

CORPORATE SERVICES SEIRHÍSÍ CORPARÁIDEACHA

The paragraphs below outline the principal achievements in 2005 and highlight the priority areas to be tackled in 2006.

Earlier this year, the Council adopted a five year Corporate Plan, setting out the principal objectives to be achieved over the lifetime of the Plan and the principal strategies to be pursued in order to achieve these objectives. The work programmes/business plan for the Corporate Services Directorate in 2006 are set out in the context of the Plan.

At the end of 2004, local authorities were required for the first time to collate details of performance against a set of 42 nationally determined Service Indicators. The results were verified and published by the Local Government Management Services Board in the middle of 2005. The performance of the Donegal local authorities, which was reviewed by the elected members, provided encouraging results in a number of areas by comparison with other authorities, while the outcome in other areas of activity indicated the need for significant improvement. The publication of the results for 2005 will enable us to review performance year-on-year, and will provide further useful information to guide decisions on resource allocation in the coming years.

Early in 2006, a draft Customer Action Plan will be discussed with the elected members. The principal objective of the Plan will be to build on the significant improvements in customer service achieved in recent years through the opening of the Public Service Centres. In particular, the Plan will focus on the setting and achievement of a range of clearly defined customer service standards, in terms of quality, timeliness and efficiency. Discussions with the staff representative organisations on the introduction of extended opening hours are also well advanced. The Plan will also provide for the introduction of a formal complaints/appeals system, in activity areas where such services are not currently available. The re-design and enhancement of the Council's website, which is currently nearing completion, will also provide improved access to information and services. A significant development during 2005 was the approval by the Minister of a three-year Scheme under the Official Languages Act for the development and enhancement of services through the Irish language. The focus now turns to the achievement of the objectives set out in that Scheme.

Priority will continue to be given to the development of a Public Service Centre for the Stranorlar Electoral Area, in partnership with the newly established Health Services Executive (North West).

Following the establishment of outreach services in Ballyshannon during 2005, the development of similar services in towns such as Bunclara and Bundoran will be actively pursued during 2006.

Over the past several years, the elected members have made a very large investment in the creation of the necessary conditions to achieve continuous significant improvement in the quality of service to customers and local communities, through the provision of the Public Service Centres, the strengthening of staffing and management structures and the development of our ICT infrastructure. The work of maximizing the return on that investment will continue in 2006 through a range of organizational development initiatives.

The elected members will continue to play a key role in all of these developments. The Strategic Policy Committees were re-established during 2005. The former Corporate Services SPC has had its terms of reference extended to include the Community, Culture and Enterprise Directorate. Each SPC has agreed a work programme and is now actively engaged on that programme.

Work is also significantly advanced on a comprehensive review of the committee structure of the Council. The review will encompass the operation of the General Purposes Committee as well as the terms of reference and composition of all sub-Committees, and their relationship or potential relationship to the sectoral working groups and other structures established under the County Development Board.

CORPORATE SERVICES
SEIRHÍSÍ CORPARÁIDEACHA

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: €25,376,100

Draft Budgeted Income: €13,703,300

The following pages set out the above as per each relevant Programme Group.

Programme Group 1

HOUSING, SOCIAL & BUILDING SERVICES

SEIRBHÍSI TITHÍOCHTA, SÓISIALTA AGUS FOIRGNÍOCHTA

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: €377,000

Draft Budgeted Income: € Nil

(Pages 1-3 of Blue Pages)

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €377,000 in expenditure under this heading.

Programme Group 2

ROADS & TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

SEIRBHÍSI BÓITHRE AGUS IOMPAIR

Budgeted Expenditure: €3,282,300

Budgeted Income: €51,300

(Pages 4-6 of Blue Pages)

MOTOR TAXATION SERVICE

Motor Taxation and related services are now available in the five Public Service Centres at Carndonagh, Milford, Letterkenny, Dungloe and Donegal Town as well as Lifford. All these offices issue motor vehicle licences (generally known as motor tax discs), driving licences, trade plates for motor traders etc., duplicate registration books, duplicate vehicle licensing certificates and duplicate motor tax discs are also issued. A full service is available from any of the centres, irrespective of the customer's place of residence.

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €1,218,200 under this heading.

Projected Motor Tax Receipts and Transactions for 2005

	Revenue	Revenue %	Transactions	Transactions %
Lifford	€3,075,788	13%	23,375	14%
Donegal Town	€4,549,480	19%	31,816	19%
Letterkenny	€6,808,313	29%	50,525	30%
Carndonagh	€4,479,992	19%	30,241	18%
Dungloe	€2,728,299	12%	18,658	11%
Milford	€1,833,485	8%	13,585	8%
Total	€23,475,357	100%	168,201	100%

It is projected that overall activity will increase in **2005 by 8.5%**.

Year	Transaction	Revenue
2002	134,261	€17,640,249
2003	143,355	€21,042,391
2004	142,766	€22,324,869
2005	168,201	€23,475,357

87% of motor tax revenue has been collected in the Public Service Centres and 86% of motor tax business in the county is being transacted there.

POSTAL APPLICATIONS

85% of motor tax transactions are dealt with over the counter although driving licence applications are always posted out the next working day. The total postal applications received in 2004 was 18,587. Total postal applications received to date (Nov 2005) are 12,751. This continued reduction suggests that more customers are finding it convenient to attend at one of the public services centres in person.

97% of postal applications are dealt with on the day they are received with the remaining 3% (usually exchange driving licences which have to be verified with the relevant issuing Authority before they can be processed) dealt with within three days.

TAXING ON THE INTERNET WWW.MOTORTAX.IE

The online motor tax service was extended in November 2005 to include the first taxation of new or second hand imported vehicles in the following tax classes - private, motorcycles, agricultural tractors/excavators and vehicles adapted for use by disabled drivers. Entering the vehicle registration number and PIN which is provided with tax renewal notices allows access to the Motor Tax Online service or in the case of first taxation of the above mentioned vehicles the owner will have to enter a portion of the chassis number as the PIN. Vehicle insurance details (name of insurer, policy number and expiry date) and Laser/Credit card details are required to avail of the service

Statistics show that 8.12% of vehicle owners availed of the on line renewal option in County Donegal up to 31st October 2005, an increase of 3% over 2004. Donegal remains the lowest online motor tax user countrywide, a contributory factor presumably being the convenience of the decentralisation of the services. The Council will continue to actively promote the use of the online service.

