

**BUSINESS PLAN FOR THE PROVISION OF
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO
ELECTED MEMBERS**

1. SUMMARY

This plan sets out reasons and options for the Council to consider the provision of information Technology support to members. It needs to be considered in line with the wider issue of services to members.

2. BACKGROUND

(a) Changing Roles

There has been an aspiration for some time for elected Members to be provided with IT equipment to help them fulfil their role more effectively. With the modernisation issues contained within the draft Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill gathering pace, this aspiration has become more focused as the role of many elected Members will change. Clearly, some Members will focus more on constituency matters in which case, access to electronically stored information will facilitate more effective casework management. Indeed, if the Council moves towards a Cabinet system of government, those Members in the Executive will also need access to electronically stored information both within the Council and via the Internet; facilities to produce their own documents and effective access to officers via e-mail.

The use of Information Technology by the Council's staff has become more widespread since the creation of the Unitary Authority. The development of the 'Windows' package has led to the majority of staff having access to, and regularly using e-mail as an effective means of communication both within the organisation and outside the

Council. Those Members who already have access to the Internet and e-mail have used it to good effect to communicate quickly and efficiently with officers, other Members and other organisations such as the voluntary sector. Indeed, officers have used e-mail as a means of communicating a wide range of information to Members. For example, there is currently an e-mail address for Members to report highway defects. Also, the Members Services section is in the process of developing a system whereby finalised agendas and minutes can be accessed electronically by Council staff. This business plan will outline how this could extend to Members.

Clearly, the rapid development of the information available via the Internet has an effect on Member development. Members can keep up-to-date with Central Government legislation and Regulations via the Web sites of the various Government Departments - information that Members had to rely solely on officers for in the past. Increasingly, all types of organisations including the voluntary sector are developing Web sites allowing Members to keep in-touch with live issues in Milton Keynes and nationally.

(b) Other Authorities

At a recent meeting of the South East Employers Members Services Officer Network, a number of Councils identified IT for Members as a key issue. Though progress was somewhat varied, many had begun the process by extending IT facilities to Political Group Rooms though not one Authority had successfully managed to provide all Members with fully networked PCs and related equipment.

The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has made some progress with a scheme for Members,

The London Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames also has a system.

(c) Current Provision

There are currently 16 Members with an e-mail address and 10 with their own P.C. and Internet access. The system is not ideal as many Members use the address at their place of employment which makes it difficult for officers to send anything more than messages and short documents and inappropriate for Members to use their PCs to generate Council related work.

The Leader of the Council has a PC and related equipment and there is financial provision for the Leader of the Opposition to be given the same. There are no PCs in the Group Rooms.

3. THE PROPOSALS

There are a number of options available in the development of IT use by Members, that are not all mutually exclusive.

Option 1 - IT Provision in the Group Rooms

What a number of other authorities have done is to provide Members with IT equipment in the political group rooms, as a starting point. It is proposed that under this option, each group room be provided with a PC, printer and related equipment to be fully networked allowing access to shared information within the Council, e-mail and Internet access and the use of word processing and spreadsheet packages. It is proposed that each Member has an individual log-on ID and e-mail address, allowing Members to produce documents, use the Internet/e-mail etc. from their own individual user site.

Financial Implications

The installation of one networked PC and one printer in each group room will be a one off-cost of £1500 per group room, coming to a total cost of £4500. This will be provided from within existing budgets from the Resources Directorate.

The ongoing maintenance, to be provided by the Resources Support Team within the IT Division in terms of Helpdesk and Technical support backup, access to Internet and e-mail are estimated to be £1200 per annum which will also need to be found from within existing budgets.

Staff Implications

Staff from the IT department will provide ongoing maintenance, installation and all related staff support which will be recharged internally to the Members services budget.

Training Implications

There is clearly a need for Members to be offered some training on the use of the various IT packages. This can be provided internally through the Council's training and development programme.

