

AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was held on 11 April 2013.

PRESENT: Councillors Brunton (Chair), Harvey, Junier (as substitute for P Sharrocks), J McPartland, G Purvis and P Purvis (as substitute for J Sharrocks).

OFFICERS: J Bennington and A Crawford.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors J Hobson, Hubbard, Mawston, J Sharrocks and P Sharrocks.

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations on interest made at this meeting.

12/6 MINUTES - AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL 27 MARCH 2013

The minutes of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel held on 27 March 2013 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

12/7 PAPERLESS COMMITTEE MEETINGS - DRAFT FINAL REPORT

Members considered the draft final report based on the Panel's findings relating to Paperless Committee Meetings.

The Chair reported upon the comments received from a Member who had attended the Council meeting held on 3 April 2013 using a tablet device onto which reports had been downloaded from the Egenda system and into notes. Members were advised that from his experience it had proved to be better and quicker to access the reports during the meeting and make notes. Other Members had confirmed difficulties in gaining a Wi Fi connection whilst in the Council Chamber. As previously indicated the Council's Desk Top Strategy and Application Review would be examining a common hardware/software platform solution and a consistent 3G/Wi Fi connection.

Mindful of the Data Protection Act and associated legislation it was acknowledged that careful consideration would need to be given to the security arrangements in respect of confidential information and reports. It was also recognised that in some cases paper copies may prove necessary where highly confidential and very complex documents were used such as at meetings of Family Placement Panel, Licensing Committees and Staff Appeals Committee. Reference was also made to the need to comply with the Local Government Act 2000 in ensuring that papers were made available for members of the public.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the following key areas within the report:-

(a) Information gained from other authorities in particular Scarborough Borough Council which had adopted a paperless approach to committee meetings an analysis of which had been examined by it's Audit Committee in December 2012;

(b) Benefits of a paperless approach which included:-

- devices were small, portable, convenient and easy to use;
- enabled mobile working;
- less paper to carry;
- improved access to information;
- information could be stored very securely;
- savings could be made on paper, printing and despatch/delivery of meeting papers;
- an authority's carbon footprint could be reduced;
- more efficient and effective use of both Member and Officer time and increased productivity;

(c) Recognition by other authorities of issues to be taken into consideration:

- involved a major cultural and organisational change and appropriate intensive training for both Members and Officers;
- possible limitations on the use of devices in terms of operating systems/links with local authority systems;
- possible negative publicity;
- consideration of the provision and use of wireless printers or centralised printing system;
- overall costs not just capital/procurement but ongoing costs such as subscription services, annual insurance and required licences;

(d) indicative costs relating to current printing of committee documents although it was stated that such costs were likely to be significantly higher when taking into account specialised printing such as colour printing, binding documents, design or production of large plans and brochures;

(e) demonstrations from Officers of Adult Social and Regeneration of the benefits of using mobile tablet devices in their area of work;

(f) ongoing work by the Council in relation to the Desk Top Strategy and Application Review with the aim of introducing common standards and reduce costs;

(g) use and/or disposal of Members' existing IT equipment.

Members referred to the importance of ensuring that careful attention is given to any publicity material with the emphasis being placed on an invest to save approach should a paperless committee process be pursued and implemented. It was acknowledged that further detail was required regarding costs not just capital but current ongoing and likely future costs.

Reference was made to the intention of Scarborough Borough Council to use an electronic diary to arrange meetings and the use of 'Facetime' which would allow Councillors to hold remote meetings with officers thus reducing costs and time of travel to the respective office which they considered would be helpful given the geographical area of their Borough. Members expressed support for a 'Facetime' type of facility in terms of enhancing the role as a councillor in particular providing greater access to the public. In commenting on the overall benefits of a portable tablet device Members referred to the usefulness of such equipment with particular regard to ward surgeries.

The Panel discussed possible conclusions and recommendations for inclusion in the draft final report as follows:-

Conclusions

(i) Work by other local authorities indicates that moving to paperless committee meetings could result in significant long-term financial savings. The use of mobile devices can also produce other benefits for Members, such as more efficient ways of working, more effective use of time and improved access to information, both in meetings and in Members' work as ward councillors. If such an approach is to be adopted, it will be necessary to demonstrate its benefits and effectiveness. It is likely that the most cost-effective approach would be to supply a single, standardised, mobile device to all Councillors.

(ii) A paperless approach would entail a major change in organisational culture, This would include all Members and those Officers involved in supporting meetings or submitting information to meetings. An assessment would need to be made in respect of the use and availability of mobile devices by appropriate Officers.

(iii) It would be essential to ensure that any paperless system that was adopted would be capable of supporting all uses/systems required by Members. It would also be necessary to mitigate any potential risks posed by the introduction of any new systems, such as security and lack of connectivity to networks or systems.

(iv) In adopting a paperless approach, there would be a need to ensure continued and easy

access to meeting papers by non-Councillors (e.g. co-opted members) as well as the public and press.

Recommendations

(i) That a paperless approach to committee meetings in Middlesbrough Council - involving the use of mobile devices by all Elected Members and relevant Officers to access all meeting papers - is adopted by the authority subject to the following additional recommendations.

(ii) That the project is examined/developed as part of the Authority's Desk Top Strategy and Application Review. This should identify the most appropriate equipment/devices to be used and undertake a detailed exercise on cost-effectiveness and long-term costs. All costs should be identified prior to the introduction of any new system. The exercise should also include an assessment of the potential risks of the system and how these could be addressed/mitigated.

(iii) That any mobile devices used are capable of supporting all systems currently in use by Members, together with any enhanced features that may be appropriate to enhance Members' role in the future.

(iv) That the necessary training is provided for all Members and relevant Officers.

(v) That it is ensured that the press, public and any relevant parties attending meetings continue to be able to easily access all public agenda, reports and minutes. It should also be ensured that the production of any printed meeting papers is reduced to a minimum.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the draft report submitted and the conclusions and recommendations as outlined above form the basis of the Final Report to be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board subject to the following:-

(a) That the first sentence of conclusion (i) above include a reference to the benefits of reducing the Authority's carbon footprint;

(b) That the first sentence of conclusion (iii) above include a reference to the need of ensuring that information could be accessed at all times.

2. That the Scrutiny Support Officer in consultation with the Chair considers the wording of an additional recommendation regarding the need for appropriate arrangements to be made regarding publicity on the aim and benefits of pursuing a paperless committee approach.