INSPECTION OF RECOVERY VEHICLES AND WORKSHOPS

Since June 2005 new arrangements have been introduced for the inspection of Recovery Vehicles and Workshops through the Vehicle Standards Division based in the Machinery Yard, Lifford. Inspections are conducted weekly on Tuesdays by prior appointment. This area is at present being jointly reviewed by The Department of Transport & DOEHLG under roadworthiness legislation.

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €2,064,100 in expenditure under this heading.

Programme Group 3

**WATER SUPPLY AND SEWERAGE
SOLÁTHAR UISCE AGUS SÉARACHAS**

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: €622,800
Draft Budgeted Income: € Nil
(Pages 7-10 of Blue Pages)

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €622,800 for expenditure under this heading.

Programme Group 4

**DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES & CONTROLS
DREASACHTAÍ FORBARTHA AGUS STIÚRADH**

Budgeted Expenditure: €158,000

Budgeted Income: €Nil

(Pages 11 - 13 of Blue Pages)

CONTRIBUTIONS

A provision of €22,500 is included in respect of contributions to the General Council of County Council (€16,300), contribution to LAMA (€4,900) and contribution to the twinning of Local Authority Areas (€1,300).

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €135,500 for expenditure under this heading.

Programme Group 5

**ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION
COSAINN NA TIMPEALLACHTA**

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: € 102,000

Draft Budgeted Income: € Nil

(Pages 14-16 of Blue Pages)

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €102,000 for expenditure under this heading.

Programme Group 6

RECREATION & AMENITY

CAITHEAMH AIMSIRE AGUS TAITNEAMHACHT

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: €158,600

Draft Budgeted Income: €Nil

(Pages 17 - 18 of Blue Pages)

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €49,500 in expenditure under this heading.

FORBAIRT NA GAELIGE

A total sum of €109,100 is included in this year's draft budget for the development of services through Irish.

The main focus over the coming year will be the implementation of the Donegal Local Authorities Scheme under Article 11 of the Official Languages Act 2003, as well as the implementation of the other elements of the Act as they relate to the work of the Council. This will involve the implementation of a wide range of initiatives and statutory obligations including staff training, translation, development of bilingual website, redesign of application forms in bilingual format, recruitment, the continuation of our Gaeltacht Scholarship Scheme for young people in Donegal, and continued sponsorship of the Glór na nGael community award.

In recognition of its significant obligations to develop a full service through Irish from Dungloe Public Services Centre, and to begin the process of developing the Irish language as the internal working language of this office by 2020, the Council will continue to support the provision of the Diploma in Irish by Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta, Gaoth Dobhair (University of Ireland, Galway), for staff within the Public Services Centre. This course commenced in October 2005 and will continue for two years. The Council will also support the provision of the European Certificate in Irish by the University of Ireland, Maynooth, to staff, focussing principally on staff in those offices serving Gaeltacht areas.

The Council have also been working with Coiste 100 Bliain de Choláiste Uladh, one of our partners in the Scholarship Scheme, which will celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the College in 2006. In recognition of the ongoing support from Coláiste Uladh to the Scholarship Scheme, the Council proposes to support a number of adult scholarships to this centenary event.

The Council will continue to support the Scholarship Scheme, a unique and widely appreciated partnership between the Council, through its Coiste na Gaeilge, and the Summer Colleges in Donegal. Under the Scheme, the Council and Gaeltacht Colleges will provide a total of 34 full Gaeltacht Scholarships for young people from Donegal between 10 and 18 years of age.

The Council will require a range of translation services to fully meet our obligations under the Act. The Act places an obligation on the Council to produce a range of major policy documents, annual reports etc in bilingual format, and provision has been made under the relevant Directorates for outsourcing translators to undertake that work. Operational translations have increased as a result of the Official Languages Act and as a result of commitments under our Language Scheme. Oifigeach na Gaeilge, and other members of staff will, in the main, carry these out internally. The 2006 draft budget includes a provision of €5,000 in expenditure to provide support for the Irish Language Office so that translation work does not deflect attention from other important development initiatives, and the full implementation of the Language Scheme.

The Council will, as usual, organise a series of events and activities to support the promotion of Irish Language Week in March, through our Public Services Centres and Libraries.

Tá soláthar iomlán de €109,100 i mbuiséad na bliana seo le forbairt a dhéanamh ar na seirbhísí i nGaeilge ó Chomhairle Contae Dhún na nGall.

Leagfar béim ar leith sa bhliain atá amach romhainn ar chur i bhfeidhm Scéim Údaráis Áitiúla Dhún na nGall faoi Alt 11 d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003, chomh maith le cur i bhfeidhm eilimintí eile den Acht de réir mar a bhaineann siad le hobair na Comhairle. Is é a bheas i gceist leis seo ná réimse leathan tograí agus dualgas reachtúil ar a n-áirtítear oiliúint, aistriúchán, suíomh idirlín dhátheangach, foirmeacha iarratais dhátheangacha, earcaíocht, Scéim Scoláireachta Gaeltachta do dhaoine óga, urraíocht ar dhuais Ghlór na nGael srl.

Mar aitheantas ar na dualgais mhóra atá orainn seirbhís iomlán i nGaeilge a chur ar fáil ón Ionad Seirbhísí Pobail ar an Chlochán Liath, agus le tús a chur leis an obair chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun tosaigh mar theanga oibre na hoifige seo faoin bhliain 2020, leanfaidh an Chomhairle lena tacaíocht don Diplóma sa Ghaeilge le hAcadamh na hOllscolaíochta, Gaoth Dobhair, fá choinne ball foirne atá lonnaithe san Ionad Seirbhísí Pobail. Cuireadh tús leis an chúrsa seo i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2005, agus mairfidh sé dhá bhliain. Beidh tacaíocht ar fáil ón Chomhairle fosta le Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge de chuid Ollscoil na hÉireann, Má Nuad, a chur fáil do bhaill foirne, go

háirithe do na baill foirne sin atá ag obair in oifigí atá ag freastal ar cheantracha Gaeltachta.

