

Executive Report

Ward(s) affected: n/a

Report of Director of Strategic Services

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Paperless Meetings

Executive Summary

Following consideration of a report at its last meeting on 18 February 2020, the Executive adopted a proposal to introduce paperless meetings, with effect from 7 April 2020 and on a trial basis for six months. The proposal involved the following:

- (1) That we 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.
- (2) That all officer level meetings shall be paperless.
- (3) 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.
- (4) That we provide in respect of each meeting to which the public would be entitled to attend:
 - (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.

The Executive also made a separate recommendation to Council to make a minor amendment to paragraph 1 (Scope) of the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution by the addition of the following:

“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.”

The reason for making this decision was 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.

Since that decision was taken, a number of councillors have raised concerns about the implications of its implementation. In the light of these concerns, the Leader of the Council has therefore asked that this matter be reconsidered by the Executive at this meeting.

Options:

Option A:

The Executive could confirm its decision taken on 18 February, although it is possible that the decision could be called-in for review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Option B:

The Executive could look at Option 3 in the 18 February report, which was as follows:

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.

If, in view of the various concerns expressed by some councillors, the Executive is minded to move to the "paper-light" approach, it is suggested that this option is clarified so that it reads:

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; **and in respect of the latter, the basis upon which paper copies will be provided will be as follows:**

- Paper copy Council agendas and order papers will only be provided to councillors who 'opt in' to receive them and, similarly, paper copy committee agendas and supplementary information (late) sheets will only be provided to members of a committee and substitutes who 'opt in' to receive them
- Paper copy agendas will be placed in councillors' pigeon-holes unless they 'opt in' to have them sent by first class post
- The 'opt in' requirements to also apply in respect of agendas for working groups, task groups, and task and finish groups involving councillors

This clarification emphasises that there is an initial presumption of paperless meetings, subject to the "opt in" provisions outlined above.

If the paper-light approach is to be pursued, the Executive will need to consider the extent to which it will apply to officers, Honorary Freemen and Aldermen, and co-opted members of committees.

Recommendation to Executive:

To reconsider, in the light of the concerns expressed by councillors, the Executive's decision taken on 18 February 2020 in respect of paperless meetings.

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 work towards delivering 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 Leader of the Council has asked that the Executive reconsiders this matter at this meeting.

2. Strategic Priorities

2.1 Working towards a paperless environment 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 Following consideration of a report on paperless meetings at its last meeting on 18 February 2020, the Executive took the following decision:

(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.
- (4) That the measures referred to above be introduced on a trial basis for six months and reviewed thereafter.

3.2 The Executive also made a separate recommendation to Council to make a minor amendment to paragraph 1 (Scope) of the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution by the addition of the following:

“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.”

3.3 The reason for making this decision was 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.

4. Concerns expressed by some councillors following the decision

4.1 Since the Executive took the decision, a number of councillors have raised concerns about the implications of its implementation. These concerns can be summarised as follows:

- screen size of councillors’ laptops is too small and there are limits to what can be done with font-sizes when viewing documents. The laptop interface of is not flexible enough to manipulate documents while trying to make points and focus on the meeting.
- use of the laptop has contributed to a marked deterioration of eye-sight
- a number of councillors (and possibly staff), have medical conditions, including epilepsy and severe migraines, which do not allow prolonged looking at computer screens.
- councillors will have no choice but to print out those agendas and reports that they feel they need in a paper format, thus negating the drive for helping Guildford to become carbon neutral.
- not all councillors will wish to have every agenda or report in paper form, but they should be able to say which ones they need in paper copy. Savings, both in terms of money and carbon will still be made, but not at the expense of councillors’ eyesight and health.
- this decision has the potential to seriously impede councillors in doing the work they were elected to do

- concern that committee chairmen may not be able to effectively chair a meeting.
- the ICT Policy for Councillors, which references the objective of paperless meetings, provides that reasonable adjustments to the policy will be made to assist councillors in line with the Council's commitment to inclusivity and in compliance with the Equality Act 2010. A councillor has enquired as to the level of proof required for councillors to be granted exemption from being paperless.
- going paperless will be a particular problem for Planning Committee members, where they often need to refer to several pages from sometimes lengthy reports while speaking or listening to others.
- no prior consultation with councillors
- any change should initially be introduced on a voluntary basis with those still requiring hard copy agendas being able to pick them up from their pigeon-holes in advance
- reviewing documents on screens wastes so much time
- this rigid approach is impractical and undemocratic (the Executive should not be permitted to dictate to other councillors about working practices) and discriminates against the less computer literate
- no argument with moving towards paperless, but it has to be with flexibility and whilst not compromising the ability to effectively represent residents.

4.2 Some councillors have expressed a clear willingness to embrace the paperless environment, to the extent that one councillor has stated that he:

- brings his laptop to virtually every meeting that he is involved in as a councillor
- has not printed off a document since he was elected last May, and
- has elected not to receive hard copy agendas (with the exception of Planning Committee agendas)

4.3 In the light of these concerns, the Leader of the Council has therefore asked that this matter be reconsidered by the Executive at this meeting.

5. Summary of Options

5.1 Option A:

The Executive could confirm its decision taken on 18 February, although it is possible that the decision could be called-in for review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Option B:

The Executive could look at Option 3 in the 18 February report, which was as follows:

“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.”

5.2 If, in view of the various concerns expressed by some councillors, the Executive is minded to move to the “paper-light” approach, it is suggested that this option is clarified so that it reads:

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; **and in respect of the latter, the basis upon which paper copies will be provided will be as follows:**

- Paper copy Council agendas and order papers will only be provided to councillors who ‘opt in’ to receive them and, similarly, paper copy committee agendas and supplementary information (late) sheets will only be provided to members of a committee and substitutes who ‘opt in’ to receive them
- Paper copy agendas will be placed in councillors’ pigeon-holes unless they ‘opt in’ to have them sent by first class post
- The ‘opt in’ requirements to also apply in respect of agendas for working groups, task groups, and task and finish groups involving councillors.

5.3 This clarification emphasises that there is an initial presumption of paperless meetings, subject to the “opt in” provisions outlined above. However, it could be argued that there is actually very little practical difference between the “paperless” decision taken on 18 February and the “paper-light” approach outlined above. Under the “Paperless” approach, any councillor could request reasonable adjustments to be made in accordance with the adopted ICT Policy for Councillors, for example due to a medical condition, in line with the Council’s commitment to inclusivity and in compliance with the Equality Act 2010. A reasonable adjustment in this context could mean that the councillor requests to continue receiving hard copy agendas. Conceivably, a considerable number of councillors could ask for this. Based on the response from some councillors since the last meeting of the Executive, a similar number of councillors is likely to opt in under the “paper-light” approach.

5.4 If the paper-light approach is to be pursued, officers will canvass every councillor to establish their preferences. The Executive will also need to consider the extent to which it should apply to officers, Honorary Freeman and Aldermen, and co-opted members of committees.

6. Conclusion

6.1 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.

6.2 The paperless meetings proposal approved by the Executive on 18 February 2020 would have contributed towards the delivery of ongoing savings in its revenue budget and assisted in achieving the Council’s corporate aspirations to reduce its carbon footprint.

6.3 The “paper-light” approach referred to in Option B (paragraph 5.2 above) will still make a contribution towards these aspirations but obviously to a lesser extent.

7. Background Papers

[Report to Executive – 18 February 2020: Paperless meetings \(Agenda Item 8\)](#)

8. Appendices

None