

Corporate Services

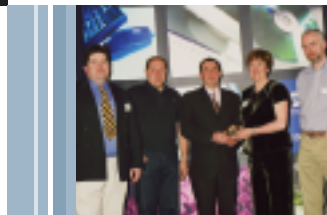
Our staff is our most important and valuable resource and our objective of providing high quality and value for money services can only be realised with the continued support and commitment from staff.



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1. Opening of Dungloe Public Services Centre
2. Presentation of Public Service Excellence Award at Dublin Castle
3. L.G.C.S.B. Local Authority Intranet Awards 2003. Winners of Best Application: Donegal County Council
4. The Cathaoirleach of Donegal County Council, Councillor Patrick McGowan, launches the E-Planning System on 20th September 2004
5. Staff at Dungloe Public Services Centre

Human Resources

Our staff is our most important and valuable resource and our objective of providing high quality and value for money services can only be realised with the continued support and commitment from staff.

The opening of the Dungloe Public Services Centre in October 2003, followed by the opening in April 2004 of the Donegal Public Services Centre, brought the total number of Public Services Centres in the county to five. This has gone a long way to achieving the objectives of the Council's Programme of Decentralisation in terms of bringing services closer to the customer and providing the opportunity for staff to work within their local area

Filling of posts in the new staffing structure, as agreed under the Better Local Government A Programme for Change initiative, was completed in 2003.

Donegal County Council continues to be a major employer in the County with a permanent approved staff complement of 899.5 persons at the end of 2004.

Staff Welfare

Equality Action Team

An Equality Action Team was established in 2003 to work closely with the Equality Officer in the development and implementation of equality policies and to monitor these policies once implemented. The team will also monitor the workplace to be aware of the potential for discrimination and will make proposals to management on equality issues. The membership of the Equality Action Team includes staff who have been nominated by trade unions and management, and staff who have voluntarily offered their time and commitment to participate in the team.

Dignity at Work Policy

Donegal Local Authorities launched a Dignity at Work Policy in October 2004. The purpose of the policy is to give practical guidance to staff on:

- what is meant by harassment, sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace
- how this unacceptable behaviour may be deterred
- how to raise the awareness of management and staff to the identification of the potential for this form of unacceptable behaviour,
- what steps to take if it does occur to ensure that adequate procedures are readily available to deal with the problem
- to ensure that all parties, complainant and respondent, are treated fairly in resolving the problem and to prevent any recurrence.

Following the launch, the Equality Action implemented an extensive awareness programme for employees of Donegal Local Authorities.

Retirement Planning Seminar

A Retirement Planning Seminar was organised for employees of Donegal Local Authorities who were approaching retirement. The seminar covered issues such as managing the changes a person can expect to encounter in retirement, pension scheme, legal issues, investment opportunities, personal taxation, social welfare entitlements, health, diet and exercise.

Health Screening

As part of our Health Promotion Programme, occupational health nurses from BUPA Ireland carried out health screening for 138 members of staff at Council Headquarters and each of the Public Service Centres over a period of six days in October 2004. Screening consisted of a general health questionnaire, body mass index, blood pressure and pulse, full urine analysis, cholesterol test and provision of health advice.

The Marie Keating Foundation Mobile Cancer Information Unit visited Council Headquarters and the Public Service Centres in September 2004. This gave Donegal Local Authorities' staff the opportunity to get cancer information or to talk privately to a nurse. Following their visits, donations were made to the Marie Keating Foundation from Donegal County Council and Donegal Local Authorities' Social Club.

Irish Language Development

240 young people applied for the Council's Gaeltacht Scholarship Scheme in 2003, and over 300 young people applied in 2004. The Council, in conjunction with the Summer Colleges, presented 24 full Scholarships in 2003, and a further 34 in 2004.

A wide range of events were organised as part of Irish Language Week in the libraries throughout the County, and in conjunction with the Western Education and Library Board on a cross-border basis; including concerts, Irish Language social nights, entertainment for children, and Irish language displays.

A new panel of Clerical Officers fluent in the Irish language was established for the Public Services Centre in Dungloe as part of the Council's ongoing drive to develop the provision of services through Irish for the people of the Gaeltacht. Panel applicants for other offices serving Gaeltacht areas also underwent an Irish language written and oral exam as part of the interview process.