Bhí an Chomhairle ag comhoibriú chomh maith le Coiste 100 Bliain de Choláiste Uladh, atá mar phairtnéir againn sa Scéim Scoláireachta, a bheas ag déanamh ceiliúradh ar chéad bhliain den Choláiste i 2006, agus mar aitheantas ar an tacaíocht leanúnach a fhaightear ó Choláiste Uladh don Scéim Scoláireachta tá socraithe ag an Chomhairle urraíocht a dhéanamh ar roinnt scoláireachtaí do dhaoine fásta don mhór-ócáid seo.

Leanfaidh an Chomhairle lena tacaíocht don Scéim Scoláireachta, scéim atá mar chomhpháirtíocht idir Choiste na Gaeilge agus na Coláistí Samhraidh i nDún na nGall. Faoin scéim seo, cuireann an Chomhairle agus na Coláistí líon iomlán de 34 Scoláireacht Ghaeltachta ar fáil do dhaoine óga i nDún na nGall atá idir 10-18 mbliana.

Beidh réimse seirbhísí aistriúcháin de dhíth ar an Chomhairle chomh maith, lenár gcoimintintí ar fad faoin Acht Teanga a chomhlíonadh. Cuireann an tAcht dualgas ar an Chomhairle réimse leathan cáipéisí polasaí, tuarascálacha, srl a chur ar fáil sa dá theanga oifigiúla agus tá soláthar déanta faoi na Stiúrthóireachtaí cuí le seirbhísí aistriúcháin sheachtracha a fháil leis an obair sin a dhéanamh. Sa bhreis air seo, déanann an Chomhairle cuid mhór obair aistriúcháin go laethúil, agus tá méadú suntasach ar an aistriú seo mar gheall ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus an Scéim Teanga. Is é Oifigeach Forbartha Gaeilge na Comhairle Contae, agus baill foirne eile de chuid na Comhairle, a dhéanfaidh na mionaistriúcháin laethúla seo i 2006. Mar sin féin, beidh buiséad beag aistriúcháin de €5,000 de dhíth le tacaíocht a thabhairt don tSeirbhís Forbartha Gaeilge sa dóigh is nach gcuirfidh obair aistriúcháin isteach ar thograí forbartha tábhachtacha eile, nó ar chur i bhfeidhm iomlán na Scéime Teanga.

Reáchtálfaidh an Chomhairle, mar is gnáth, méid áirithe imeachtaí agus gníomhaíochtaí i rith na bliana chomh maith le tacú le Seachtain na Gaeilge i mí Mhárta, tríd na hIonaid Seirbhísí Pobail agus na Leabharlanna.

Programme Group 7

AGRICULTURE, EDUCATION, HEALTH & WELFARE TALMHAÍOCHT, OIDEACHAS, SLÁINTE AGUS LEAS

Draft Budgeted Expenditure: €10,318,900

Draft Budgeted Income: €10,242,600

(Pages 20 - 22 of Blue Pages)

HIGHER EDUCATION GRANTS

Donegal County Council administers the Higher Education Grants Scheme on behalf of the Department of Education and Science, for students who intend to pursue undergraduate courses in third level colleges and universities in Ireland, Northern Ireland and E.U. Member States. All monies expended on the Scheme are fully recouped from the Department, except for staff salaries (€68,900 included in the Draft Budget for 2006) and a fixed sum of €7,388.

There has been an increase in the maintenance grant levels over the past few years together with a significant increase in the income thresholds, which determine grant eligibility.

HIGHER EDUCATION GRANTS SCHEME 2005

INCOME THRESHOLDS

Reckonable Income Limits for the ordinary rates of grant
(for the period 1st January, 2004 to 31st December 2004 (the tax year 2004))

Number of Dependent Children	Full Maintenance and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (75%) and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (50%) and Full Fees	Part Maintenance (25%) and Full Fees	Part Tuition Fees (50%) only*
Less than 4	€35,485	€37,695	€39,915	€42,130	€44,350
4 - 7	€38,990	€41,430	€43,865	€46,305	€48,740
8 or more	€42,335	€44,980	€47,625	€50,265	€52,910

*Full Student Service Charge is paid where income is at or below this level.

In 2005 there was a 4.7% increase in income limits for the "Ordinary" rate of maintenance grant and a 6.35% increase in income levels for the Special "Top-up" rate of maintenance grant.

In the 2005/2006 academic year where 2 or more children (or the candidate's parent) are pursuing a course of study listed below, the reckonable income limits have been increased by €4,295 where there are 2 children, €8,590 where there are 3 children and so on, by increments of €4,295:

- Attending full-time third level education
- Attending a recognised PLC course, Student Nurse training or Student - Garda training
- Participating in a CERT course of at least one year's duration
- Attending a full time Teagasc course in an agricultural college
- Attending a recognised full-time further education course, of at least one year's duration, in Northern Ireland

Maintenance Grant - Rates 2005

	Non-Adjacent Rate	Adjacent Rate
Full Maintenance	€3,020	€1,210
Part Maintenance (75%)	€2,265	€ 905
Part Maintenance (50%)	€1,515	€ 605
Part Maintenance (25%)	€755	€ 305

The adjacent rate of grant is paid to students who live within a fifteen-mile radius of an approved college.

Special Rates of Maintenance Grant - 2005

Grant	Standard Grant	Top - Up Amount	Total Grant
Adjacent Rate	€1,210	€935	€2,145
Non - Adjacent Rate	€3,020	€2,335	€5,355

The Special Rate of Maintenance Grant was introduced in 2001 to provide assistance to students from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds. The net reckonable income limit was €15,626 in 2005. In order to qualify for this Top-up grant, the reckonable income had to include one of the designated social welfare payment specified in the in the Higher Education Grants Scheme.

A total of 367 Special Rate of Maintenance Grants were awarded in 2005.

Fees

The maximum fees grant payable in respect of grant holders of third level student support courses, assessed under the 2005 Scheme (i.e. where the Free Fees initiative does not apply), remained at €5,028.

The Council reached agreement in 2005 with Comhairle that staff in the Independent Information Units in each of the Public Service Centres would provide students with assistance in completing their grant application forms. Council staff provided training. It is anticipated that this will become a feature of the application process over the coming years, together with the provision of Student Information Seminars. In addition, it is intended to continue with the decentralisation of Higher Education Grants services to the Public Service Centres.

Over 1,511 applications were processed in 2005. Of these 1,321 grants were awarded to undergraduate and postgraduate students in Ireland, and undergraduate students in the U.K.

