

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM TO
MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PANEL**

Date 2nd October 2014

HEADING Members' Use of ICT and ICT Resources

Submitted by: Head of Business Improvement, Central Services & Partnerships

Portfolio Communication, Policy & Partnerships

Ward(s) affected All

Purpose of the Report

To consider methods of delivering information to Members more effectively and efficiently.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are subject to further discussions between Group Leaders, followed by Cabinet and Full Council

- (i) That the practice of printing off and sending on Members' emails cease**
- (ii) That a similar policy to that outlined above and currently applied to officers be implemented to also cover Member email accounts**
- (iii) That the use of Borough Council email by all elected Borough Council Members for council business be made mandatory**
- (iv) That the Members' weekly courier service be ceased. Instead, Members will be required to use either electronic means to access committee papers in future, or will be required to visit the Civic Offices to pick up their printed papers. The Council will continue to encourage all Members to use appropriate available technology and will offer the necessary training for Members to use this technology. It is envisaged that the practice of making printed agendas and other papers available to Members in this way will be phased out following the 2015 Borough Council elections.**

Reasons

The recommendations seek to encourage Members to access their emails on a more regular basis and to use email as the primary method of communication with both their constituents and also with officers. This will ensure that any questions asked by Members of officers or asked by constituents of Members are answered more promptly and that information is conveyed to Members/constituents more efficiently. Furthermore, the move would create a cost saving to the Council, as printing costs will be reduced and also time spent by officers printing out emails for Members could also be used more effectively. Finally, the ending of the weekly courier service would also save on costs for the Council.

1 Background

- 1.1 Members have been supported over a number of years to ensure that they have been able to maximise their use of ICT facilities. This support has taken a number of

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forms and has included extensive ICT training, one to one support for Members in improving their ICT skills and initiatives to overcome particular difficulties.

- 1.2 The council has also offered computers to Members who do not have their own facilities and more recently a pilot of iPads have been undertaken with a group of Members with a view to determining their suitability for future use by Members.

2 Issues

The importance of ICT

- 2.1 In a comparatively short space of time the use of modern ICT has become a necessity of modern life. Mobile phones, once a luxury item, are now common place and many people regard them as indispensable. The use of computers, once the preserve of large organisations with mainframe machines, is now commonplace and personal computers are now household items. There has also been a noticeable convergence of technology most evidently with mobile phones able to do things which would previously have needed a computer such as connecting to the internet and receiving emails. The ability to access the internet through a television set is another example of the convergence of technologies which is increasing the range of tasks which can be delivered through these facilities.
- 2.2 Email is fast becoming the preferred method of communication for people and is widely used not only as a business tool but also to support people in their personal lives. Technologies such as email and text messages also provide opportunities for people to contact and respond to others at times most convenient to them. Access to the internet is seen as being as important as having a landline telephone was a generation ago and connection to gas and electricity before that.
- 2.3 The Borough Council has embraced all of these technologies and is using them in a wide variety of ways not only to improve the efficiency of its operation but also to improve its responsiveness to the customer.
- 2.4 Members have been an important part of this process and have, in many cases proactively embraced the use of modern ICT in their role as councillors both within the council and also in their wider constituency work.

Taking advantage of modern technology

- 2.5 New technologies have delivered a number of other advantages which have reduced cost and improved efficiency. One noticeable trend has been the reduction in the use of printed paper and the move to handling documents in digital form. This, of course, has been one aspect of the iPad trial and was a part of the rationale behind it. Emails have significantly replaced paper based mail and it is now much easier and more efficient to share documents in electronic rather than in hard copy form.
- 2.6 All these uses and potential uses of new technology are enabling elected Members to engage with their residents in a more dynamic way than has been possible in the past.
- 2.7 A significant number of Members have also embraced social media as a way of helping them to communicate with residents. The trend towards the ever greater use of ICT is now not only growing in extent but also in pace.