Nine members of staff completed their Diploma in Irish with the University of Ireland, Galway, and extra classes were organised in various Council offices throughout the county. The simultaneous translation equipment was introduced to the Islands' Committee meetings on a trial basis, at its meetings in Dungloe.

The Official Languages Act came into effect in July 2003, and work began to ensure that the Council was fulfilling its duties and obligations in relation to the Act. In 2004 Donegal Local Authorities were selected among the first 25 public bodies nationally to develop a Language Scheme under the auspices of the Act, and this included a public and

internal process of consultation. The Scheme is to be ready for approval by March 2005.

Workplace Partnership

In early 2003, the Partnership Committee agreed that its Action Plan for the period 2003 – 2005 would have as its basis the Sustaining Progress (Social Partnership Agreement) 2003 – 2005 – Agreed Action Plan, and that the activities overseen by the Partnership Committee would be directly related to meeting the agreed objectives, while embracing the national partnership's own strategy Deepening Partnership.

In the Committee's view, fundamental to achieving these objectives would be our collective ownership of them. Accordingly, while we agreed to pursue our projects to completion in the period 2003 – 2005, our prime concentration would be to mainstream partnership as the way we should be doing our business throughout the organisation, and at all levels.

The Committee agreed that its profile and empowerment would be raised and consolidated by the participation of the County Manager and the Directors of Services along with staff and staff representatives. In addition, because Donegal County Council had decentralised, the Committee agreed that the formation of Area Partnerships, mirroring the makeup of the County Partnership Committee, was imperative to the successful mainstreaming of the ethos. The Area Partnerships are as follows:

Glenties – Milford Area Partnership;
Letterkenny – Inishowen Area Partnership;
Donegal – Stranorlar Area Partnership;
Lifford Headquarters Area Partnership;
County Fire Service Area Partnership.

The first three Area Partnership Committees (APC's) were trained to work together as a team in late 2003. The Fire Service Partnership was trained in early 2004. The Lifford HQ Partnership will be assembled and trained in 2005, and Town Councils will be introduced to the APC's in 2005 also. The County Committee, the APC's and the Fire Service Forum meet on a two-monthly basis.

While the County Partnership Committee directs and oversees the partnership process, the Area Partnership Committees involve themselves in local 'nuts and bolts' issues having as their basis the delivery of our commitments under Sustaining Progress. Common to the agendas of all APC's are such issues as cross service collaboration, lunchtime opening, communications, health and safety, equality, mobile facilities and the Social Club.

In addition, Partnership continued its involvement in the following ongoing specific projects:

- Staff Handbook;
- Return to Learning Project;
- Communications;
- Health and Safety;
- Family Friendly (Work-Life Balance) Policy;
- Grapevine staff newsletter;
- Health screening for staff.

Donegal Integrated Service Delivery Project

Each of the five public service centres is fronted by an Independent Information Unit and has a range of agencies co-locating to deliver services to the customer. On a practical level, a customer calling to any of the Public Service Centres now has access to information on all public services and civil entitlement, and can initiate an application to a range of services provided by the partner Agencies.

Over the past two years, an extensive range of research has been undertaken by the Project aimed at increasing the understanding of issues involved in integrating services and at using additional channels to deliver services to the customer. This included:

- Research aimed at demonstrating the potential to integrate services from three separate agencies (unemployment, housing and medical cards) for delivery to the customer using technology to allow customers the option of sharing data between agencies instead of having to provide the information separately to each of the agencies.
- An in-depth study of means testing processes and procedures using three service areas (unemployment, housing and medical cards) leading to a report, with recommendations on the development of common or shared means test procedures. The report also recommended on issues related to the use of shared means tests and on the rules to apply to the updating of data by agencies.
- Research to identify the most suitable services to be deployed and tested in a pilot Contact Centre, and to project the impact of demand (the willingness of customers to use alternative channels) on the Contact Centre pilot. This research reported on the sustainability of the pilot, forecast the implications of scaling the Contact Centre pilot to National level; and attempted to gauge the effects of the Contact Centre pilot on the traditional points of public service delivery.

Review of the Operation of Social Housing Support Schemes in County Donegal

An interagency review of the operation of the Rent Supplement Scheme, and its impact on social housing provision and support, has been conducted with the participation of service delivery staff in each of the agencies. This report included recommendations aimed at establishing the real level of social housing need and at making these schemes more efficient and effective in meeting the needs of customers.

