaeron's current housing product. Simdell is not a hierarchical database. It does not meet current technology standards, and fails to deliver open systems and web-enabled functionality.

The successful implementation of a new housing management system will enable Wiltshire Council to demonstrate that it exceeds many of the Audit Commission benchmark performance indicators. It will also allow housing staff to operate more effectively and to perform more responsively to changing requirements. It will also enable a better user interface.

A modern housing management application would also align with Wiltshire Council's IT and IM strategies. Funding for this development will be drawn from the Housing Revenue Account budget.

Proposal(s)

- That the committee be made aware of and endorse this project to improve services within the Housing Management Service, as set out in this document and the accompanying detailed business case

- That the committee be made aware of and approve the funding required for this development

Reason for Proposal(s)

The purpose of these proposals are twofold:

1. To brief and inform the committee on this development as set out in the business case

2. To approve the funding for the development.

Graham Hogg
Director of Housing

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Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the committee of the need to replace
    the Simdell housing management system, and to brief on the requirements
    behind this project. The report also seeks approval to fund this project from
    the Housing Revenue Account.

Background

2. Wiltshire Council is responsible for social housing primarily in South
    Wiltshire. The current stock comprises:
    • 5,372 dwellings
    • 1,250 garages
    • 1,000 communal facilities (approx)

    The housing management department is also responsible for the care and
    maintenance of leasehold land and flats within the South Wiltshire area. The
    Former Salisbury District area is the only part of Wiltshire Council with a
    retained housing stock. Social housing in other parts of the county is
    provided by housing associations.

    The performance of housing management is currently as 'zero star' by the
    Audit Commission.

    As a result of the Audit Commission report, housing management have
    developed an improvement plan which sets out a number of targets and
    areas for improvement. Key to the success of this improvement plan is the
    implementation of a modern housing management system, to support the
    service improvements and provide housing management staff with a high
    quality management and information system.

    The current housing management system is 'Simdell', which was procured
    from Simdell Ltd (now Aareon UK Ltd), and was implemented in 1998. The
    design and structure of the system does not meet modern requirements in
    either information or technical requirements. Simdell is an uncustomisable

flat-file application. It is no longer available on the market and has a user base of less than five local authorities.

In order to address Simdell's shortcomings, a number of workarounds and ad hoc Access databases have been developed in-house. These temporary solutions need to be brought in to line with corporate standards and support requirements. Simdell is hosted on its own hardware environment, which is unsustainable in the modern, virtualised server environment.

Main Considerations for the Committee

3. The main considerations for the committee in this proposal are the limitations of the current housing management system:
a) the end of life of the product
c) the likely end of support to the product
d) the lack of public access afforded by the product and
e) the negative rating by the Audit Commission
f) its incompatibility with more up to date and efficient ways of working

Environmental and climate change considerations

4. The environmental or climate change impacts of this proposal, being a software implementation, are not particularly significant:

a) Due to improved power management systems, this virtualised environment that this system implementation will be hosted in, will result in a slightly lower degree of energy consumption, than the physical environment used by the legacy Simdell system, implemented in 1998.

b) The increased functionality of a more modern system will allow the opportunity for smarter working, and therefore enable Housing to minimise the amount of travel journeys that neighbourhood staff make.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

5. Modern housing management systems have enhanced public functions which grant secure access to a range of housing management functions. The current legacy system does not have this functionality. Enhanced features a new system would bring would include, but not be limited to:

a) Remote access of rent accounts
b) The ability to query, in detail, rent payments
c) The ability to make payments to deal with rent arrears
d) The ability to report defects and request repairs via the internet

Additionally the current system does not easily facilitate the storage and retrieval of data that would enable a better more tailored service to be offered to customers with special needs or who are vulnerable.

Risk Assessment

6. The project will be managed by an appointed Corporate IT project manager, who will manage the task, on behalf of a high-level project board. It will be the role of the project manager to identify project risks and issues, and produce mitigations for approval by the project board.

7. From a service aspect, continuing to use the legacy system presents risks to the housing directorate, in the areas of support, development and not enabling the service to improve its process and procedures, or deliver services and information to the public via the internet.

Financial Implications

8. The cost of implementation will be classified as capital expenditure. The total spend for the implementation, comprising software purchase, IT costs and project management costs is estimated at circa £0.500 million. The entire cost will be fully funded through a revenue contribution from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

9. Revenue costs for the new system are likely to be in the region of £30,000 per annum which again will be met by the HRA. This estimate has been confirmed through a series of soft market testing presentations that have been held with system suppliers.

Legal Implications

10. The implemented system would meet the council's legal requirements with regard to Data Protection and current legislation.

Options Considered

15. The options considered, before deciding on replacing the legacy system were:

    a. Do nothing

       This would require Wiltshire to continue operating a system that is inflexible, doesn't meet the changing business requirements and fails to allow members of the public/service users direct access to their information.

    b. Have Simdell developed to meet the business requirements

       This option would be an expensive solution that would provide Wiltshire with functionality that an off-the-shelf solution would carry as standard.

Additionally, the revenue costs for such a development would be higher than the existing £50,000/year

c. Develop an in-house solution

An in-house solution could be developed, but the development time required to keep abreast of the changing social housing legislative requirements would be a significant call on IT resources

d. Procure an existing solution from a housing management system provider

This is the cheapest option, and the easiest to implement in a short timescale

e. Work with another landlord to jointly procure a system.

Regrettably there are no other local landlords that could either share an existing system with Wiltshire or could jointly procure in step with our timetable. However we do intend to set out our requirements in a way that will allow for the system to be made available to other providers should they decide to procure a system at a later date

Conclusions

16. It is noted that it is an absolute necessity to replace the existing system as it could well become obsolete very soon, additionally the functionality of the current system is seen as very poor and switching to a new IT system is key to achievement of the landlord service improvement plan and top quartile performance. It is therefore recommended that the Council chooses option (d) above and procures an existing solution from a housing management system provider whilst at the same time endeavouring to reduce costs by enabling the solution provided to be made available to other social housing landlords who may wish to procure at a later date.

**Graham Hogg
Director of Housing**

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14th March 2011

Background Papers

Simdell Replacement Housing IT Management System Business Case (as attached).

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

Draft Timetable

Appendices

Appendix I: Simdell Replacement Housing IT Management System Business Case

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