A total of 125 undergraduate awards were made to students attending colleges in England and Scotland.

Grants Awarded 2005

Student Type	New	Renewal
Grants Awarded	474	847

The 2006 Draft Budget provision of €5,250,000, for maintenance grants/fees is an increase of €121,000 on the expected 2005 outturn of €5,129,000. This increase is to allow for the standard annual increase in the grant amount payable and an increase in the grant payable to students from low-income backgrounds under the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant Scheme. Variations in the number and range of Postgraduate Tuition Fees are also provided for.

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €5,000,000 under this heading for retired VEC Personnel. This expenditure is 100% recoupable.

MISCELLANEOUS
ÉAGSÚIL

Budgeted Expenditure: €3,569,400

Budgeted Income: €454,200

(Pages 23 - 27 of Blue Pages)

FRANCHISE AND ELECTIONS

The 2006 Draft Budget provision of €149,500 covers salaries of staff engaged in the preparation of the Register of Electors and associated expenditure on printing, stationery, advertising and postage.

Provision has been made for undertaking a publicity campaign to create public awareness of the importance of being registered, especially in the lead up to the next General Election. Field staff will be asked to carry out extensive checks to identify, as far as feasible, errors and omissions as well as over registration. The Council is in consultation with the REACH agency with a view to obtaining, on an ongoing basis, names of deceased persons.

A requirement to produce, annually, an Edited Register came into force in November 2004. This enables electors to choose how their information will be used i.e. they can stipulate that their name be used only for electoral and other statutory purposes. The general version of the register can be procured/viewed by any person on payment of the appropriate fee and the information used for commercial or advertising purposes. The Edited Register is not available for purchase.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government has recently amended the application form for registration (RFA) to enable applicants to express their preferred form of registration. It will be necessary to provide advice and training in this regard to field staff and public representatives

A facility is now available on the Council's website, through which voters can check that their name is on the Register.

ELECTED MEMBERS' SERVICES

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €1,023,700 to cover the following members' costs:

Cathaoirleach Allowance:	€41,200
Leas Cathaoirleach Allowance:	€10,300
Representational Payment:	€479,200
Annual Allowance:	€266,700
SPC Chairs Allowance:	€28,000
External Members:	€18,000
Home Travel (Conference etc.):	€145,000
Foreign Travel:	€20,000
Members' Insurance:	€5,300
Provision of Broadband Access:	€10,000
Total	€1,023,700

The Annual Allowance provision has been increased to take account of a revision of mileage and subsistence rates during 2005 and in anticipation of a possible revision of the fixed element of the allowance arising from a review of members expenses being carried out by the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government.

The Representational Payment provision reflects the cumulative impact of Benchmarking and general increases during 2005 and also provides for the increase under the final round of Sustaining Progress Agreement payable from 1st June 2006.

€10,000 is included in 2006 to defray the cost of providing members with broadband connectivity in furtherance of the Council's objective of maximising the use of information communications technology and reducing paper communications. Work commenced in 2005 on presenting reports electronically at Electoral Area meetings using technology available in the Public Service Centres. We will explore in 2006 the feasibility of sending agendas and supporting material electronically to members.

A sum of €15,000 - the same as in 2005 - is included in the Draft Budget for 2006 in respect of Civic Entertainment.

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €527,300 for expenditure under this heading.

INFORMATION SERVICES

Communications Office

The Communications Office has responsibility for receiving and co-ordinating requests under the Freedom of Information Act 1997 - 2003, complaints received from the Office of the Ombudsman, annual reports and public relations activity.

Freedom of Information

40 requests were received under the Freedom of Information Act to the end of November 2005. The number of requests received has decreased in the last number of years and this is mainly attributable to the introduction of request fees in July 2003 under the Freedom of Information (Fees) Regulations 2003. Although the number of requests has reduced, the information being sought has increased in volume and complexity, and this is similar to the experiences of local authorities throughout the country.

In addition, the Council's reorganisation programme has had a knock-on effect on how we deal with requests, in that the number of designated decision makers and internal reviewers of decisions has had to increase. Bearing in mind the increasingly complex nature of requests being received and the need to ensure that the Freedom of Information Act is implemented in a consistent and effective manner, an extensive FOI training programme has been developed and it is anticipated that over 70 staff will receive the appropriate training before the end of 2005. In association with the provision of this training, the FOI Staff Reference Manual has been updated and is being made available on the Council's intranet site. Work is ongoing in updating the manual prescribed under Section 15 and 16 of the Freedom of Information Act 1997, as amended. The manual will serve as a practical guide to Donegal County Council, setting out the information that we hold and how it can be accessed. It will also provide an overview of the structure of the Council, the services we provide and details of legislation, regulations and circulars that are relevant.

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €110,700 in expenditure under this heading.

Ombudsman

The Office of the Ombudsman was set up in 1984 to investigate complaints from members of the public who feel they have been unfairly treated by certain public bodies. At present, the public bodies whose actions may be investigated by the Ombudsman include all Government Departments, the health boards (HSE), local authorities, and An Post.

The Ombudsman has extensive powers in law. She can demand any information, document or file from a body complained of and can require any

official to give information about a complaint. She can look into all administrative actions including:

- Decisions
- Refusal or failure to take action
- Administrative procedures

The Communications Officer acts as a Liaison Officer and the first point of contact in any particular case between the Office of the Ombudsman and the Council. In this regard, the Communications Officer ensures that any written or oral enquiries from the Ombudsman's Office are immediately directed to the appropriate section(s) of the Council and that all time limits applying to requests for information, or for responses to complaints, from the Ombudsman's Office are met.

Public Relations

The Communications Officer also acts as the first point of contact for queries from local and national media and ensures that any query received is immediately directed to the relevant manager.

Online Media Monitoring Software was purchased in 2005 to allow for the effective monitoring of media coverage in local and national newspapers, radio and online news services.

A Draft Media Relations Policy is currently under discussion, setting out the procedures and protocols on how the Council will interact with the media. It is planned to come into operation in the first quarter of 2006, following the completion of consultations with all relevant stakeholders including staff, elected members and representatives of the media. In conjunction with the introduction of the new policy, provision has been made in the Draft Budget 2006 for media training for relevant staff in the Council. This training will be delivered as part of the Council's Management Development Programme.

