

Executive Report

Ward(s) affected: n/a

Report of Director of Strategy

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Date: 18 February 2020

Paperless Meetings

Executive Summary

In common with other councils, Guildford faces a number of significant challenges over the next few years particularly in respect of:

- (a) meeting our corporate responsibilities in addressing the climate emergency that we declared in July 2019, and
- (b) finding sufficient resources to continue to provide services that meet the needs of our residents

Facing up to the action required following the climate emergency declaration, the Council has agreed that, amongst other things, we should work with partners across the Borough to evaluate and determine how and when Guildford Borough can become carbon neutral and work towards making the Council's activities net-zero carbon by 2030. It will also be necessary to establish the required governance structures, investment plans and officer resources to enable the Council to build a strong foundation to deliver progressively ambitious carbon reductions across its operations.

We have also put in place, and are currently implementing, the Future Guildford transformation programme, which will reorganise our whole organisation by restructuring and redesigning services to improve service delivery, with a better focus on commissioning and commercial opportunities, and being more efficient through investment in our ICT infrastructure, increasing customer self-service, and addressing issues of duplication.

A proposal that was put forward in 2018 as part of the work on the 'Service Challenge' element of the Future Guildford project to achieve savings and efficiencies was the reduction of printing and postage costs by the introduction of paperless meetings.

However, this proposal was dependent upon councillors (and officers) having improved ICT devices with all the necessary functionality and software to enable them to read and annotate agendas electronically and, importantly, having the necessary training on how the devices and software operate.

In January 2019, the Executive adopted a set of ICT policies, including the *ICT Policy for Councillors*, a key objective of which was “to ensure Councillors are clear on the Council’s commitment to moving towards paperless meetings in the 2019-20 Municipal year”. This Policy was included in the information packs given to all councillors following the Borough Council Elections last May. Paragraph 7 of the Policy states:

- “(7) With the increasing use and access to mobile computing devices and the Council’s objectives to reduce costs and protect the environment, there will be an expectation that all Councillors will view committee agendas and reports online rather than require printed hard copies.”

As part of the Council’s investment in its ICT infrastructure, all councillors were issued with a new Dell touchscreen laptop device following the Elections. Council staff have also been progressively migrated to the new infrastructure.

Councillors have been given support both by ICT and Democratic Services staff in helping them to understand, and to become more confident in using, their device and the Modern.Gov app that supports the principle of paperless meetings. In addition, a training course for councillors on the operation of the Modern.Gov app was held on 16 December 2019.

Recommendation to Executive:

- (1) That, subject to paragraph (3) below and with effect from 7 April 2020,
 - (a) the Council will no longer provide to councillors, officers, Honorary Freemen, Honorary Aldermen, or the public, any printed copy agendas, minutes, order papers, supplementary information sheets (Late Sheets) for Council, Executive, Committee, Sub-Committee, Board, Working Group or Task Group meetings; and
 - (b) all officer level meetings shall be paperless.
- (2) That officers continue to support councillors in the understanding and operation of their new devices and the Modern.Gov app, including arranging a repeater session of the training given to councillors on 16 December.
- (3) That the Council shall provide in respect of each meeting to which the public would be entitled to attend referred to in paragraph (1) (a) above:
 - (a) one hard copy agenda for viewing by the public at the main reception of the Council offices following publication of the agenda, and
 - (b) six hard copy agendas for viewing by the public at any such meeting.

Recommendation to Council:

That the following amendment be made to paragraph 1 (Scope) of the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution:

“Reference in these procedure rules to the making available or supply of copies of any agenda and reports, or any other written material submitted to the Council, Executive, Board, Committee or Sub-Committee shall include the provision of such copies by electronic means.”

Reasons for Recommendation:

To deliver on the Council's commitments to secure ongoing savings in its revenue budget and to assist in achieving the Council's corporate aspirations to reduce its carbon footprint, whilst still complying with legislation requiring the provision of copy agendas for inspection by the public.

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication? No

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to ask the Executive to provide the necessary commitment to achieve paperless meetings by embracing the current technology available to councillors and officers.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 The proposal in this report will help the Council deliver on its strategic priorities of protecting our environment and using innovation, technology and new ways of working to improve value for money and efficiency in Council services.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Council currently provides and posts printed copy Council agendas to all councillors and printed copy committee agendas to all councillors who are members (or substitute members where appointed) of the committees to which they have been appointed. Spare copy agendas (approximately 8 per meeting) are also printed and made available for viewing by the public present. We also provide printed agendas in respect of meetings of the Corporate Governance and Standards Committee to our five co-opted independent and parish members of that committee.
- 3.2 Printed agendas are also provided for directors, certain senior officers, and committee staff.
- 3.3 In addition, the Council provides and posts printed copy Council agendas to all Honorary Freeman and Honorary Aldermen.
- 3.4 In common with other councils, Guildford faces a number of significant challenges over the next few years particularly in respect of:
- (a) meeting our corporate responsibilities in addressing the climate emergency that we declared in July 2019, and
 - (b) finding sufficient resources to continue to provide services that meet the needs of our residents.

