

**EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL**  
**POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

21<sup>st</sup> February 2002

**DIGITAL COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE**

**Report by Depute Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Resources.**

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1** To report progress on the Council's expression of interest in nominating Muirkirk for funding as a new Digital Community.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1** On 11<sup>th</sup> October 2001, the Minister for Enterprise and Life Long Learning, launched a competition to select one urban and one rural digital community within Scotland as part of the Scottish Executive's strategy for Digital Inclusion "Connecting Scotland's People".

- 2.2** Within this initiative, 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 design the project, provide its management and any other resources that they wish to contribute.

- 2.3** The objectives of the Digital Communities Initiative are :

- to increase the take-up of computers and the Web in disadvantaged households ;
- to increase ICT skills in disadvantaged communities ;
- to increase community involvement to develop local on-line content, and a local support network ;
- to tackle the financial barrier of ownership, and
- to examine methods of promoting digital inclusion in disadvantaged communities.

- 2.4** Local authorities were invited to submit expressions 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.
- 2.5** At Emergency Powers Committee on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2001, officers were authorised to prepare a bid to the Scottish Executive on behalf of the Council nominating Muirkirk as a digital community.

### **3. PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 3.1** A Bid Team was established with representation from relevant Service Departments, the Ayrshire Electronic Community (AEC), the East Ayrshire Jobs Action Team, and BT as private sector partners who indicated their willingness to support the Council's bid.
- 3.2** After assessing the benefits to be accrued from the establishment of Muirkirk as a Digital Community, and based upon the willingness of BT, our private sector partners, to take a lead role in the provision and support of the necessary ICT equipment, an Outline Project Proposal was prepared and submitted to the Scottish Executive.
- 3.3** This Outline Project Proposal is designed to deliver entry level PC's with broadband Internet connection through the existing AEC infrastructure, to 750 households in the Muirkirk community, involving in excess of 1,800 local residents. In addition, under the proposed project it is planned to provide similar ICT facilities to Small to Medium Enterprises (SME's) within the Muirkirk community.

### **4. TIMETABLE**

- 4.1** The Council's bid in the form of the Outline Project Proposal was submitted to the Scottish Executive on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2001, and the Council has now been advised that it has been short listed for further examination and consideration as one of three competing bids in the Rural Section of the Initiative.
- 4.2** As a consequence, the Council was invited to attend a Scottish Executive run Bid Workshop at Dunblane Hydro Hotel on 13<sup>th</sup> / 14<sup>th</sup> February in preparation for the final stage of the bidding process which will entail the submission of a Detailed Project Proposal by 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002.
- 4.3** The Bid Team identified an established Digital Community in Ennis, County Clare, Republic of Ireland where each household has been provided with a PC with internet connection and associated training.

In conjunction with the Council's partners in the proposed project, a requirement for a study visit to Ennis was identified for the purposes of fact finding to further inform the Council's bidding process by learning from the practical experience of a community already benefiting from the advantages of digital inclusion. This visit took place on 11/12<sup>th</sup> February, 2002, prior to the aforementioned Scottish Executive run Bid Workshop.

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1** There are no financial implications to the Council in respect of this bid to establish Muirkirk as a Digital Community.
- 5.2** If the Council's bid is approved, then the total Capital funding available from the Scottish Executive to establish and run the project over an initial three year period would be £ 1,750,000.
- 5.3** To ensure sustainability, it is expected that any recurring costs beyond those contained within the initial three year period will be met by our private sector partners.

## **6. LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1** A Draft Legal Agreement setting out the proposed relationship between the Scottish Executive as the project sponsor, and the successful Authorities as the project hosts, has been produced by the Scottish Executive and is presently under consideration by the Council's legal advisors.
- 6.2** The creation of a Digital Community within East Ayrshire, particularly in the community of Muirkirk, will contribute to the advancement of the Council's social inclusion objectives.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Committee :-

- i)** note that the Council's bid in respect of the nomination of Muirkirk as a Digital Community has been shortlisted, and consequently the Council has been invited to submit a detailed project proposal by 1<sup>st</sup> March 2002;

- ii) note that a report will be presented to a future meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee advising Members of the outcome of the Council's Bid and; otherwise
- iii) note the contents of the Report.

Fiona Lees  
Depute Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Resources

AMR / 28<sup>th</sup> January 2002

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. Letters dated 15 and 28 January 2002 from Rhona Hamilton, Digital Communities Project Manager, Scottish Executive.
2. Outline bid submitted by the Council to the Scottish Executive.

For further information on this Report, please contact Malcolm Roulston,  
Head of Information Technology (Tel : 01563 576809)

**AGENDA**