A key element of the new Media Relations Policy is to ensure that a proactive approach is taken in dealing with public relations, both through the media and directly to our customers. In this regard, provision has been made in the Draft Budget 2006 for work towards the development of a Citizens Newsletter. It is anticipated that this newsletter will be an effective tool in communicating with our customers, ensuring that essential information is provided in an effective manner and highlighting the positive work undertaken by the Council.

The Communications Officer has also been working closely with Information Services and other staff to develop a new customer-focused website for Donegal County Council. The new website will be an important public relations tool for the Council. It is envisaged that this website will be

updated and maintained by each of the Directorates and an internal Web group has been established to co-ordinate the involvement of each of the Directorates in the development of the site.

Provision has also been made in the Draft Budget 2006 for the design, compilation and printing of the 2005 Annual Report.

WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €86,100 in expenditure under this heading.

The key principles that inform and drive the need for change in the Public Service are:

- Quality in the delivery of services;
- The effective management of performance at all levels;
- Flexibility in the development of resources;
- Training and development;
- The effective use of information technology; and
- An open, participative approach by all concerned.

The management of Donegal County Council, its employees and their employee representatives have pledged their collective commitment to the Partnership approach to change. The Mission Statement and Core Objectives adopted by the Donegal County Council Partnership Committee reflect this commitment:

Mission Statement

'To achieve joint ownership of and responsibility for the process of change within Donegal County Council by management, unions and staff based on an open, co-operative process with effective consultation and participation by all concerned'.

Core Objectives

'To play a key role in the process of implementing change through partnership, of issues such as:

- Improved service delivery to our customers
- Putting in place the structures which are required to efficiently deliver the Services on a decentralised basis
- The achievement of best business practice
- The elimination of the "Them and Us" perception
- Better communication
- Investment in the training, development and working environment of the staff'.

Handling Significant Change Through Partnership

Donegal has been selected as one of the pilot Partnerships for the rollout of the LANPAG project *Handling Significant Change Through Partnership*.

The County Partnership Committee's Work Programme has been determined by its collective commitments in its *Sustaining Progress* Action Plan. These commitments will also be reflected in the continuing work of the Area Partnerships and the Fire Service Partnership. At a Review Day of the County Committee in July of 2005, the County Committee reviewed the present status of workplace partnership in Donegal Local Authorities, agreed the significant issues for the Committee in the context of the *Sustaining Progress* Action Plan, and agreed methodology to work through these issues in the County Committee in 2006. The issues are as follows:

- Staff Mobility Policy
- B.L.G. Review
- Cross Service Collaboration
- Lunchtime Opening
- Performance Management Development System (PMDS)
- Communications
- Workplace Review
- Health and Safety
- Welfare and Equality

In order to involve all staff in this process, three Area Partnership Committees (APCs) (Glenties-Milford, Letterkenny-Inishowen and Donegal-Stranorlar) in addition to the Fire Service Partnership Forum will continue their work in 2006. They will be joined, early in 2006, by a new Lifford HQ Partnership Forum.

Expenditure in 2006 will be geared towards deepening the partnership ethos by ensuring that our agreed significant issues are dealt with in partnership.

Programme Group 9

SUPPORT SERVICES/CENTRAL MANAGEMENT CHARGE SEIRBHÍSI TACAÍOCHTA

Budgeted Expenditure: €6,787,100

Budgeted Income: €2,955,200

(Pages 28 - 30 of Blue Pages)

SUPERANNUATION

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €175,900 in expenditure under this heading.

HUMAN RESOURCES

IMPLEMENTATION OF BETTER LOCAL GOVERNMENT - A PROGRAMME FOR CHANGE AND THE DECENTRALISATION OF SERVICES BY DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL.

The decentralisation of service delivery was strengthened in Donegal during 2005, with the original target of five Electoral Area offices, serving the Inishowen, Milford, Letterkenny Donegal and Glenties Electoral Areas fully operational throughout the year. The level of customer contact, on a face-to-face basis, bears testament to the decision taken by the Elected Members to embark on this ambitious programme of decentralisation a number of years ago. As members are aware, options are being explored in conjunction with the Health Services Executive - North West, with regard to the provision of services for the Stranorlar Electoral Area

Throughout this change programme, the Council has demonstrated its commitment to the provision of better quality services by investing heavily in the organisation's most important resource - our staff. The process is being supported through an ongoing programme of training and development, which will continue in 2006. During the course of the year, employees in particular grades and services, which did not form part of the original Better Local Government rationalisation in 2002, had an opportunity through the negotiated restructuring of their grades, to gain promotion and to take on increased levels of work and responsibilities. A number of these areas were completed during the year while others remain to be finalised in early 2006 as follows:

- Technician Grades Completed in 2005
- Revenue Collectors Completed in 2005.
- Community & Enterprise Completed in 2005
- Library Services Agreed locally - Implementation in 2006
- Clerk of Works Negotiations ongoing
- Fire Service To commence early in 2006

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELFARE AT WORK ACT, 2005.

The above Act came into law on 1st September, 2005 and places significant responsibilities on all employers in relation to safety, health and welfare of their employees. During the latter half of 2005, the Council was subject to a number of Health & Safety visits carried out by the Health & Safety Authority. There is little doubt that this is an area of critical importance and one which the Council must give full and proper consideration to in relation to all its operations, including those carried out on the Council's behalf by contractors etc. The Draft Budget for 2006 includes provision for strengthening the staffing structure in this area which will assist the Council in meeting its obligations in this regard. The total provision is €82,800.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINING PROGRESS PAY AGREEMENT AND BENCHMARKING

During the past year, the Council in line with all Local Authorities has implemented significant pay increases to employees in accordance with the national wage agreement '*Sustaining Progress*' and the Benchmarking process. The pay increases under the '*Sustaining Progress*' agreement are contingent on an agreed Local Action Plan being developed through local Partnership structures and approved nationally by the Performance Verification Group (PVG). The progress report, on the implementation of the Action Plan for Donegal, to the end of November, 2005 has been submitted to the PVG following adoption by the County Partnership Committee.

The Action Plan for Donegal contains a wide range of commitments within the nationally agreed framework. The principal commitments of the local agreement are as follows:

1. Introduction of effective Financial Management/Expenditure Control systems
2. Explore the need for and scope of extension of opening hours in the context of flexible working arrangements
3. Role out of E-Direct Contact Management System
4. Development of Performance Indicators
5. Introduction of formal complaints and appeals system for customers

6. Effective systematic communications between line managers and staff
7. Implementation of *Dignity at Work* policies
8. An organisation wide review of disability issues
9. Effective team-working and cross functional co-ordination
10. Staff mobility policy to be developed and agreed.