4. Meeting the challenges

Climate emergency

- 4.1 Facing up to the action required following the climate emergency declaration, the Council has agreed that, amongst other things, we should work with partners

across the Borough to evaluate and determine how and when Guildford Borough can become carbon neutral and work towards making the Council's activities net-zero carbon by 2030. It will also be necessary to establish the required governance structures, investment plans and officer resources to enable the Council to build a strong foundation to deliver progressively ambitious carbon reductions across its operations.

Future Guildford

- 4.2 We have also put in place, and are currently implementing, the Future Guildford transformation programme, which will reorganise our whole organisation by restructuring and redesigning services to improve service delivery, with a better focus on commissioning and commercial opportunities, and being more efficient through investment in our ICT infrastructure, increasing customer self-service, and addressing issues of duplication.

Paperless Meetings proposal

- 4.3 A proposal that was put forward in 2018 as part of the work on the 'Service Challenge' element of the Future Guildford project to achieve savings and efficiencies was the reduction of printing and postage costs by the introduction of paperless meetings.
- 4.4 However, this proposal was dependent upon councillors (and officers) having improved ICT devices with all the necessary functionality and software to enable them to read and annotate agendas electronically and, importantly, having the necessary training on how the devices and software operate.
- 4.5 In January 2019, the Executive adopted a set of ICT policies, including the *ICT Policy for Councillors*, a key objective of which was "to ensure Councillors are clear on the Council's commitment to moving towards paperless meetings in the 2019-20 Municipal year". This Policy was included in the information packs given to all councillors following the Borough Council Elections last May. Paragraph 7 of the Policy states:
- "(7) With the increasing use and access to mobile computing devices and the Council's objectives to reduce costs and protect the environment, there will be an expectation that all Councillors will view committee agendas and reports online rather than require printed hard copies."*
- 4.6 Prior to the 2019 Borough Council elections, and since 2012, all councillors were issued with iPads through which they were able to access their GBC email account and other council systems. Many councillors felt that the iPads were not fit for purpose in terms of functionality and reliability. In any event, the continued use of iPads would not have been compatible with the changes to the Council's systems recently introduced.
- 4.7 As part of the Council's recent investment in its ICT infrastructure and following consultation with the relevant lead councillor under the previous administration, the Council procured new Dell 5290 2 in 1 touchscreen laptop devices for all councillors, which were issued to them following the 2019 Elections. The procurement decision was based on the need for a portable device with the latest functionality at a competitive price. The unit cost for the councillors' devices was

£896, making a total outlay of just over £43,000. Council staff have also been progressively migrated to the new ICT infrastructure.

- 4.8 Councillors have been given support both by ICT and Democratic Services staff in helping them to understand, and to become more confident in using, their device and the Modern.Gov app that supports the principle of paperless meetings. In addition, a training course for councillors on the operation of the Modern.Gov app was held on 16 December 2019.
- 4.9 This support will continue, and it is also proposed to arrange a repeater training course on the Modern.Gov app for those councillors who were unable to attend the session on 16 December.
- 4.10 Modern.Gov is the market leading provider of robust meetings management systems which is used by 76% of councils in England and Wales. The Modern.Gov app ensures that councillors always have the latest meeting papers for the committees that they are interested in and allows them to highlight sections of reports and make annotations in exactly the same way as they would with a paper copy. Document navigation is made quick and simple via bookmarking and intuitive controls. It also enables the user to view information offline.
- 4.11 The Modern.Gov app, which can also be downloaded by the public via our website, has a feature which allows councillors (but not the public) to view confidential papers which are exempt from publication.
- 4.12 A number of local authorities nationally have already adopted a paperless approach to committee meetings by the use of laptops/tablets by councillors, together with the associated app enabling them to view and annotate agendas. These authorities recognise the benefits, which can generally be summarised as follows:
 - Devices are small, portable, convenient and easy to use once users become familiar with them, although intensive training is likely to be required.
 - Access to information can be improved – e.g. all meeting papers (current and previous) are easily available.
 - Information can be stored very securely, which is important when meeting papers contain sensitive, or confidential, information.
 - Savings can be made on paper, printing and postage of meeting papers.
 - An authority's carbon footprint can be reduced - paper and stationery usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers.
- 4.13 As a Council, we are increasingly encouraging residents to access our services electronically as much as possible. Members of the public are able to access meeting agendas, reports and minutes either directly via our website, or by downloading the Modern.Gov app on their phone or tablet.
- 4.14 We are already putting in place measures to introduce paperless meetings at officer level; for example, the weekly meetings of the Corporate Management Team are now fully paperless.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 For the financial years 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20 (to date), the Council has spent a total of £53,444 on printing agendas and £14,270 on postage.
- 5.2 Annual savings of approximately £14,500 in printing costs and £3,800 in postage could be achieved if the Council adopted paperless meetings.
- 5.3 If the proposals in this report were introduced, there would still be a requirement to produce seven hard copy agendas in respect of each meeting to which the public are entitled to attend. However, the cost would be a fraction of the current costs.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 The Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Government (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the legal provisions governing the requirement to make available agendas and minutes of Council and committee meetings and Executive meetings both to councillors and to the public.
- 6.2 In relation to full Council meetings, Schedule 12 to the 1972 Act requires us, amongst other things, to send to every member of the Council “a summons to attend the meeting, specifying the business proposed to be transacted at the meeting¹” at least five clear days before the meeting. This provision also applies to committee meetings by virtue of Section 99 of the 1972 Act.
- 6.3 In respect of Council and committee agendas, including the “connected” reports, Section 100B (1) of the 1972 Act requires that “copies of the agenda for a meeting” and “copies of any report for the meeting shall be open to inspection by members of the public at the offices of the council.”
- 6.4 Furthermore, Section 100B (6) of the 1972 Act requires us to make available for the use of members of the public present at the meeting “a reasonable number of copies” of the agenda and reports for the meeting.
- 6.5 In partial response to changing technologies, The Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015 permits delivery of an electronic summons to Councillors, subject to the consent of the Councillor.
- 6.6 Regulation 7 of the Local Government (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 requires us to make available for public inspection at least five clear days before a meeting of the Executive a copy of the agenda (including the reports) at the Council offices and on the website. Paragraph (6) of Regulation 7 requires us to make available for the use of members of the public present at the meeting “a reasonable number of copies” of the agenda and reports for the meeting.

