

Is an in-house system feasible again?



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Investigating whether opensource in-house systems can be developed and successfully supported by local authorities

Back in 2012 I wrote an article that posed the question whether it would be possible for Revenues and Benefits services to be able to write their own IT system to administer the then soon to be introduced, Council Tax Support Scheme in 2013.

Well, in 2019/2020 it might be happening or at least the feasibility of writing a non-commercial system for local authorities is now being investigated. Teignbridge, Exeter, East Devon, Basildon, Brentwood and Sedgemoor councils are partnering to explore the feasibility of creating what they describe as a true customer focused, configurable, cost effective IT system for processing Revenue and Benefits. It should be noted that Sedgemoor currently has its own in-house system, which was developed 25 years ago. The Sedgemoor system is reported as allowing the authority to maintain a high level of performance.

The authorities have successfully bid for, and hence will receive, £71,000 funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as part of the **Local Digital Fund**. The Local Digital Fund was announced in July 2018. It aims to help local authorities implement the **Local Digital Declaration** by funding digital skills training and projects that address local service challenges in common and reusable ways. The MHCLG is investing up to £7.5 million during the financial years 2018/19 and 2019/20. The fund is being used to:-

- offer digital skills training to all signatories of the Local Digital Declaration. The training will be delivered by the Government Digital Service (GDS) Academy for both leaders and delivery teams
- deliver collaborative projects, through a bidding process which is open to all signatories of the Local Digital Declaration

The Revenues and Benefits feasibility project is in the discovery phase and aims to test the following:

1. Can an opensource in-house system be developed and successfully supported by local authorities?
2. Are the current offerings from suppliers meeting users' needs?
3. Are there any cross authority benefits from having an in-house system that cannot be realised through the supplier market?
4. Whether a modern approach to supporting a function like Revenues and Benefits could be delivered by a set of components, made interoperable by standards and APIs, so that Councils can jointly build solutions on a digital platform? Local Authorities can then choose to plug in other local and national components, for example those from the GDS like Pay, Notify and Verify to offer joined up services to customers. New opportunities may then open up for data sharing, 3rd party apps, self-service, automation and artificial intelligence.

In their application to the MHCLG the authorities highlighted that the Revenues and Benefits system marketplace is dominated by approximately 3 very large suppliers and that these suppliers are resistant to interoperability. The supplier systems were all written many years ago in the 1990s and are therefore designed with outdated technologies. The application states that none of the existing providers have expressed any plans to develop new core systems to take advantage of modern technology.

The application to the MHCLG also highlights how much authorities are paying for systems with the annual cost of providing the Revenue and Benefits systems for 3 Authorities (East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council and Teignbridge District Council) being approximately £350k per annum. For the Basildon BC and Brentwood BC Shared Service, the Revenues &

Benefits system costs for 2019/20 are £175k per annum plus 2% yearly up-rating. The cost of acquiring additional modules is also highlighted with a GDPR module costing one authority £30k with an ongoing maintenance cost of £3,600.

The authorities note that the present commercial systems they use do not put the customer at the **'heart'** of the process and that if the authorities want to tweak part of the system, they must purchase a full module with functionality they do not require or wish to use.

Additionally, the joint application details that the current commercial systems do not always meet the Local Digital standards and appear to prevent authorities from being able to transform all their services to more digital, automated, customer centric solutions.

I wish the authorities well as they seek to understand how feasible it is to create an in-house option in the current marketplace. They are investigating the creation of an opensource solution with a community supporting the software and who will be ultimately refining and maintaining the overall integrity of the system. This is one Local Digital Fund application that I will be watching with great interest over its duration from October 2019 to March 2020.

In-house systems are nothing new and perhaps it is right that the concept should be revisited. Is now the right time to go back to the 80s but with a 2020 vision?

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