The Council offers 3 introductory courses - Introduction to e-mail, Introduction to Windows 98 and Introduction to Word which are corporately funded. However, there is unlikely to be sufficient provision in this budget to allow all Members to be trained and it is likely that this would need to be supplemented for the Members' Training Budget. Additional, more advanced courses cost approximately £100 per day and £50 per half day, for which there would need to be an internal recharge to the Members Training budget.

Timescale

It is anticipated that all IT equipment could be installed in the group rooms by the IT department's staff by March 2000.

Option 2 - Provision of IT equipment to all Members

This could clearly be seen as the medium term aspiration depending on the resources available to deliver it. Under this option, each Member without the necessary IT equipment would be provided with what was required. Those Members who already had a PC would be provided with upgrades and/or additional peripheral equipment such as printers, modems etc. This would be fully supported by the IT Department through helpdesk and technical staff. Alternatively, the helpdesk advice could be provided externally.

Financial Implications

All the required equipment PCs with modems and printers would cost in the region of £80,000 including installation and assumes that an additional post of Technician is created to support Members (approximately £25,000, including costs). Officers are currently exploring external funding/sponsorship opportunities. No resources exist within current budgets.

The total cost of ongoing maintenance, if provided by the Resources Support Team with the IT Division in terms of Helpdesk and Technical support; backup, access to Internet and e-mail; and installation in new Members homes in May, is estimated to be £30,000 per annum, for which there is no current budgetary provision.

There may be some savings if all agendas and other information to Members was posted via e-mail, rather than as a hard copy via the courier. This is somewhat difficult to quantify, although the current spend in excess of £80,000 on Committee agendas would be offset against the reduction in print costs. Members would still have to be provided with enough paper to print out a full agenda or anything else sent to them by officers, which could be relatively costly and the practice of 'colour-coding' agendas etc, would cease.

The use of additional telephone time would also likely increase costs for Members, or the Council if reimbursed (if permitted by the District Auditor).

In common with options 3 and 4 there are implications for the insurance of IT equipment installed in Members' homes. The Council would need to ensure that the equipment is covered by sufficient insurance cover which could potentially increase the Council's premiums.

Staff Implications

If staff from the IT Division provide ongoing maintenance, installation and all related staff support, this will be recharged internally to the Members services budget. Apart from the initial installation, every time a new Member was elected, the PC would have to be transferred to that Member from the retiring Councillor.

As stated above it will be necessary to employ an additional technician to support Members in their homes. Further costs will be incurred if the technician has to make abortive visits to Members, or visits outside normal office hours.

Training Implications

As previous option.

Timescale

This would depend on how quickly resources could be found, either internally or through sponsorship, a Private Finance Initiative etc. If resources were found immediately, the earliest date by which IT equipment could be installed in each Member's home would be June 2000.

Option 3 - Members lease IT equipment from the Council

Under this option, Members could lease or purchase the PC from the Council with costs being deducted from each Member's allowance over an agreed period, which would need to be within the Member's term of office. There is some doubt as to whether this is legal as one other authority (East Hampshire) attempted it but District Audit objected

Financial Implications

The initial cost of providing IT equipment to Members via a leasing agreement would be in the region of £300 per annum per Member. Although some items cannot be leased which would result in an estimated one off cost of £600.

Ongoing maintenance, support etc, if provided by the IT Division would be approximately £400 per annum, depending on numbers.

If staff from the IT department provide ongoing maintenance, installation and all related staff support, this will be recharged internally to the Members services budget.

Training Implications

As previous options.

Timescale

This would depend on how quickly resources could be found to balance the initial costs and on the views of the District Auditor.

4. COST COMPARISONS WITH NATIONAL RETAILER

A table of cost comparisons between a Council provided PC/laptop and a PC purchased from a major national retailer is **Annexed**.

Use of a Council provided PC will give Members access to the Council's network, including eventually Committee documentation and backup of data. These would not be available if the PCs were to be purchased from a national retailer, access being provided by an Internet Service Provider, also usage could not be monitored by the Council.