This research on social housing supports led to a Government decision in July 2004 to take an integrated inter-agency approach to the provision of social housing supports and to differentiate more clearly between short and long-term accommodation needs. As a result of the Government decision, a new scheme, the Rental Accommodation Scheme, is to be introduced to provide an additional accommodation option for Rent Supplement

customers with long term accommodation needs. Donegal County Council has been named as a pilot authority for the implementation of the new scheme and commenced work on this in late 2004 through the ISD Project.

Award for Public Service Excellence

As part of the Governments overall change and modernisation programme, the Department of Finance invited submissions early in 2004 from all parts of the Public Service to highlight innovation in public service delivery and to give recognition to those selected as meriting an award. Donegal County Council's submission outlined the work on developing five Public Service Centres to deliver a localised service at Electoral Area level. It also highlighted the work on fostering inter agency collaboration and the work to integrate the provision of public services from the Public Service Centres. Donegal County Council was presented with an Excellence Award and invited to showcase this work at a Showcase Event for Public Service Excellence held in Dublin Castle on 8 July 2004.

Higher Education Grants

The Council administers Higher Education Grants on behalf of the Department of Education and Science for students pursuing undergraduate courses in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain and to students wishing to pursue postgraduate courses in Ireland, including Northern Ireland.

In May 2003, the Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey TD, introduced a package of measures to address the problem of disadvantage in third level education. Grant levels were increased by 15% with the income threshold levels expanded to incorporate four categories of grant ranging from 25% to 100% grant. This resulted in an increase in the income threshold from €36,897 to €40,000, ensuring a significantly higher number of students from households with moderate incomes would not have to pay the €670 Student Service Charge.

These measures have carried on into 2004 with an 18.6% increase in the "Top-up" element of the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant. The Special Rate of Maintenance Grant or "Top-up" was introduced in 2001 to provide extra assistance for students from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds.

Higher Education Grants Scheme - Income Thresholds 2003/04

| Number of Dependent Children | Full Maintenance and Full Fees | Part Maintenance (75%) and Full Fees | Part Maintenance (50%) and Full Fees | Part Maintenance (50%) and Full Fees | Part Fees (50%) only* |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Less than 4 | €32,000 | €34,000 | €36,000 | €38,000 | €40,000 |
| 4 - 7 | €35,165 | €37,365 | €39,560 | €41,760 | €43,955 |
| 8 or more | €38,180 | €40,565 | €42,950 | €45,335 | €47,720 |

* Full Student Service Charge is paid where income is at or below this level.
* Income limits increased in 2004/05 in the order of 6%.

The following payments were excluded from the calculation of reckonable income under Clause 2 "Award of Grants / Scholarships" in the 2004/05 Scheme: -

1. Millennium Partnership Fund
2. The Fund for Students with Disabilities
3. The Student Assistance Fund

Maintenance Grants 2003/2004 & 2004/05

| | Non-Adjacent Rate | | Adjacent Rate | |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2003/04 | 2003/04 |
| Full Maintenance | €2,885 | €2,945 | €1,155 | €1,180 |
| Part Maintenance (75%) | €2,165 | €2,210 | €865 | €880 |
| Part Maintenance (50%) | €1,445 | €1,475 | €580 | €590 |
| Part Maintenance (50%) | €720 | €735 | €290 | €295 |

Special Rates of Maintenance Grant (Top-up)

The income limit for the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant was increased to €13,760 in 2003 and €14,693 in 2004 thus maintaining the linkage with social welfare payments. The income threshold equated to the maximum point of the Old Age Contributory Pension plus the maximum Qualified Adult Allowance for a person over 66 years of age, annualised. The non-adjacent rate of the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant was increased to the maximum personal rate of Unemployment Assistance.

| Grant | Standard Grant | | Top – Up Grant | | Total Grant | |
|---------------|----------------|-------|----------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| | 03/04 | 04/05 | 03/04 | 04/05 | 03/04 | 04/05 |
| Adjacent Rate | €1155 | €1180 | €645 | €765 | €1800 | €1945 |
| Non-Adjacent | €2885 | €2945 | €1610 | €1910 | €4495 | €4855 |

Number of Higher Education Grants Awarded:

1,165 grants were awarded for the 2003/04 academic year and 1,252 in 2004/05.