A separate Parallel Benchmarking process has been agreed nationally in relation to Craftworkers, General Operatives and related grades. Local negotiations have been underway with Unions since late 2003 in relation to the implementation of pay increases due under this process to Craftworkers and General Operatives in the context of the major rationalisation for these employees already implemented in Donegal. These negotiations were the subject of a Labour Court hearing and recommendations in June 2005. The implementation of the recommendations from the Labour Court, were subject to the sanction of the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government and to the outcome of trade union ballots. The Unions conducted a successful ballot in relation to these recommendations in August, 2005 and the Council obtained the sanction of the Department to their implementation on 30th November, 2005. Arrangements will be made in early 2006 to implement the full terms of these recommendations, which will involve significant productivity gains in return for the pay increases sanctioned.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

During 2005, the Council was successful in retaining the "Excellence Through People Award" for another year. This is an independent, external validation of the organisation's commitment, by the National Training Agency, FAS, to the training and development of all staff.

The major extension and development of facilities at the Regional Training Centre in Stranorlar was completed in 2005 at an overall cost of €1.9m. An official opening of this impressive new facility took place in April, 2005. The Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government through the Water Services National Training Group provided the funding. This Regional Centre caters for the training needs of employees from Donegal, Cavan, Monaghan and Sligo and allows for the delivery of courses provided under the Water Services National Training Group Programme, the Non-National Roads Road-workers Training Programme and Donegal County Council's own Training Programme. These improved facilities will allow a greater range of Training Courses to be provided as well as providing training for the private sector.

The implementation of a Management Development Training Programme commenced in 2005. The programme began in July, 2005 and will continue throughout 2006. The aim of the programme is to meet the management development needs of staff throughout the organisation. The programme will focus on providing managers and supervisors throughout the organisation with the required training, skills and expertise to carry out their work in a more effective and efficient manner. This ambitious programme will run alongside the organisation's commitment to continue to meet the needs of staff in all areas and services.

In 2006, it is intended to deliver a comprehensive training programme for elected members.

In tandem with the staff-training programme, the Council commenced the implementation of a Performance Management Development System (PMDS), which is a requirement under national pay agreements. The Council appointed two full time PMDS trainers in July 2005. The programme commenced in the Roads and Planning & Economic Development directorates and will be rolled out to all areas of the Council during 2006. The system will further enhance the Management Development Training programme in Donegal and will provide managers with the skills required to deal with the development and training needs of their staff in addition to providing mechanisms to identify and deal with performance issues.

A total of €253,000 has been provided for training and development in the Draft Budget. In addition a provision of €424,300 has been made in respect of the Regional Training Centre, which is funded by the training fees paid in respect of the various training courses.

CUSTOMER SERVICES PROVISION FROM PUBLIC SERVICE CENTRES

2005 will be the first full year of operation of all five Public Service Centres since the first centre opened in Carndonagh in June 2002. It is timely, therefore, to reflect on the impact that they have had on bringing access to services closer to the citizens of the County. The pattern of contacts both in person and over the phone continues to grow. While this will ultimately reach a plateau the convenience factor is very obviously being availed of by customers.

The schedule of customer contacts and activity in the area of cash receipting for 2004 and projections for 2005 are set out hereunder for comparison purposes. The data excludes customers for Motor Tax and related services which is detailed separately in this report.

2004

	Carndonagh	Milford	Letterkenny	Dungloe	Donegal	Total
In Person	8,041	2,902	13,461	10,613	3,500	38,517
By Telephone	31,491	17,407	29,607	31,750	17,000	127,255
No. of Receipts	5,307	3,410	5,213	4,095	3,100	21,125
Value	€2.88m	€0.90m	€2.13m	€1.58m	€1.6m	€9.09m

2005 (Projected as at 9.12.05)

	Carndonagh	Milford	Letterkenny	Dungloe	Donegal	Total
In Person	6,700	3,400	7,600	14,000	9,600	41,300
By Telephone	32,000	21,000	38,000	35,000	29,000	155,000
No. of Receipts	5,500	3,600	6,200	4,700	6,200	26,200
Value	€2.82m	€1.38m	€2.7m	€1.92m	€3.2m	€12.02m

There continues to be a year on year increase in customer contacts, both in person and by phone of approx. 7% and 21% respectively. There has been a significant increase in the income collected (€12.02m in 2005 versus €9.09m in 2004 - 32%).

The Council continues to take initiatives in a range of areas to bring information into peoples homes with advancements in technology, through development of our ICT systems e.g. on-line planning and over time it is expected that such initiatives should see a reduction in the need to contact the Public Service Centres for basic information.

A review of methods of paying for services through a range of mechanisms is also being actively explored, which will in time, reduce the activity levels in cash receipting.

The potential to extend opening hours in 2006 is being explored with staff and their representative organisations.

DEVELOPMENT OF OUTREACH SERVICES

In October 2005 the Council took an initiative to test the concept of outreach service delivery from a new centre in Ballyshannon, which is shared with Ballyshannon Town Council. The initiative was taken in the context of further decentralisation within the Donegal Electoral Area from the Donegal Public Service Centre. The library has relocated to the building with a range of new services and extended opening hours including evenings and Saturday. Citizen Information Services are also available from the Centre. While applications for County Council services will continue to be

processed and decided in Donegal Town, customers can get information and application forms for County Council schemes and services and check the status of their application in the Centre. In addition a facility to enquire about planning applications and to view maps/drawings etc is also available.

Based on experience in Ballyshannon, it is intended to develop this concept further, where practical, with similar proposals under consideration for Buncrana, as an outreach for Carndonagh, to be advanced in 2006.

PUBLIC SERVICE AND OTHER AGENCY SERVICES

In addition to County Council services, the Centres continue to be a focal point for the delivery of a wide range of public services and other services. Health Service Executive staff are now delivering services from Letterkenny, Donegal Town and Dungloe with proposals well advanced for Milford and Carndonagh. Teagasc services are available from Carndonagh and the services of MABS from the Donegal Town Centre. The activity levels in terms of customer contacts are not readily available in respect of these services but it is important to note that like Motor Tax, they are in addition to those for the County Council which are detailed above.

