



NORTHERN IRELAND – July 2021

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Equiniti wins Northern Ireland Finance Department contract to build land revenue system... 4 years after project proposed

Northern Ireland's Department of Finance has awarded IT services firm Equiniti a contract worth up to £80m to build a land revenue and benefits system in a procurement four years in the making.

The department's Land and Property Services requires a "modern digitally-enabled ICT solution" that will help with the assessment and collection of rates for domestic and non-domestic properties, and the administration of various rate reliefs such as Housing Benefit and Disabled Person's Allowance. The system should also manage interfaces with internal and external applications of the agency, such as the Enforcement of Judgments Office.

According to a contract award notice, the new system needs to be "flexible and adaptable to support new and innovative methods of delivery, future changes and business needs whilst being user friendly, customer-focused and utilising digital self-service platforms."

Flexibility comes in the award price too. The initial award is for £14m, although that could increase depending on changing requirements during the course of the contract.

In that, the Department of Finance is not going by halves. The implementation period is expected to last two years, with the resulting software running for at least another nine. It even allows for the possibility to extend the contract for three further 12-month periods. So, not so agile when it comes to changing contractors, then.

Nor has the department been particularly fleetfooted when it comes to procurement. The prior information notice, which scopes out suppliers who might be in line for the work, was published in July 2017, four years ago. A contract notice formally calling for competition appeared in October the following year, meaning the department has had a little under three years to select a supplier, pandemic notwithstanding.

The Finance Department has been contacted for comment.

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It's not the first time the organisation has struggled to accelerate its procurement processes. In January, it awarded BT a £20m contract extension, without competition, on a project that ballooned in value by 138 per cent.

"There are technical reasons relating to the bespoke and complex nature of the solution which would lead to substantial duplication of costs and unacceptable technical risks which would not allow for the service to be transferred to another supplier," Northern Ireland's Department of Finance said at the time.

BT won the contract to finance the design, build, and operation of the service in 1999 for a fee originally agreed at £46m. The Northern Ireland Audit Office reported [PDF] that as of April 2019, a total of £97.89m had been paid to BT by way of unitary charges, which were inclusive of transaction fees. Total payments to July 2021 were set to reach £106.89m, it found.

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