Freedom of Information

On 7 July 2003, fees for Freedom of Information requests were introduced under the Freedom of Information (Amendment) Act 2003.

41 requests were received in that year and 49 requests in 2004. The following is a breakdown of the status of those requests:

| | 2003 | 2004 |
|----------------------------------|------|------|
| Granted | 23 | 39 |
| Refused | 8 | 5 |
| Withdrawn/Dealt with outside FOI | 4 | 3 |
| Part Granted | 2 | 2 |
| Review/Appeal | 2 | |
| Transferred | 2 | |
| Total requests | 41 | 49 |

Motor Taxation Service

Motor Taxation & related services are now available in the Public Services Centres at Carndonagh, Milford, Letterkenny Dungloe and Donegal Town as well as in Lifford thereby improving the accessibility and convenience of the service. All the offices issue motor vehicle licences (generally known as motor tax discs), driving licences and trade plates for motor traders. A full service is available from any of the centres, irrespective of the customers place of residence.

The Motor Taxation Offices collectively processed 139,249 and 142,766 receipted transactions in the period amounting to over €21 million in revenue in 2003 and over €22 million in 2004. The breakdown of transactions is as follows:

| | 2003 | 2004 |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Driving Licences | 21,771 | 19,729 |
| Tax Discs | 103,027 | 108,273 |
| Motor Trade Licence | 153 | 165 |
| Miscellaneous Receipts & Items | 14,298 | 14,599 |

Driving Licences for Ten New EU member States

With effect from 1st May 2004, 10 new Member States joined the European Union. In accordance with EU Directive 91/439/EEC Driving licences from these countries are mutually recognised for driving purposes in the EU from that date. The states concerned are Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

Under the Driving Licence Directive, no person may hold a driving licence from more than one Member State. Drivers holding valid driving licences issued by Member States are not obliged to exchange their licences; this is to facilitate the common transport policy and to facilitate the movement of persons settling in a Member State other than that in which they have passed a driving test.

Taxing on the Internet www.motortax.ie

In the Spring of 2004, the option for owners of private cars, motorcycles and vehicles adapted for use by disabled persons to tax on the Internet was introduced. The

renewal/reminder notice has a PIN number printed on the right hand side. Entering the vehicle registration number and PIN gives access to the Motor Tax Online service. Vehicle insurance details (name of insurer, policy number and expiry date) and Laser/Credit card details are required to avail of the service.

New Single Vehicle Registration Document

All vehicles registered after the 28 May 2004 are issued with a Vehicle Registration Certificate from the Vehicle Registration Unit, Shannon when they are taxed. This replaces the Vehicle Licensing Certificate which had been in operation since January 1993.

Testing of Commercial vehicles

The Department of Transport has introduced new regulations on vehicle testing for Light Goods Vehicles (unladen weight less than 1524kgs) from 1 September 2004. The regulation require these vehicles to be tested when they are one year old and annually thereafter.

National Road Traffic Act, 2002 (Penalty Points System)

Penalty points were introduced on the 1st June 2003 for speeding and on the 25 August 2003 for no insurance and for not wearing a seatbelt. On 4 June 2004 penalty points were introduced for careless driving. Points remain on the licence record for a period of 3 years and an accumulation of 12 points at any time within the 3 years will lead to automatic disqualification for 6 months. The full penalty points system will be introduced for other offences at a later stage.

Local Motor Taxation Service Indicators for 2003

Percentage of Applications which are postal
 Motor Taxation 16%
 Driving Licences 25%

Average Number of Postal Applications Daily

Motor Taxation 68
 Driving Licences 20

Percentage of overall postal applications which are dealt with (i.e. disc/licence issued) from receipt of the application:

| | Motor Taxation | | Driving Licences | |
|-------------------|----------------|----|------------------|----|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| On the Same Day | 4 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Third day or less | 61 | 90 | 19 | 96 |
| Fifth day or less | 3 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Over 5 days | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 |

Note: Performance indicators for Local Motor Taxation for 2004 are listed on page 78.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Implementation of the Council's Information Systems Strategic Plan 2002-2005 continued. The work programme ranged from network maintenance and expansion, systems development and implementation to the progression of information society strategies and provision of broadband infrastructure. Opportunities across a wide range of technologies are now routinely explored and exploited to the benefit of the Council, its customers and increasing the ICT capacity of the county.

