

Is county council's ambitious IT project on hold?



■ Up in the air? The county council's £750,000 IT project

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MYSTERY surrounds the future of a scheme designed to save millions of pounds of taxpayers' money.

In a bid to save up to £300million, Essex County Council recently joined forces with software giant IBM.

However it has emerged the council's leader for the project, Mark Briggs, has been placed on indefinite leave.

The council is steadfastly refusing to answer any questions over the matter, but a council insider claims Mr Briggs was escorted out of County Hall last month.

Other senior figures, including his project manager wife Victoria, and chief software architect Gareth Allen, are also believed to have been removed from the project.

A spokesman said: "Essex County Council does not comment on individual staffing matters. In line with best practice guidelines, we use a leave of

- Chief officer said to be on indefinite leave
- Two senior workers thought to be off project

absence as part of our resolution procedures."

The council would not answer whether Mr Briggs' six-figure salary was still being paid, or why he was not involved in the project at a crucial point in its development.

It also declined to answer questions regarding the project, in which technology and systems improvements costing almost £750,000, were meant to help save £85million.

Plans to "think ahead about the future of IT" were expected to save another £40million.

Emma Boon, campaign manager for the Taxpayers' Alliance, said: "Essex County Council needs to be upfront and honest with taxpayers about whether this IT project is going ahead."

"The council should always put the public interest ahead of

UNANSWERED QUERIES

SOME of the questions the county council refuses to answer:

- Is Mark Briggs still on leave as chief information officer? Is he still being paid? Why is he on indefinite leave with such a major IT transformation taking place as part of the £300million cuts?
- What internal/external reviews have or are taking place?
- What, if any, irregularities have been found by the audit team for Essex County Council?
- Is it true Victoria Briggs, Gareth Allen and others have been suspended from the transformation project?
- What do these developments mean for the transformation project, the timetable for the project and the council's ability to deliver £300million savings?
- Is it true half of the IT staff at Essex County Council will be made redundant or have been told they will be by 2013 because of advances?

trying to protect its own reputation, and if staff whose salaries are funded by taxpayers have been suspended or dismissed, they should say why."

Julie Young, Labour county councillor for Wivenhoe, said: "This is something we will have

to ask questions about. Opposition members have not been made aware of it. We are completely in the dark, but I will be asking questions."

Mr and Mrs Briggs and Mr Allen were unavailable for comment.