Moving with technological change

- 2.8 A major challenge in ensuring that new technology delivers greater efficiency is to ensure that, as new facilities are introduced; older technologies are progressively

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phased out. In the home, the replacement of the VHS tape with the DVD disc is a good example of this. This change has not happened overnight but nonetheless the newer technology has replaced the old over time. Another example would be the number of retailers and others who no longer accept payment by cheque, the widespread availability and use of the plastic card having replaced the need for cheque based payment.

- 2.9 It has been noted above that in the office the more widespread use of digital documents and communications has significantly reduced paper-based storage methods.
- 2.10 The Council, in order to remain efficient, has also had to ensure that old ways of doing things and practices have been phased out. Also, modern technology is not without cost and therefore care has had to be taken to ensure that these resources are used in the most efficient way possible. Phasing old systems out is sometimes difficult as people get used to working in a particular way. However, without the cessation of old systems and practices, the benefits of introducing and using new systems are inevitably compromised.
- 2.11 It is in this context that it is timely to consider some of the ways in which Members are now using new technology and to determine whether, in the interests of both efficiency and good service, some old practices need to be phased out. Three areas in particular have been highlighted:-
- The practice of printing out emails for Members;
 - The need for Members to actively manage their council email accounts; and
 - The continued use (and costs) of the weekly courier service for delivering paper documents to Members.

3. **Options Considered**

Printing and posting emails

- 3.1 The practice of printing emails for those elected Members who request it creates three types of cost:
- The materials used;
 - The distribution costs (see below); and
 - The officer time in undertaking the work
- 3.2 It is estimated that the current cost for providing this for the 8 members who have requested this service is £730 per annum.
- 3.3 Up until now, the Council has held a very clear position with regard to Member support in order to ensure that this is fair and consistent and that Members are supported in a manner consistent with their role(s) in the Council. It could therefore be argued that those Members who continue to receive printed and distributed copies of their emails are accordingly receiving additional support not enjoyed by other Members. It is without question that they are taking a greater share of the Council's resources by doing so.
- 3.4 In addition, the process of printing and distributing emails introduces significant delay to the communication process. There may be up to a week between the time a message was sent and the time it is seen by the intended Member which is contrary to the expectations of those using e-mail as a fast and efficient communication method. The printing process also does nothing to address the issue of actually

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sending a response to an email, where an electronic reply is expected rather than a paper one.

It is therefore recommended that the practice of printing off and sending on Member emails ceases. This may need to be preceded by the appropriate training where required.

Managing email accounts

- 3.5 The issue of Members managing their own email accounts is more complex than the matter of printing emails and has a number of dimensions. Appropriate training, however, can help to resolve most issues.
- 3.6 Members who are not actively managing their email accounts are allowing a build-up of emails, and this has a number of consequences:
- (i) Members who are not regularly checking their email accounts may be missing important information being sent to them by their residents, colleagues, their Party and officers.
 - (ii) Members who are not regularly deleting old emails are calling upon an ever increasing amount of storage on the council's systems. This storage has a cost and the cost of storing data on an email server (i.e. in an email account) is significantly greater than documents held on non-mail servers.
- 3.7 Due to the high cost of the storage of data held in email accounts, the Council has instituted a policy for officers and a separate Protocol for Members which limits the size of their email accounts and will cease to allow further emails to be sent once that size limit is exceeded.
- 3.8 Since this policy was introduced it has had a significant impact upon the amount and therefore the cost of administering the council's email facility. It should be noted that a very small numbers of exceptions have been granted to officer email accounts which due to their nature regularly receive very large documents or high email traffic rates.

It is recommended that a similar policy to that outlined above and currently applied to officers is implemented to also cover Member email accounts

Accessing Emails

- 3.9 It has been noted that there is a small minority of Members who have not accessed their Borough Council email accounts for a very considerable period of time or who access their accounts only very occasionally. This runs the risk that Members may miss important information which they need to perform their role as a councillor. Given that email is now a preferred and highly cost effective mechanism of communication it is considered that Members' use of the council's email system should be made mandatory. It would be prudent to phase in mandating the use of email and it is suggested that it become a requirement for new Members at and for all dates after the elections in May 2015. This will give time for the political parties to consider this requirement when engaging in candidate selection processes.
- 3.10 It has been noted previously that a number of Members use their own personal email accounts for a number of reasons rather than the Borough Council email account provided for them. It has been made clear to Members in the past that this is not acceptable due to security concerns over personal email accounts. It should therefore be reiterated that all Members must use their Borough Council email and that officers will not send emails to personal email accounts.