Technology Infrastructure

Donegal County Council's infrastructure at the moment comprises 50 various Servers, 1,090 PC's and 480 printers. 25 servers sit on the Local Area Network in Lifford with the other servers located on various office networks throughout the county. This infrastructure represents many years of investment and is amongst the largest Local Authority Networks in Ireland.

Expansion of the network continued with the opening of two more Public Service Centres. Server-based local area networks are located in the offices, linked to headquarters by 2mbps-leased lines, supporting the range of services at local level. Public service kiosks offer instant access to the public to Government websites and downloadable application forms. Facilities in the new offices are shared with other agencies such as Department of Social & Family Affairs, Citizens Information Centres, National Road Design Office, FAS and MABS. The Council co-operated with the various agencies in the planning and development of shared technology. The most recently opened office at Donegal Town has wireless hotspots enabling mobile working, complementing the comprehensive conference and meeting room facilities which feature modern audiovisual technology.

Other new additions to the network included the Letterkenny Fire Station, Bundoran Town Council and Bundoran District Library in 2003. The relocation of the Stranorlar Roads Office and improved technology provision to the Stranorlar Regional Training Centre occurred in 2004.

Implementation of a wireless network in Letterkenny and its environs, linking Council-operated sites, was completed in 2003. Expansion of wireless networks in 2004 included connectivity between the Sanitary Office and Public Services Centre in Carndonagh and the Water Pollution Laboratory in Letterkenny. These implementations demonstrate ongoing commitment to research, development and implementation of state of the art networking solutions offering greater efficiency at reduced cost. The Taobh Tire project was completed in 2004. This project enabled the rollout of a library service and public Internet access points to rural communities using ICT. Locations served included both Arranmore and Tory islands.

Geographic Information Systems

Throughout the period of this report, there has been increased development and utilisation of GIS as a key technology. Under a Mapping Contract with the Ordnance Survey, 2003 saw the delivery of complete coverage of the

county colour orthophotography. By the end of 2004, the Council possessed the most up to date mapping available since the early 1900s for the majority of the county, achieved through delivery of 1:2500 and 1:5000 mapping under the OS contract.

GIS has been used to optimum advantage in the development of the Letterkenny Town Plan and the associated public consultation process. GIS technology was used extensively in the planning and route selection for the Letterkenny, Ballybofey/ Stranorlar and Bundoran Metropolitan Area (Broadband) Networks. 2004 saw further deployment as GIS was used to facilitate the definition of polling boundaries for election purposes as well as identification of winter maintenance routes, which resulted in the production of a planned network of efficient gritting routes.

Wider deployment, and applications such as virtual reality GIS, continues to benefit the visual impact assessment of planning applications, housing land availability, economic planning, fibre optic route planning and wireless network provision.

E-Government Services

The Council's website has been established for a number of years now and provides information access to the public on all aspects of Council business. Commencing in 2003 and culminating in the official launch by An Cathaoirleach, Cllr. Patrick McGowan in 2004, a major enhancement to the website was the introduction of the ePlanning facility. Further information is provided earlier in the report under Planning and Economic Development.

The Library Web OPAC system, formally launched in 2003, is an example of another online enhancement to Council services. Further information is provided under Community, Culture and Enterprise Service.

Extensive use has been made of the website to advertise and facilitate various public consultation processes on major policy issues including waste management, planning and speed limit revisions.

Work is ongoing in the area of website prototyping in preparation for a complete overhaul of the Council's website to present a more customer-centric view and to deliver increased interaction with Council Members through the provision of online access to Council Meeting Agendas, Minutes, etc.

Systems Development

A Corporate Intranet has also been in place for a number of years and we are continually building on this technology to provide an organisational wide platform for information exchange and new systems. Work is ongoing on the development and implementation of Intranet-based applications and solutions. These systems range from those focused on efficiency and service delivery to the customer, to systems designed to support staff at all levels. Examples of systems implemented include Contact Management, Management of Council Business, Annual Leave, Local Improvement Schemes, and Water Connections/Road Openings.

In 2003, innovative work on Intranet development was recognised nationally as part of the Local Government Computer Services Board's competition for the best Local Authority Intranets. Donegal County Council was awarded the prize for the best Intranet application for our Telemetry Application. This system allows staff to receive real time information on activity in water treatment plants and reservoirs direct to their desktops or over the Internet.

