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BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

JOINT AUDIT & SCRUTINY PANEL

Held on Wednesday, 24 November 2010 at 10.30 am in
St George's Room, Elizabeth House, Dereham NR19 1EE

PRESENT

Mr S.G. Bambridge
Councillor Claire Bowes
Mr R.P. Childerhouse

Mr J.P. Cowen
Mr C.R. Jordan

In Attendance

Helen McAleer
Jane Osborne
Rory Ringer
Teresa Smith
Kevin J Taylor

- Senior Committee Officer
- Committee Officer
- Elections and Scrutiny Manager
- Member Services Support Officer
- Head of ICT

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1/10 CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Mr J P Cowen be elected as Chairman.

2/10 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mr D S Myers.

3/10 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were none.

4/10 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING

None.

5/10 TERMS OF REFERENCE

Subject to amendments replacing the word 'party' with 'elected' in point one and changing activity to actively in point four, the Terms of Reference were agreed by Members.

6/10 REVIEW OF THE PROVISION OF ICT EQUIPMENT AND FACILITIES FOR ELECTED MEMBERS

Rory Ringer, Breckland's new Elections and Scrutiny Manager introduced himself to Members and explained his primary role and that of Teresa Smith, Member Services Support Officer, who would be the contact for the group.

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The Head of ICT explained that the purpose of the meeting was to review Members' IT needs post-election 2011, to flag any current issues/constraints, and to identify potential future requirements, including hardware, connectivity and applications. His PowerPoint presentation covered the following areas:-

- Current position
- Future consideration
- What's changing (expectations and hardware/software)
- Hardware options
- Software training options
- IT support
- What's happening elsewhere
- Underpinning Principles
- Next steps

Current position

The existing IT equipment was nearing the end of its useful life and needed to be replaced.

Future considerations

The replacement IT needed to meet the needs of Members and provide best value for money.

What's changing?

Future technology needed to be able to link to partners, whether private sector, community or county/national organisations. Councillors might want to make use of their own equipment and connectivity or, alternatively, might want to make more business and personal use of County equipment. They might also want to access services from a range of different devices.

Residents were becoming more technology and media literate, with the use of social media tools. Members therefore needed to be aware of that and consider ways in which to meet that need. There were also other channels, such as DigiTv - using televisions to access services, which might be an area for consideration.

A Member asked what was happening in West Dereham regarding better community connections to broadband, and how it was progressing. Mr Jordan was able to advise that Norfolk County Council was looking at making their current 600 node network more widely available, which should help to significantly reduce the areas of poor broadband coverage across the whole county.

With regard to District sites, the Head of ICT said that there was an opportunity to 'piggy-back' the County system, and make use of existing capacity if it proved cost-effective.

Hardware options

A variety of devices were available, which had been tried and tested in a number of other authorities. Members were shown examples of three: a Netbook, a Tablet, and a Thin Client. Their advantages and disadvantages were explained. Decisions

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needed to be made on future provision which could be desktop, laptop or hand held. There was also an option to provide Members with an allowance to procure their own equipment, although support implications would need to be considered.

Software and Training options

There were a number of applications already in use by the Council that could help Members. These included Breckview/GIS and Modern.gov which could be developed to ease administration and management for Members. There had been a recent article in the Municipal Journal about an award to Teignmouth Council for their Member's information management system. The Head of ICT suggested including a demonstration of that system at the next meeting.

Members were asked if they felt that the IT training provided met their needs. Although the Council had achieved its CharterMark Plus for Member development, some recent ICT training events had been poorly attended. This lack of training had a knock-on effect on the volume and types of calls that ICT dealt with. To help address this issue, a Member suggested that it should be compulsory for all Councillors to reach a certain level of IT literacy prior to being connected to systems as this would maximise their time using the systems and minimise calls and costs of fault rectification. There was also a growing expectation from the public that Councillors should be accessible electronically.

IT Support

Currently there was a dedicated Member support officer for IT issues. Members were asked if they considered that IT support was a necessity or a luxury.

The Chairman said that if the system didn't work then support was a necessity, however if it was a case of inadequate training, then it was not. He noted that there had been a lot of hardware failures and the service had been a necessity. However, with a hardware replacement programme, additional training and greater adoption of remote resolution there should be a reduction in the need for both assistance and on-site visits.

It was noted that support outside of working hours was a requirement given that evenings and weekends were the only times that some Members were able to access e-mail and the Breckland systems and services.

The Head of ICT agreed that if the cause of some of the problems could be addressed it would reduce the demand for the service.

Members were asked if they would support the use of personal hardware for Council work. Some supported this suggestion as they had problems accommodating two sets of equipment however others would have problems as there were additional demands on their personal hardware.

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A Member was not happy about the potential security issues of use of personal PCs as he felt the Council could have access to his private details. He also felt that a laptop was necessary to take to meetings.

The Head of ICT thought that it might be possible to support both cases – some Members having their own equipment and others being provided with Council hardware. He then asked about broadband provision. A number of other authorities provided a monthly allowance and Councillors arranged their own broadband contracts. Was this something that Members considered acceptable?

A Member thought that it would be better to bulk buy hardware/software and communication links, rather than each Member getting an individual price. The Head of ICT agreed that having recently changed broadband supplier they had been able to negotiate a very good price for bulk circuits.

The Head of ICT felt that with improved equipment, the number of call-outs would be greatly reduced. To ensure that Members were aware of any issues or changes he suggested that there should be a quarterly Members Forum to monitor and evaluate service more regularly.

The Chairman said that there needed to be a Reporting by Exception item on both the Audit and the O&SC agendas.

A Member asked if there was still an e-Champion and it was confirmed that David Williams held that position.

Next Steps

A decision needed to be made on what equipment would be preferred. The Head of ICT asked Members to seek the views of their colleagues and provide him with feedback. He would issue a paper on the options available and their associated costs.

A Member was concerned that some of the devices on offer had very small screens. It was explained that these could be plugged into much larger screens at quite low cost.

The Chairman showed the Cabinet Agenda (480 pages) which included policies and diagrams for the meeting on 30 November. A document of that size would be difficult to read on any screen. He also pointed out that whichever IT equipment was chosen it would need to have the facility to “red line” and annotate points.

Members confirmed that they were happy for the views of the Youth Council to be sought with regard to the review of ICT equipment.

The Head of ICT agreed to provide Members with the following before the next meeting:-

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- Options and Costs of ICT equipment
- A copy of the PowerPoint presentation
- The views of the Youth Council

7/10 NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be held on 14 December at 10.00 in the St. Georges Room, Elizabeth House, Dereham.

The meeting closed at 11.30 am

CHAIRMAN