

## Policy & Finance Committee

**Date:** 27 February 2023

**Title:** Provision of councillor devices

**Purpose of the Report:**

To update Members of the progress thus far in the procurement of council owned devices is to help and support the work of councillors in their role from May 2023.

**Contact Officer:**

Sarah Sandiford, Deputy Town Clerk

<b>Corporate Objective/s</b>	LLTC Five Year Plan – Objectives 1 (To regularly review how we communicate and seek to embrace new technologies) & 2 (To continue to aim towards a paperless office).	
<b>Implications:</b>		
<b>Financial</b>	Yes	Earmarked reserve 9060/920 for this purpose.
<b>Human Resources</b>	No	
<b>Operational/Service delivery</b>	Yes	To ensure the council can operate effectively.
<b>Procedural/Legal</b>	No	LGA 1972 s111
<b>Risk/Health and Safety</b>	No	
<b>Environmental Aims</b>	Yes	Paper reduction in line with environmental ambitions
<b>Equalities</b>	Yes	Provision of electronic meeting documents allows for use of screen readers, increased font sizes, coloured backgrounds.

### 1 RECOMMENDATION

Should the Committee be minded, the proposal is:

- 1.1 To procure 21 council owned devices for use by elected Members from May 2023 – May 2027 together with associated device management and support, to enable all councillors to undertake their role and safeguard council compliance with legislation regarding information management (costs to be met primarily from earmarked reserves).

## **2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The Town Council started using the Modern.gov meeting management software in June 2018 as a mechanism to provide meeting documents electronically to elected Members.
- 2.2 At that time, councillors were offered a choice of whether to use a town council owned device to access the software or whether to use a personal device. This was considered a matter of personal preference for each councillor, with a majority opting to use personal devices but recognising that it was unfair to expect all councillors to do this.
- 2.3 Following some research of options, it was determined that a 10-inch screen would be sufficient for viewing of documents and that an Android tablet device offered best value for money.
- 2.4 Additional devices were purchased for the next council administration in May 2019, for councillors who opted to use them. Devices were purchased direct by the council with some limited configuration support being provided by the council's IT supplier.
- 2.5 Devices in circulation are now 3-4 years old and by the next elections in May 2023, will no longer be fit for purpose.
- 2.6 Neither council owned nor personal devices are externally supported and it is therefore for councillors to manage and maintain those devices on an operational level (e.g. enabling software updates). Some limited support has been given by council officers but is dependent on councillors bringing those devices into the council office at an appropriate time.
- 2.7 Provision of training to councillors has been more difficult given the range of devices and platforms being utilised. As with any group of individuals, there is a diversity in terms of confidence, experience and interest in using devices and software.
- 2.8 The Council is required to comply with legislation such as the Data Protection Act 2018 and Freedom of Information Act 2000. This collective, corporate responsibility is complicated by the mix of personal and council owned devices.
- 2.9 All elected Members are expected to use a Microsoft O365 account linked to their official town council email address. Use of official email addresses is recommended by the Cabinet Office and the Information Commissioner. Licences are provided by the council which include "light" versions of Office suite software as well as Outlook for email and calendar management and Teams for messaging, document sharing and online meetings. Use of O365 for town council communications to/from officers, to/from each other and to/from residents helps to ensure compliance with legislation and reduces the potential for breaches of data security or confidential information.

- 2.10 Unlike some councils, the town council has always taken the position that all documents for all meetings should be available to all councillors, regardless of whether they are appointed to that committee or sub-committee, or not. Electronic agenda publication has facilitated this access to both councillors and the public.
- 2.11 Whilst recognising and accommodating any individual preferences for paper based meeting documents, the Council has seen a reduction of circa 23,000 sheets of paper per municipal year since introducing electronic agendas. This not only contributes to the Council's sustainability ambitions but has freed up officer time in the printing and collating of agenda packs.

