

Advertisement feature on SANDWELL METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

# Cutting down on costs - and saving paper

Decision-making processes within local government has traditionally relied upon the production of paper documents.

Sandwell Council, in common with most local authorities, has accumulated an immense amount of paper-based and electronic data relating to committee meetings over the years.

The demand on officer time and effort required when trawling for information within these archived documents can therefore be immense.

In the wake of the recent push to modernise local services under the e-government agenda, not to mention the Gershon Public Sector Efficiency Reviews focused upon releasing additional resources to frontline services, Sandwell MBC spotted an opportunity to address this inefficient usage of time, effort and ultimately cost.

To tackle the problem, in May 2003, the council installed a system developed by Enline, called Committee Management Information System (CMIS).

This system, which the council considers is the leading knowledge-based democratic management system, enables council members and democratic services officers to be able to manage more effectively the democratic process and decision-making structures.

It is also able to search for and find decisions, minutes, reports and agenda information from previous meetings, effectively and efficiently.

In just four months Sandwell was in a position to go live with the system across the Council's website in September 2003.

The council's elected members and officers, and indeed anyone worldwide with access to the Internet, can now access members decisions and the information they were provided with to help them make those decisions.

Councillor Steve Eling, deputy leader and cabinet member for strategic resources said: "You can also find out about your elected member, view the council's

forthcoming key decisions on its forward plans and even receive e-mail notifications at home, work or any public access point when anything is added to the system.

"Developments for the future include a facility to allow you to register your interests with the system so you don't even have to go looking for information on your favourite subjects, the system will contact you - and it doesn't stop there.

"If you want to comment on any of the proposals, in line with the vision of e-democracy, citizens may review and comment directly on the authority's forward plans and gain feedback."

Due to the success of CMIS and with the ongoing support of its partners in the initiative, Enline, Sandwell council is now moving towards phase two of its e-modernisation of its decision making processes - CMIS Mobile.

CMIS Mobile using iOra software enables councillors and officers, through the use of tablet and laptop PCs, to download a copy of

the entire content of the CMIS System and browse it even though they will not be connected to the Sandwell Council network.

This effectively allows them to conduct meetings without the accompaniment of the usual bulky and expensive bundle of committee reports.

When the member next logs onto the CMIS mobile server, the software on the tablet PC looks at differences in content between CMIS and what is held on the tablet and sends only what's needed to the tablet, resulting in only small amounts of data being transferred, which is both speedy and inexpensive.

This means that officers and members who need access and use of the information within CMIS will be able to do so without the need to be connected to the internal network, for example when they are at home, a Council meeting, an off-site meeting or while running a surgery.

Access to all the information stored in CMIS will be available on a 24 hours per day seven days a week basis.

What the user sees online is what they see offline and CMIS mobile does this without the need to re-train existing users as it has the same features as the main CMIS system.

The scheme was originally meant to be piloted with the council's cabinet meetings but early experiments with a small number of members have been so promising that the council is hoping to take larger steps towards sustainable meetings using tablet PCs giving added flexibility and paperless meetings for all members and chief officers.

While there will need to be an initial investment in hardware, the council, is anticipating significant savings from reduced support costs resulting from a reduction in printing of hard copies of agenda, minutes and reports and a reduction in e-mail/phone calls to obtain information.

Savings could ultimately be in the region of £60,000 per year, every year with spin off benefits for the environment in terms of reduced paper consumption and emissions from printers and printer toner cartridges.

The Council has no concerns about the security of its system as the developers Enline are principally an internet security firm.

CMIS Mobile uses a combination of encryption and offline authentication to protect confidential content, which would otherwise be stored insecurely on a laptop's hard disk.

## High-tech duo riding high at top of the polls

Two Sandwell councillors are topping a national hit parade of most popular local government websites.

The Local Government Network carried out a survey of websites produced by 372 individual councillors across 11 local authorities, and Sandwell's Coun Bob Piper and Coun Martyn Smith topped the poll, each recording an impressive 2,000 hits during an eight month period.

Pollsters found that Coun Piper and Coun Smith's websites were among the most frequently updated, proof that the time they spend updating the information is well worth it.

Both websites contain frequently sought information about local nurseries and Freedom of Information with useful links to other websites including the main council site: [www.sandwell.gov.uk](http://www.sandwell.gov.uk).

Coun Piper, Labour member for Abbey ward, said: "Councillors' websites are another way of keeping people informed about the council and what is going on in the area.

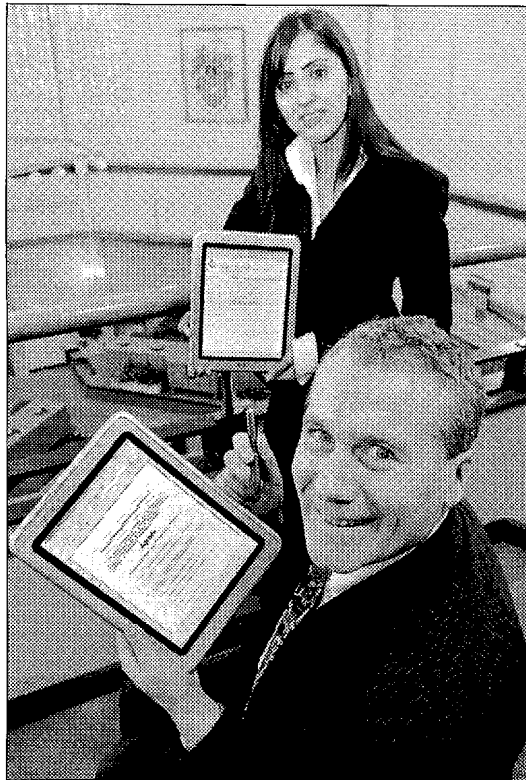
"I'm pleased to hear the site is popular and I welcome any feedback that people want to give."

Coun Smith, Liberal Democrat member for Newton ward, said: "When people discover that my website is critical of shortcomings in council services, I am sure they feel it worth visiting again.

"They know they are getting an honest opinion untainted by public relations."

Sandwell Council is helping all 72 members develop their own websites setting out their views and information on local issues, events and performances and providing a new way for electors to get in touch."

Ideas for future developments include teaming up councillors as "web buddies" to share helpful ideas on how to get the most out of their websites and also quarterly meetings organised by the council's member services unit and web development team to share what does and doesn't work.



Deputy leader of Sandwell MBC, Coun Steve Eling, and Suki Nagra, try out the new computer tablets in the council chamber

The objectives and benefits of CMIS Mobile are:

- The final step towards sustainable meetings using electronic media based on the use of tablet technology giving added flexibility and a paperless meeting for users.
- Significantly increased productivity as users have 24/7 access to CMIS and other applications.
- Users being able to browse the CMIS site, open documents, view information about other members, minutes, agendas etc, even though they will not be connected to the Sandwell council network.
- Reduced telecommunications costs resulting from not having to spend significant time connected in order to access or download online information.
- Reduced support costs resulting from a reduction in printing of hard copies of agenda, minutes and reports and a reduction in e-mail/phone calls to obtain information.
- Increased security as CMIS mobile uses a combination of encryption and offline authentication to protect confidential content, which would otherwise be stored insecurely on a laptop's hard disk.
- The provision of offline mobile portal access to other applications.
- By way of the facilities offered through the main CMIS system, the release of a public version of any private report along with the agenda for a meeting in order to encompass the spirit of freedom of information and the right to know.