NEWS ASSESSMENT

London has two computer consortia. Roger Green reports on their development.

Why only Lola appears to be succeeding

The London Boroughs Joint Computer Committee's (LBJCC) troubles as a computer consortium seem to date back to a decision taken in 1968.

Ironically, the success of the only other local authority computer consortium in the country, London On-line Local Authorities (Lola) can originate at the same time.

It was in 1968 that the London Boroughs Management Services Unit (LBMSU) produced a revolutionary plan for an on-line corporate data base for the two computer consortia that then existed, LBJCC, and the North East London Consortium (NELC).
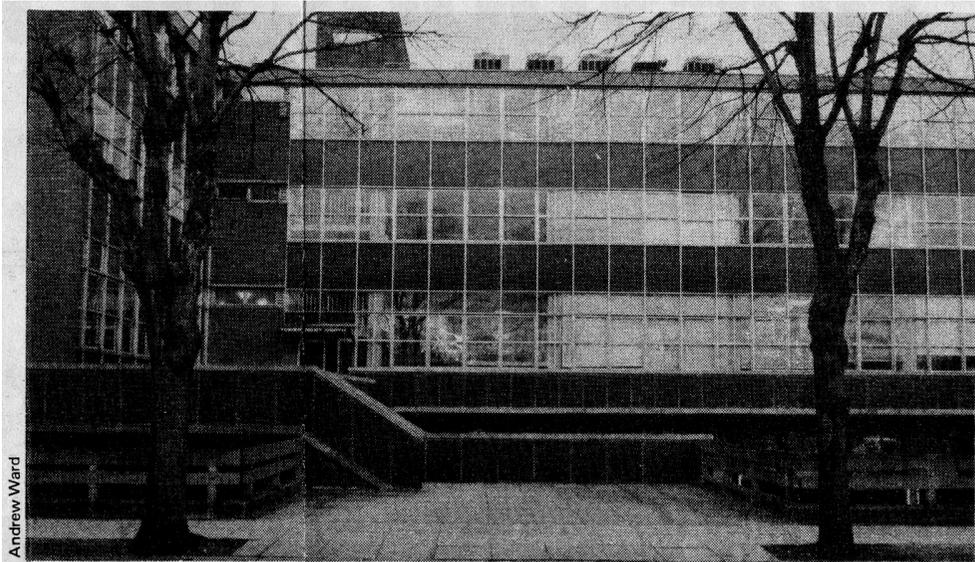
According to Derek Schartau, now director of Lola, but then in charge of the computer division of LBMSU. 'This led to us being kicked out of LBJCC — they wanted to follow a less ambitious path and were not interested in on-line updating.'

LBMSU's computer division had been in existence since 1959, with the purpose of acting as consultants to the London Boroughs. It persuaded six of the then 'metropolitan' boroughs to form the LBJCC in 1962, and developed under Schartau's direction, computer systems it needed for its Leo III.

After local government reorganisation, the' members of LBJCC emerged under their more familiar names of Greenwich, Southwark, and Bexley.

In 1966, LBMSU was asked to set up a similar operation for Hackney and Tower Hamlets, that became NELC. The systems that were used were the same as the ones that had been developed for LBJCC. Two years later, Haringey joined NELC, having concluded that like Hackney, it could not afford to go out on its own.

Following LBMSU's withdrawal from South Lon-

Lola headquarters at Enfield

don, the LBJCC recruited its own computer manager and retained about half of the resident LBMSU staff, the rest going to the more ambitious pastures of the north.

According to Schartau, 'we only had three authorities, just the right number for that sort of exercise.' Hillingdon came in with NELC the following year, attracted, said Schartau, 'by

the current systems on the Leo for decimalisation, and the idea of a database.'

The name of the group became Lola in 1970 and it entirely absorbed the operations of LBMSU's computer division retaining Schartau as director ——— LBMSU was absorbed by Lamsac about two years ago.

The switch to an IBM 370/158 and the move to its

present premises at Enfield were followed by one of the first UK implementations of IBM's IMS database system for use primarily for rating and financial planning applications, covering purchasing controls and creditors' payments. These systems now support 112 visual display around North London.

How has this been achieved? 'It has not all been

plain sailing,' Schartau told me. 'Our boroughs don't agree on everything. We regard it as our job to persuade them what is vital — and if they have their own special requirements, we parameterise the systems.'

But how much does this cost them? According to one of the boroughs, they each pay around £500,000 a year for the benefits of belonging to Lola, but the manager of one of London's go-it-alone Boroughs who claimed to have been involved in studying the advantages of consortia, believes the total cost to be nearer £1 million, and was doubtful about the cost savings that are actually achieved by a consortium.

He was more inclined to favour the idea of two Boroughs getting together — as at Ealing and Brent, where the total cost to the two authorities, according to Ronald Wayne, principal computer officer, is just around the £500,000 mark.