### **3 UPDATE**

- 3.1 In a 2022 survey of councillors to which 15 out of 21 responded, it was clear that there continues to be a wide range of personal preferences in terms of device type and operating system.
- 3.2 Two-thirds of respondents advised that the provision of support and maintenance would make use of a council owned device more attractive, although 60% still stated they would prefer to use a personal device if re-elected.
- 3.3 Two-thirds of respondents advised they use tablet devices, but others stated a preference for a keyboard and mouse and/or a larger screen.
- 3.4 A majority of respondents agreed no financial allowance should be made to councillors for the provision of equipment to undertake their role.
- 3.5 In October 2022, the committee made a decision to change IT support provider and meeting management software. Changes coming into effect from 1 March will see greater use of Office 365, potentially enabling councillors to view shared documents and to use Council/committee-specific Teams-based chat channels for communications. It is envisaged this will reduce email traffic but allow greater shared communication and easier access to documents.
- 3.6 Whilst O365 can be accessed from any device, documents and communications will be easier on a larger device than on a mobile phone for example.
- 3.7 In-meeting electronic voting is a feature of the new Decisions software which it is likely the council will seek to adopt, but this will only be feasible if all councillors present and voting have access to electronic devices.
- 3.8 Whilst recognising that some of the new council administration from May 2023 may wish to use own devices for familiarity/convenience, consideration should also be given to those who either don't possess, or would prefer not to use, personal devices for council work.

## 4 OPTIONS

- 4.1 Provision of technical support, device maintenance and user training would be significantly more deliverable if there was a consistency in approach. For these purposes, an ideal scenario for all councillors would be using the same devices which could be maintained remotely via a support contract, thus also enabling councillors to access helpdesk support.
- 4.2 Should the council wish to take this approach, it would make sense to source devices in the Spring to be set up and ready for use by newly elected Members post May 2023.
- 4.3 The council's IT provider has put together a specific package aimed at the local council sector nationally. The suggested solution is a Lenovo P11 tablet with a keyboard at £385 per device. The majority of the total cost of £8,085 can be met from earmarked reserve 9060/920 (£7860 available), with the remainder met from the revenue budget.

One off set up, configuration and training costs would be a total of £1650 to be met from the Professional Fees earmarked reserve.

Additional services (costs could be met from the revenue budget) would be:

Ongoing device management £2.00 per device per month  
Councillor support £250 per 5 hours

- 4.5 Initial purchase costs could be met from the IT earmarked reserve. Ongoing device management and support costs could be met from the IT revenue budget.
- 4.6 Cloudy has advised that council owned devices could be configured to ensure security whilst maximising convenience for councillors, for example with facial recognition security rather than having to remember passwords or PIN codes.
- 4.7 Committee/Council could otherwise decide:
- That councillors use own devices
  - That councillors use a mix of own and council devices
  - That no decision be made until the new Council administration and that new councillors then decide a way forward, recognising they will need to use own devices for email/Teams and either use own devices for meeting papers or use paper copies, until such time as a way forward is agreed.

- 4.8 Previous Council administrations have expressed concern over the public perception of expenditure on devices for councillor use. Many councils now do this routinely, to facilitate communications, including communications with residents.

Broadly speaking, the cost of procuring a tablet/laptop will, over a 4-year term, be less than the cost of providing paper copies of all meeting agendas by post, particularly when taking into account the associated council staff resource implications. This calculation is based on 2021-22 actual costs and meeting frequency.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 In a group of 21 elected Members, there will inevitably be a range of views and preferences regarding device types and platforms.
- 5.2 Use of personal devices allows councillors to use devices of a type/platform they prefer and are familiar with, at no additional cost to the council. However, it should be recognised that use of personal devices may also give rise to concerns regarding confidentiality, potential for breach of data protection legislation and difficulty for the corporate body in complying with matters such as Freedom of Information or Subject Access requests (see further guidance **attached** from the Society of Local Council Clerks and Information Commissioners Office).
- 5.3 Committee/Council is also asked to note that use of a range of devices/platforms including personal devices will make the provision of technical support or training difficult or potentially impossible.
- 5.4 Recognising that at the present time, the individual requirements and preferences of newly elected councillors post May 2023 are unknown, the Committee is asked to consider the best course of action for the Council as a body in order to ensure new Members can undertake their duties and that the Council as a corporate body complies with its responsibilities under legislation.

**End.**

## APPENDICES

- A. Information Commissioner's Office factsheet for councils on the use of personal email addresses and devices
- B. GDPR presentation Clerks & Councillors personal devices from SLCC
- C. Personal email and device advice sheet
- D. Affordable agenda and meeting management for councils 2023 (Cloudy IT)