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It is recommended that use of Borough Council email by all elected Borough Council Members for Council business be made mandatory

Weekly Courier Service

- 3.11 The courier service was introduced in 2009 in response to the previous ad hoc, in-house arrangement of delivering post by hand to Members as a temporary solution to an immediate problem.
- 3.12 Much of the Members' mail is heavy due to the quantity of reports and appendices which are attached to agendas and this became very expensive to post by Royal Mail.
- 3.13 The courier service has proved to be a more cost efficient and accountable way of delivering mail to Councillors' home addresses but it was introduced at a time when Councillors did not have widespread access to email facilities.
- 3.14 Since that time, the Council has moved to an alternative provider of its corporate mail services and restricted the user of first class postage which has significantly reduced postal costs. However, although the amount of courier post has decreased as more Members make use of their email addresses, or use alternative means of collection, there are still weekly envelopes sent to upwards of 40 Members at a total cost estimated to be £5,000 per year.
- 3.15 At other authorities within Staffordshire, it is mandated that Members must periodically visit their respective Council's offices to pick up any items of post they have received. This negates the need for those Councils to operate a bespoke delivery solution for their Members. A similar practice could be adopted and phased in at Newcastle for new Members at and for all dates after the elections in May 2015.
- 3.16 Members should therefore be offered two options. One option is for a Member to exclusively utilise electronic delivery of agendas (via modern.gov), thereby receiving no printed agendas. The second option is to continue to provide paper copies for committees on which a Member sits, but to stipulate that the printed papers will need to be collected from the Civic Offices. However, the number of available printed agendas will be restricted to avoid printing overheads. All Members should also be advised when an agenda is available on the Members' website (via modern.gov), so that they can have an initial look at any particular agenda. It is envisaged that, following the Borough Council elections in May 2015, all Members will be expected to use electronic technology as part of their role, and that paper copies will only be provided in extreme circumstances (e.g. if ICT facilities are not available).
- 3.17 The reason for presenting the above set of options is that accessing documents via a tablet device (as used in the recent trial) in a 'live' situation needs certain skills and experience which need to be developed should the proposal go ahead. It is also proposed, however, that training will be provided to Members on the use of electronic devices generally.

It is recommended that the Members' weekly courier post be ceased. It is further recommended that Members should use electronic means to access committee and other papers via modern.gov without receiving any printed documentation under normal circumstances Training will be provided where required. Any member choosing not to use electronic means to access committee papers will be able to receive printed papers, but they will also have to come to the Civic Offices to collect those papers, and it should be noted that this arrangement will be phased out following the 2015 Borough Council elections

4. Proposal

4.1 To commence negotiations with Group Leaders followed by papers to Cabinet and Council with a view to implementing 4.2 below

4.2 To agree to the recommendations outlined in sections 2 and 3 (above).

5. Reasons for Preferred Solution

5.1 By implementing the recommendations, there will be a significant cost saving in printing and delivery costs.

6. Outcomes Linked to Corporate Priorities

6.1 The recommendations support all of the Council's corporate priorities.

7. Legal and Statutory Implications

7.1 There are no legal and statutory Implications to consider at this stage

8. Equality Impact Assessment

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment will be developed based on these proposals.

9. Financial and Resource Implications

9.1 The implementation of recommendations will ensure that the areas reviewed will provide value for money in relation to their objectives and that operations are provided safely and risks managed. This in turn will reduce the risk of financial losses.

10. Major Risks

10.1 A risk profile will be created based on the proposals set out in this report.

11. Key Decision Information

11.1 Not applicable