A number of agencies have also relocated staff to their purpose built accommodation in both the Dungloe & Donegal Town Centres including the Dept. of Social & Family Affairs, National Roads Authority Regional Design, Revenue Commissioners and the Dept. of Agriculture & Food.

The Independent Information Units within each of the Public Service Centres continue to develop and enhance the range of information and advice available to customers on all public services continues to grow, and is reflected in the fact that in excess of 50,000 customers will avail of these services in the current year. These numbers are in addition to the visitor numbers outlined above.

An independent review of the service, which is currently being undertaken under the auspices of Comhairle, is expected to provide the basis for further development of these services in particular, and for the advancement of the integrated services agenda in general.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The Draft Budget for 2006 includes a provision of €2,656,200 for this heading.

Introduction

Implementation of the Council's Information Systems Strategic Plan 2002-2005 continued during 2005. Work ranged from network maintenance and expansion to systems development and implementation as well as the progression of broadband and information society strategies. Opportunities across a wide range of technologies are now routinely explored and exploited for the benefit of Council staff members and the general public.

Technology Infrastructure & Networks

Donegal County Council's infrastructure currently comprises 57 various Servers, 1,130 PC's and 550 printers. 30 servers sit on the Local Area Network in Lifford with the other servers located on various office networks throughout the county. 13 PABX telephone systems and 850 telephone handsets are integrated into the County network and are supported on an on-going basis. This infrastructure represents many years of investment and is amongst the largest Local Authority Networks in Ireland.

Expansion of the network continued in 2005 with the addition of a number of sites including Ballyshannon Town Council, Ballyshannon Library, Mountain Top Site Office, Earagail Arts Festival Administrative Centre and the Killybegs Roads Office.

Expansion of the Council's wireless network continued in 2005 with the Branch Library in Dungloe being linked to the local Public Services Centre. The Library Administrative Centre in Rosemount was added to the wireless network in Letterkenny and the wireless link to the Catalogue Centre at Magheranan upgraded from 11MB to 36MB. These installations resulted in the Council being able to cancel existing leased lines as well as giving greater bandwidth to users.

A wireless solution was also installed between Lough Eske Water Treatment Plant and Donegal Town Public Services Centre to facilitate the continued rollout of the Telemetry System by the Water Services Division.

Additional computer hardware has been procured recently as part of the Taobh Tíre project and will be installed by year-end in Pettigo, Falcarragh and at two locations in Letterkenny.

This will bring to thirteen the total number of rural communities, which have been provided with a library service under the project using ICT.

2005 saw the implementation of the Customer Management System 'eDirect' in the Information Systems Department and this has been extremely successful in providing an enhanced I.S. Support service to all our users throughout the county. For the period 01/01/05 to 31/10/2005 a total of 3,128 requests were logged in eDirect and dealt with accordingly.

2005 also saw the implementation of an automated Mobile Text Messaging solution. This system has significant potential to reduce the number of calls to mobile phones. The Roads Service is the first live user on the system notifying engineers, lorry drivers and overseers daily using SMS of weather forecasts and any action required from lorry crews for the following 24 hours.

Members' Computer Project

2005 saw the completion of Phase 1 of the Council Members Computer Project where each member was supplied with a laptop computer and an all-in-one printer/scanner/copier. As well as providing the usual office automation software packages, e-mail and internet access facilities were also provided from the Member's home or office. In 2006 the Information Systems Department will work with each Council Member to upgrade their individual connections to broadband standards where broadband is available.

Inter-Agency Co-operation

The Information Systems Department have provided the Citizens Information Units in the Public Services Centres with access to the Comhairle network for information uploads via our Government Internet VPN connection. In conjunction with this service, secure inter-agency connections were established between the Council's networks and DSCFA systems. The Council provides Internet facilities to FAS, DSCFA, CIU and the NRDO in various Public Service Centres throughout the county.

I.S. Support for PABX Telephone Systems and handsets is also being provided to DSCFA, HSE, NRDO, MABS, CIU Teagasc and FAS. The total inter-agency service provision has required much collaborative work to facilitate the different requirements of each agency and ensure integration with the Council's infrastructure.

Systems Development & Implementation

The electronic Parking Fines system initially piloted in Bundoran was rolled out to Donegal Town, Ballybofey and Ballyshannon during 2005. The manual method of using notebooks by the Traffic Wardens to issue parking tickets, has now been replaced by the use of mobile handhelds and printers, utilising wireless technology to pass information in real time to back-end databases. To complement the expansion of the parking fines system, an online payment facility has been introduced which allows customers to pay parking fines via the Donegal County Council Website by entering the parking ticket

ID and registration number of the car and also credit card details. This facility will be expanded in 2006 to cover other Council payment areas.

Within the library website (www.donegallibrary.ie), a new public service "Ask a Librarian" has been provided. This allows a member of the public to select an area of interest from a list e.g. genealogy. They can then enter a question and submit it. This question will be directed to a librarian who specialises in the chosen area, and a response is sent to the questioner's e-mail within 24 hours.

During 2005 major work has been carried out in terms of developing a new County Council website which will go live early in 2006. The site is structured around the needs of the public in terms of dealing with the Council rather than department based as in the past with the emphasis of life events such as building a house, going to college etc. The issue of accessibility has also been addressed making it more accessible to people with disabilities.

The Council's E-Planning system continues to attract considerable interest from agents and members of the public. The system received 46,000 visits in the last six months.

A new environmental system Labinfo has been installed in the Council's Laboratory. This system is primarily required for the management of Laboratory samples and analysing results.

A new application has been developed to help the Tenant Liaison Officers to manage the Council housing estates which they cover, and which is due to be released in the near future.

Assistance has been provided to various Council Departments in relation to the provision of various websites including Earagail Arts Festival website, Donegal Youth Council website and the Donegal Youth e-Forum website.

Geographic Information Systems

2005 saw the introduction of new speed limits in all areas of the county. The existing and proposed new limits were all captured using GPS technology and plotted and presented for consultation using MapInfo GIS. The resulting maps were published on the website.

The County Development Plan draft review was published this year. This involved the design and production of new thematic mapping for the plan. Maps ranged from overall strategy maps, population maps with latest census data, to local village control point maps. These were all plotted and published in hardcopy and on the website.