¹ The “summons” in this regard is merely the front page of the Council agenda setting out the date, time and venue of the meeting, and the list of the items of business to be transacted usually on the third and fourth pages

7. Human Resource Implications

- 7.1 Arising from Phase A of the Future Guildford transformation, the number of staff engaged in reprographics services was reduced from four to two FTEs. Consequently, the continuation of the current level of production of paper agendas is no longer considered to be sustainable.

8. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 8.1 The adopted ICT Policy for Councillors states: "The Democratic Services Manager will make arrangements to assist any Councillor requiring reasonable adjustments to the policy in line with the Council's commitment to inclusivity and in compliance with the Equality Act 2010. Any Councillor wishing to discuss this should contact the Democratic Services Manager. All conversations will be treated in the strictest confidence".

9. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

- 9.1 As mentioned above, the Council declared a climate emergency at its meeting on 23 July 2019. It was acknowledged at the time that the Council had already been proactive in identifying and delivering projects that saved energy and carbon and was on track to meet its stated target of 43% CO₂ emissions reductions by 2020, based on 2008-09 levels. However, it recognised that a greater level of ambition and urgency was required.
- 9.2 According to Standard Carbon², a single sheet of paper produces approximately 0.0092 lbs of CO₂. 500 sheets produce 4.59 lbs of CO₂. On this basis, we have calculated that from April 2016 to date, the printing of agendas at this Council has produced approximately 13,220 lbs (nearly 6 tonnes) of CO₂.

10. Key Risks

- 10.1 The key risks to the Council of not embracing the concept of paperless meetings are:
- (a) The opportunity of achieving an efficiency saving of approximately £14,500 p.a. (plus £3,800 in postage) would be missed.
 - (b) The opportunity of demonstrating a willingness to reduce our carbon footprint, and effecting an actual reduction in CO₂ emissions, would be missed.
 - (c) Reputational damage to the Council as a consequence of (a) and (b) above

11. Summary of Options

11.1 Option 1

To adopt a paperless approach to all meetings involving both councillors and officers with effect from 7 April 2020 (the date of the next Council meeting). As part of this, officers will continue to support councillors in the understanding and operation of their new devices and the Modern.Gov app, including a repeater session of the training given to councillors on 16 December. We will continue to

² Standard Carbon LLC was a leader in the development and aggregation of carbon offset credits in the US. <https://www.standardcarbon.com/2008/06/do-you-really-need-to-print-that-the-carbon-footprint-of-copy-paper/>

comply with statutory requirements to make available a reasonable number of copies of an agenda at any meeting to which the public are entitled to attend.

Option 2

As per Option 1, but on a trial basis for six months and reviewed thereafter.

Option 3

To adopt a “paper-light” approach to meetings, which would have paperless meetings as an aspiration, but recognise that councillors should still have a choice between using their devices and the functionality of the Modern.Gov app or continuing to receive paper copy agendas.

Option 4

To make no change to our current arrangements.

11.2 For the reasons outlined in this report, Option 1 is recommended.

12. Conclusion

12.1 In conclusion, a number of councils have completed a transition to paperless meetings over the past three or four years and there is a clear direction of travel in this regard, such that over the course of the next few years it is expected to become standard practice in local government.

12.2 This Council is now at the point at which it can begin a transformation to radically reduce our reliance on, and use of, paper. This will not only save the Council a considerable amount of money each year, but also assist in reducing our carbon footprint and set an example to others.

13. Background Papers

None

14. Appendices

None