A pilot parking fines application using mobile technology, was developed and piloted in the Bundoran Town Council area during 2004. This system sees the Traffic Warden's notebook replaced by a handheld device into which details are recorded and tickets printed off. Car registration details are transferred electronically back to the Town Council for follow up. This system will be implemented countywide in 2005.

The Systems Development work programme is concentrated in areas where service delivery improvement is ongoing. New systems are being designed to facilitate better access to information for both internal users and the public. In many cases, manual processes are being streamlined and automated with new systems that are secure, reliable and easy to use.

Technology in the Broader Context

Through participation in the ERNACT (www.ernact.net) network since its foundation in 1990, Donegal County Council has been involved in a range of European transnational and interregional, as well as cross border public sector Information Society technology projects. This involvement enables the Council access to EU funding for technology projects within the County. 2003 saw the expansion of the ERNACT network to incorporate partner regions in Spain and the Czech Republic, adding diversity and increased potential for knowledge exchange. The ERNACT network continued to evolve in 2004 into an EU network of excellence for developing and implementing ICT-based models of regional development.

During 2003, the ERNACT network was successful in the submission of an eGovernment project for funding under Measure B2 of the Interreg III 'Atlantic Area' Programme – Access to the Information Society. The "Atlantic Area eCommunity Centres of Excellence Network" (AA-ECONET) project aims to develop a network of eCommunities in the Atlantic Area to enhance citizen participation in the decision making process within their regional/local administrations using ICT.

The main focus during 2004 was to examine the current consultation processes on a local and transnational level and to develop an online tool to facilitate consultation and citizen participation over the Internet.

In 2004, the ERNACT network was successful in the submission of a project proposal under Interreg IIIC called "Boosting Regional Information Society Expertise" (BRISE). The project brings together 10 public authorities from across Europe who will work together over the three-year lifespan on developing best practice in the area of regional Information Society strategies. With an emphasis on

knowledge exchange and development of information and communication technology initiatives, Donegal County Council is participating in three key areas: Citizens and eGovernance, Broadband and ICT-driven Inward Investment. The BRISE project will allow Donegal County Council to interact with more developed Central European regions towards identifying opportunities for increasing ICT capacity.

2004 also saw the successful submission under Interreg IIIA of the Border Corridor Digital Economy Network (BCDEN) project. This project is a follow up to the successful development of the Digital Economy Strategy for the North West Crossborder region. Project funding has been awarded to implement various projects in the areas of telecommunications infrastructure, e-Government, tourism, and knowledge economy generally over a three-year period. Another aspect of the project will be to transfer the lessons learned to other areas in the border corridor with a view to stimulating the demand for wireless, public services, healthcare and tourism related services.

Broadband Infrastructure

Advancement in the area of broadband moved at a strong pace with the completion of the Letterkenny Metropolitan Area Network (MAN) in 2004. Optimally routed around the town to encompass existing areas of commerce, education, voluntary as well as industrial and planned industrial sites, this infrastructure represents significant investment in the economic development of the town. It will assist Letterkenny, and the Donegal region, in attracting investment from the high-tech sector and facilitate a move from dependence on traditional industry for employment. The Letterkenny MAN is managed by E-Net (www.enet.ie) with whom the Council has established a close working relationship to ensure efficient management and operation of the network.

The Minister for Communications Marine & Natural Resources announced a new Broadband Action Plan on 12th December 2003. The purpose of this plan is to connect towns of 1500 population to Broadband in partnership with Local Authorities over a four-year period. During 2004, the Council responded to a call for proposals for the further development of Metropolitan Area Networks. Proposals were submitted in respect of Ballybofey/Stranorlar, Bundoran and a cross border link from Letterkenny to Derry. Construction, subject to funding approval, will commence in 2005.

In addition, the Government announced a new Group Broadband Scheme initiative. Smaller rural communities can pool their demands and secure high-speed connectivity from a range of providers in the Irish market with grant-aided support. The Council is working with the Department of Communications Marine and Natural Resources and local communities to maximise the benefit for Donegal under both of these measures.

There is sustained commitment to explore opportunities for the expansion of broadband, including wireless networking, for other towns and rural communities across the County. The emphasis is on making the Information Society a reality throughout the entire county and opening up the potential for social development and economic growth as a result.