The GIS was extensively used for the design and proposal of Broadband routing in the county to coincide with phase II of the Regional Broadband Programme. Business types were extracted from the address database and mapped on current OS mapping. These were used to design resilient draft routes for consideration by telecommunications consultants. Local area plans were also incorporated into the Broadband GIS to future proof the route designs by including industrial and business zones. Wireless propagation zones were also calculated to show areas covered by proposed local wireless broadband. Wireless backhaul routes were designed using 3D point-to-point analysis methods.

Donegal County Council in co-operation with Mayo County Council has instigated the development of a Pre-Planning webGIS. This will allow users to investigate sites and how different policies can influence planning decisions for that area. This will be designed to give the public as much information about their area of interest so that they can submit a best informed application and will be available for public use early in 2006.

The Ordnance Survey has delivered the annual update of the colour photography. This is a highly valuable dataset.

ERNACT

Through participation in the ERNACT (www.ernact.org) network since its foundation in 1990, Donegal County Council has been involved in a range of European, Interregional, as well as cross border public sector Information Society technology projects. This involvement enables the Council to access EU funding for technology projects within the County. ERNACT has now evolved into a EU network of excellence for developing and implementing ICT-based models of regional development. ERNACT comprises a total of 8 regions - Galway, Donegal and Derry in Ireland, Wirral in England, Zeeland in The Netherlands, San Sebastian and Cantabria in Spain, and Olomouc Czech Republic.

Atlantic Area eCommunity Centres of Excellence Network

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. The project has involved the development of a web-based eConsultation tool. This tool offers an additional online channel of access to the public to participate in consultation processes. Members of the public can subscribe to be notified of upcoming consultations related to their interests and localities. Consultations may be facilitated through completion of an online form or participation in an online forum. After the

consultation period expires, there will be a facility to review the results of the consultation e.g. results of polls, reports etc. The Council hopes to pilot the eConsultation tool during the Development Plan consultation processes in early 2006.

Boosting Regional Information Society Expertise

The BRISE (Boosting Regional Information Society Experience) project is funded under Interreg IIIC and involves 10 public authorities from across Europe. Donegal County Council is engaged in this project under three strands: Citizens and eGovernance in the Information Society, Broadband and ICT-based inward investment. Interaction with more developed central European authorities under these themes will result in knowledge transfer and improved capability to engage in the knowledge economy with its inherent benefits for the region.

Border Corridor Digital Economy Network

Arising out of a previous 1994-1999 ERNACT initiative and the subsequent development of the Digital Economy Strategy, Donegal County Council has been engaged since 2004 in the Border Corridor Digital Economy Network project. This project seeks to implement the Digital Economy Strategy in the NWCBR, and replicate the process that led to its development within the ICBAN and East Border Regions. The BCDEN project has the following key objectives:

- Improvement of ICT skills development, awareness of new technologies, and accessibility to ICT.
- Increase the number of citizens making use of ICT in their everyday lives.
- Increase the level of research and innovation in new technology by promoting linkages between businesses, third level education and the public sector
- Foster the development of links with other regions in Europe to identify new opportunities and models for exploiting ICT.
- Attract high-tech inward investment into the region.

Work is currently underway on specific actions under BCDEN with Donegal County Council engaged in projects looking at mobile working linked to location based services and inter-agency cooperation in service delivery.

Edirect

The Information Systems Department has been involved in researching and facilitating the introduction of contact management in the Council. The eDirect contact management system was introduced, in co-operation with Corporate Services, into the Milford Public Services Centre on a pilot basis in April 2003. During the course of the pilot phase and since going live (June 2005), the experiences of the staff utilising this software have been fed back into the system development process at national level and have resulted in a tailored system which supports the streamlined and coordinated handling of customer contacts.

A decision was taken to introduce eDirect into the IS Department to facilitate contact management with internal customers during 2005. It is intended to roll out the system across the entire organisation over the coming year.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME - BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

Broadband - Critical Infrastructure for Donegal

The Metropolitan Area Networks Programme seeks to construct high speed fibre-optic rings in all towns in the Country with a population over 1500 in partnership with Local Authorities. Following construction these networks are managed by a Service Agency on behalf of the state and the Local Authorities, providing open access to all telecommunications providers at agreed rates.

Donegal County Council has long advocated the benefits of broadband as a means of assisting Donegal in the alleviation of its competitive disadvantage and providing a key tool to assist the economic and social development of the County.

In 2003 the County's first Metropolitan Area Network was constructed in Letterkenny and this network is now operational.

During 2005, planning work on 6 other networks was carried out in co-operation with the Department of Marine & Natural Resources and construction work on these networks will commence in 2007. The towns in question are:

Ballyshannon,
Bundoran,
Donegal Town,
Ballybofey/Stranorlar,
Carndonagh
Buncrana.

This major construction project will be managed by the Information Systems Department. Following construction, the Council will work with the national managed services agency E-Net on an on-going basis to promote the networks locally and fast-track applications for connections to services.

At the conclusion of this project in early 2007, all towns in the county with a population over 1,500 will possess fibre based open access networks servicing their advanced telecommunications needs for a considerable period of time.

Another fibre network of strategic importance to the County is the development of a cross-border link in order to provide resilience on the various networks throughout the County. An application has been approved in principle by DCMNR to construct an open access network between Letterkenny and Derry. Negotiations are currently taking place with the Department to agree how best to implement this important piece of infrastructure.

Fibre based wireless broadband will transform broadband availability in the larger towns in the County. Donegal, however, is predominantly a rural county and it is crucial that citizens in smaller towns and in the Donegal countryside can avail of broadband services. The MAN's programme will assist greatly in terms of providing backbone architecture in the county which will allow the provision of fixed wireless and similar broadband services to the rural areas.

The Department of Communications Marine & Natural Resources has recognised this issue nationally and designed the group broadband scheme which promotes the rollout of broadband services in rural areas on the basis of Local Authority co-ordination and community driven initiatives. As of November 2005 a total of 8 schemes have been approved for County Donegal from the two calls for proposals to date.

The Information Systems Department in co-operation with the Council's Community & Enterprise Department have been working with the DCMNR and local communities to assist the formulation of proposals and the establishment of approved projects in the County. A third call for proposals will be issued in the near future and the Council's assistance to local communities will continue in 2006 as required.