AGENDA ITEM No. 

To: GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE
From: DIRECTOR OF ADMINISTRATION
Date: 7 August 2001

Subject: DEVELOPMENT OF REGISTRATION SERVICES IN SCOTLAND
Ref: JAF/AH

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 The Registrar General for Scotland has written to all local authorities to advise of two initiatives in the use of information technology to develop registration services in Scotland. In that letter, the Registrar General seeks comments on options for delivery of the two projects and indications of willingness to participate in a pilot project.

2. Background

2.1 For over ten years the General Register Office of Scotland has maintained a computerised index of births, deaths and marriages registered in Scotland. That index allows searchers at New Register House to quickly locate registered entries, and access to that index has been available to a limited number of registration offices through two services - Local On Line Access (LOLA) and Lola-lite. LOLA is designed for offices running a genealogy service, costs £1,500 per year and gives users a dedicated modem at New Register Office. Lola-lite is aimed at current day-to-day registration and shows the indices for the past one hundred years. Lola-lite is free. At present, no registration office in North Lanarkshire is served by LOLA, although most, but not all, have connections through Lola-lite.

2.2 The Registrar General proposes to undertake the digital imaging of all microfilm/fiche records held by the General Register Office for Scotland and proposes, also, to enhance services offered to local registration offices to include the possibility of viewing images of records rather than, as at present, merely indices of records. The Registrar General proposes, also, to make available, on the internet images of historical events including census information and registrations of births, deaths and marriages registered more than one hundred years ago and deaths registered more than seventy five years ago. This project - the Digital Imaging of the Genealogical Records of Scotland's People (DIGROS) - aims to make available access to those records by means of an internet browser thus overcoming the problems posed by the limited capacity of LOLA. It appears, however, that for the full range of services the Registrar General envisages a continuing requirement to subscribe to LOLA at a cost of £1,500 per year. In addition, the Registrar General proposes to make images of historical events directly available to a number of other agencies including the Students’ Awards Agency.

2.3 The current software system which links local registration offices with the General Register Office for Scotland was developed in the early 1990s and involves a weekly transfer of data from registration offices to the General Register Office for Scotland using diskettes. It is proposed to replace this software with a Forward Electronic Register which will involve electronic transfer of registration data from registration offices to the General Register Office for Scotland.

2.4 The Registrar General for Scotland indicates, also, that it is planned to develop a small pilot project by the end of March 2002 with full implementation of the new systems planned for the beginning of 2003. Local authorities are invited to indicate interest in participating in that pilot project.
3. Considerations

3.1 It is considered that both initiatives are to be welcomed. The development of a computerised index within the General Register Office for Scotland has led to an increased interest in genealogical research. Online access to that index through LOLA could, however, be justified only for registration offices running a genealogy service and, by 1996, all possible connections to LOLA were taken up. Similar - though more restricted - information is available through Lola-lite; but, as access to that service is shared, it is frequently the case that the service is engaged and, accordingly, that a connection cannot be made.

3.2 The current Scottish Registration Software is now dated and this is beginning to lead to problems in providing adequate levels of support. Additionally, the reliance on the weekly transfer of diskettes with attendant requirement for local backup should not now be necessary given the advances in information technology.

3.3 The success of both projects will require the upgrading of communications between local registration offices and the General Register Office for Scotland, and for this the Registrar General identifies a number of options. For North Lanarkshire, being one of the few authorities with a significant number of registration offices, all of which are linked to the local authority network, the preferred option would clearly be access by way of the Local Government Secure Intranet (LGSI). This would involve no call costs. North Lanarkshire Council has already agreed to link to LGSI and is scheduled to achieve that link in the second phase of connections.

3.4 Implementation of both proposals would bring significant day-to-day benefits in the speed and efficiency of registration of births, deaths and marriages. It would, also, remove the current bottleneck in genealogical research access posed by the restriction in access through LOLA. This would enable the Council, in determining any future registration provision, to give consideration to establishing one or more genealogical research centres within North Lanarkshire.

3.5 A significant aspect of the DIGROS proposal is, however, the issuing of extracts. At present, the issuing of extracts proves a significant source of revenue to the Council. The Registrar General acknowledges that the implementation of the DIGROS project may reduce the demand for extracts: it is, however, his view that there will be a compensatory increase in income from genealogical searches. In addition, in his consultation paper, the Registrar General states -

   ‘In due course it is possible that local registration offices could be permitted to issue certified extracts of vital events using the DIGROS system regardless of where the vital event was originally registered.’

3.6 It is fairly certain that the implementation of the DIGROS project will result in a reduction in the demand for extracts - both as a result of the availability of copies through the internet and as a result of the direct access to records by a number of agencies such as the Students’ Award Agency which previously required extracts. The possible increase in genealogical search income is, however, more speculative. In addition, the justification for a continuing fee of £1,500 per annum for connection to LOLA is not immediately apparent. In these circumstances, it is considered that the Council should indicate its support for both initiatives but, with regard to the DIGROS project, subject to clarification of the financial implications and to confirmation that local registration offices will be given, immediately, the right to issue certified extracts of vital events regardless of where the vital event was originally registered.

4. Pilot

4.1 As one of the few Councils with a significant number of registration offices, all of which are connected to a local authority network, North Lanarkshire would be well placed to participate in the pilot project. It cannot, however, be guaranteed that North Lanarkshire will be fully linked to the Local Government Secure Intranet in time to achieve participation in a pilot project from March
2002: without such a link participation in the pilot project would involve the Council in significant capital expenditure which, following achievement of the LGSI link, would be redundant. For that reason, it is proposed that North Lanarkshire Council should not offer to participate in the pilot project.

5. Corporate Considerations

5.1 The proposal to capitalise on advances in information technology accords with the Council's modernising agenda: the proposals are, accordingly, consistent with the Council's policy. It is, however, recognised that further consideration will be required on clarification of the financial aspects of the proposals.

6. Recommendation

6.1 It is recommended that the Committee -

(a) notes the initiatives proposed for the future development of the registration service in Scotland;

(b) indicates that, subject to satisfactory clarification of the financial aspects detailed above, the Council supports in principle both initiatives; and

(c) agrees that the Council should not offer to participate in the pilot development project.

Members seeking further information on the contents of this report are asked to contact John Fleming, Head of Central Services on Extension 2228.