

Finance, Smart City and City Management Policy and Scrutiny Committee

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Title:	Councillors' IT Provision post May 2022
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Cabinet Member Portfolio	Finance and Smart City
Wards Involved:	All
Policy Context:	City for All
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1. Executive Summary

In advance of the 2022 local elections this paper sets out some of the key themes and possible options for Councillors' IT support in the new Council term.

The Committee's feedback and recommendations on this paper will form part of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Smart City's final proposal for Councillors' IT support from 2022 onwards.

2. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

The Committee were asked in advance of this meeting (Appendix A) for initial thoughts on the points below; comments received have been included in the options later in this report.

- Does £1,000 feel like a reasonable amount for a four-year period to cover an individual Councillors' IT requirements?
- What are the Committee's views on the options set out to provide hardware to enable Councillors to fulfil their roles?

- How should we approach situations where Councillors have already purchased hardware privately – should they still be entitled to an allowance or to claim expenses at the same level as others?
- How could we handle situations where Councillors start a four-year term by taking one approach from the options set out but then wish to switch e.g. they have privately purchased equipment but then wish to be given a Council device – should any expenses be repaid for example?
- In the experience of members of the Committee, what other considerations should be factored into decision making on the future of Councillors' IT provision?
- What training do Councillors feel they need in order to use the systems in place – what would they recommend new Councillors are trained in when first elected?
- What support do Councillors feel they might need to be 'digital by choice'?

3. Background

Since March 2020 Councillors have had to adapt to remote working and virtual meetings. This has transformed how they interact with the Council's systems; brought into light what equipment is needed and what support is also required to maintain this new way of working.

It is anticipated that as we move forward hybrid meetings and a greater reliance on virtual meeting technology and digital paperwork will become ingrained in the work of Councillors.

This paper looks at options for supporting Councillors in this move and asks the Committee to consider these and provide their own steer on how this support can work best for Councillors and enable them to perform their duties successfully.

4.0 Key issues

4.1 Provision of hardware

The Council does not supply Councillors with IT equipment and instead provides £1,000 allowance every four years for Councillors to purchase any products which would enable them to perform their duties. Therefore, at present most Councillors are using their own devices to complete Council work, which can work well where Councillors are adept at using IT.

It can, however, also cause difficulty when support is required for both hardware and software issues, as the IT helpdesk cannot access any personal devices remotely.

This makes it hard for problems encountered by Councillors to be diagnosed and solved. The helpdesk is open in working hours Monday to Friday and an out of hours service is also available.

There are also concerns about the safety of data on personal devices as not all Councillors have engaged with the IT team to get multi-factor authentication (strengthened security) on their devices.

Alternative options

- a. Provision of Council owned hardware:** All Councillors could be automatically provided with a Microsoft Surface Pro for Council work. These devices would be built and owned by the Council, which means that there is full support for them including replacements if necessary. As part of this offer, we would also provide a Surface pen, adaptors and a large screen for home working, if needed. The device would be 'loaned' from the Council and therefore will be expected to be returned when a Councillor is no longer in post.
- b. Purchase of personal equipment:** For Councillors who do not want to take up the above offer, they could be provided with a clear specification for what is appropriate to purchase, but they would not be able to access the full support for their personally purchased hardware from the IT helpdesk. The specification would include processing power, ability to run Office 365 and a high standard of camera and microphone.

If Councillors prefer to take this option an allowance would be provided.

- c. Configuration of existing personal equipment:** For Councillors wishing to configure any existing equipment they would need to ensure they adhere to all IT policies including multi factor authentication on all devices which access the Council's network and ensure that the equipment is able to run all the platforms that they will need e.g., suitable processing power, microphone and camera.

Where Councillors take such an approach, they could be entitled to an IT allowance on the grounds that they had previously purchased equipment which already enables them to do their job but may have additional requirements.

4.2 Allowance level

As mentioned above, at present, an allowance of £1,000 is provided for all Councillors for the purchase of IT equipment. Taking the approach above, in providing Council-owned hardware to Councillors, would mean removing the default £1,000 allowance for all Councillors and taking a more flexible approach based on support requirements.

The allowance is subject to PAYE taxation and so the £1,000 is the gross amount provided. The Committee are asked to consider whether this amount is still suitable for the purchase of equipment that would be used over the four-year period.

If Councillors decide part way through the term to switch, from using personal equipment to being provided with Council-owned hardware, the suggestion is that any allowance provided is paid back on a pro-rata basis.

4.3 'Digital by choice'

Since the pandemic the Council has shifted significantly to a larger proportion of virtual or hybrid meetings and a large reduction in the printing of papers, which has in the most part been very successful.

In line with the Council's aim to be carbon neutral by 2030 we are suggesting that printing of papers for all formal Council meetings is reduced as much as possible and Councillors are encouraged to be digital by choice. Any accessibility issues will of course be considered on a case-by-case basis.

We are suggesting the above could be achieved in a number of ways.

Research has been started into possible applications/platforms which would support Councillors to be more digital. Initial research has indicated that the Committee Management System the Council already use (Modern.Gov) can provide an app which would enable the annotation of papers on multiple devices. In addition, in providing Council-owned hardware, we can supply Surface pens to enable the above more effectively.

This move to a paperless future is being pursued by other Councils and we will link into the research that they are doing – most notably City of London are working via an ADSO (Association of Democratic Officers) network to look into solutions.

Printers are available in both Members' Rooms and on all floors in City Hall so if Councillors prefer paper copies these can be accessed via those, and we would make this more easily accessible, with training provided if needed, and simple to use for Councillors.

Alternatively, there is the potential to provide a personal printing allowance. This would be a finite budget, allocated to Councillors who do not wish to purchase products to support them to work digitally. This allowance could be used in the Council's print room on a self-serve basis i.e. Councillors send requests directly to the print room for printing and a deduction is made from their personal printing budget.

Such a budget could vary in line with a Councillor's responsibilities i.e. a higher budget would be available for Councillors sitting on a greater number of committees. As an example, a set of Licensing Sub-Committee papers cost between £12 - £17 to print, depending on size.

4.4 IT policies, support and training

The Governance and Councillor Support and IT teams are investigating the option of employing a dedicated Councillor 'IT set up' officer for a short-term period, i.e. from April – September 2022 to provide Councillors with a direct point of contact for any issues in the months after the election. This officer would also run drop-in sessions and inductions on equipment, use of Office365 and signposting to what support is available and where.

The new Members' SharePoint Hub will also contain up to date information on equipment, training sessions and signposting for Councillor queries.

There is not a great awareness of the IT policies by Councillors, which could in the worst-case scenario lead to a large fine for the Council and to Councillors as individuals if there is a data breach. An annual cyber security and data protection course is delivered, and a large number of Councillors have installed Multi Factor Authentication on their personal devices. However, attendance and installation are not at 100% which they should be.

Therefore, it is proposed that all Councillors will be required to sign up to the Council's IT policies and there will be mandatory attendance on annual cyber security and data protection training for all Councillors whether new or re-elected. Multi Factor Authentication will also automatically be applied to all Councillor accounts.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact Janis Best on 07971 920521 or jbest@westminster.gov.uk