

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

EMERGENCY POWERS COMMITTEE: 23 OCTOBER 2001

DIGITAL COMMUNITIES

Report by Head of Corporate Development and Communication

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek authority to prepare an expression of interest in nominating Muirkirk for funding as a new Digital Community.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Wendy Alexander MSP, launched a competition on 11 October 2001 to select two Digital Communities within Scotland as part of the Scottish Executive strategy for digital inclusion, *Connecting Scotland's People*.
- 2.2 The Scottish Executive wish to enter into a partnership with local authorities where £1.75m will be spent by the Executive in each of two communities to fund the provision of PCs to up to 2000 homes, Internet access, training, a community web portal, and project development teams. Local authorities will be expected to provide the design of the project, its management and any other resources that they wish to contribute.
- 2.3 The overall intention of the initiative is to create a 'critical mass' of PC and web users within communities and social networks, increasing the likelihood of success in a disadvantaged community.
- 2.4 Local authorities are being invited to submit an expression of interest proposing *one* community within their area that could benefit from this initiative. The Scottish Executive is likely to select one urban and one rural community. Submissions of interest have to be made by 30 November and, following an initial assessment, around six proposals will be invited to move to the second stage of bidding with the winning bid being decided in March 2002.

3.0 CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The guidance issued by the Scottish Executive contains the selection criteria that will be used to identify the communities. Key criteria include:
- a compelling vision of how becoming a digital community would benefit the community and the individuals in it – tackling social deprivation and widening opportunities;
 - an achievable and practical plan for securing that vision;

- a broadly based partnership – which includes the key players (e.g. local authority, schools, private sector etc) who can make the initiative happen in that community;
 - deprivation levels in the community, and
 - a comprehensive and sustainable future management plan.
- 3.2 After reviewing the options for a community that could be nominated to the Scottish Executive, officers are of the view that the community of Muirkirk would stand the strongest chance of success against the Scottish Executive criteria.
- 3.3 Officers considered other alternatives including urban Better Neighbourhood Services Pathfinder areas and other rural communities outwith the Social Inclusion Partnership area. However it is believed that a bid on behalf of Muirkirk would be most likely to succeed because: it lies within a formal social inclusion partnership; it has substantial poverty and deprivation issues, and there is no readily identifiable labour market for members of the community (and so the 'upside' from developing new ICT skills and digital age small businesses is substantial). Muirkirk also benefits from an established and effective community ICT partnership, the Ayrshire Electronic Community, and it has a school and community education resource. The area also has an Employment Service Jobs Action Team.
- 3.4 In addition, the council is able to make a strong case for sustainable future management. Much of this will be built upon the Ayrshire Electronic Community and plans to develop that into a social enterprise business delivering community support for ICT initiatives. Initial indications are that we will also be able to receive substantial backing for a bid on behalf of Muirkirk from the private sector.
- 3.5 The Scottish Executive will only select one urban community and one rural community. It is believed that the case for Muirkirk's selection against other rural communities will be stronger than any case that could be made by the council for one of its urban communities against any other urban area in Scotland.
- 3.6 It is therefore proposed that Muirkirk be selected by East Ayrshire Council for nomination to the Scottish Executive as a Digital Community.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 A limited amount of financial resources will be required to prepare the initial bid and the council has secured a private sector partner to meet these initial costs. The full financial implications of designing and implementing the Digital Community project will be assessed as part of the second stage of bidding, should the council's expression of interest be taken further.

5.0 LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The creation of a Digital Community within East Ayrshire, particularly in the community of Muirkirk, will help to advance the council's social inclusion objectives.

i) RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 It is recommended that officers:

- ii) prepare a bid on behalf of the council to the Scottish Executive to nominate Muirkirk as a Digital Community, and
- iii) prepare a detailed submission for consideration by Policy and Resources Committee in due course should the initial expression of interest be successful.

Head of Corporate Development and Communication

22 October 2001

List of background papers: Nil

Implementation Officer: Douglas Campbell, Head of Corporate Development and Communication, Tel: 01563 576165

AGENDA