

18 December 2023**Agenda Item: 2****REPORT OF THE HEAD OF TECHNOLOGY & DIGITAL ICT****MICROSOFT 365 COPILOT EARLY ACCESS PROGRAM****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report seeks the approval of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources to enter into the Microsoft 365 (M365) Copilot Early Access Program (EAP). Copilot is a Large Language Model (LLM) generative AI (Artificial Intelligence) tool that has a range of time saving capabilities such as summarizing meetings and noting action points, assisting in the drafting of standard documents such as tender specifications, and supporting other tooling such as chatbots that enable more efficient website searches etc. Participation in the EAP provides access to licences for M365 Copilot and Dynamics Copilot with additional support from Microsoft to identify and support deployment opportunities ensuring that security and information governance considerations are balanced against productivity improvements.

Information

2. The rapid advancement of Generative AI over the last 12 months or so has enabled Microsoft to build an enhanced AI tool set for its products known as Copilot. Copilot sits alongside the M365 product suite and should be thought of as an advanced personal assistant able, through the use of command prompts to carry out tasks such as drafting documents, minuting meetings and aiding users with laborious, resource intensive or repetitive tasks. There are other Copilot models that deal with security, infrastructure, and the like however this work is limited to the Desktop suite of software.
3. By participating in the EAP, the Council will have early access to a cutting-edge technology that is not yet widely available and will be able to provide feedback to influence its development. The Council will also benefit from the support and guidance of Microsoft experts who will help identify and implement suitable use cases, as well as provide training and troubleshooting. The Council will work closely with business areas to test and evaluate the performance and suitability of Copilot for different tasks and scenarios, and to ensure that any risks or challenges are properly addressed.
4. The technology having been produced is likely to change the modern workplace and as such it is imperative that the Council understands the implications of this technology and how it should be introduced into the workplace in the least disruptive manner possible while taking advantage of the benefits it brings.

5. The capabilities of Copilot, if implemented in a carefully structured and considered manner offer the possibility of driving efficiencies by removing some of the drudgery out of repetitive administrative tasks. These range from the straightforward, such as minuting meetings, summarizing topics and producing action notes, through to more complex tasks such as summarizing tender responses, drafting reports, business cases and other more complex documentation. Copilot should be thought of as a personal assistant that augments rather than replaces a human, enabling them to concentrate effort on higher value work.
6. This activity fits within the general push of the ICT strategy for modernisation and automation of processes and one of the key areas for trialling will be the activity within the Customer Service Centre (CSC) which link to the corporate transformation activity and the Council Plan.
7. The opportunity to participate in the second wave of the EAP was only offered to organisations by invitation, and those eligible to participate will be supported throughout the process to prototype solutions ensuring that considerations such as Data Protection/GDPR are considered. The Council has several use cases that are low risk, but if successful high reward based on the resource time that could be released from repetitive and burdensome tasks to be focused on more meaningful, higher value work.
8. This EAP is for one year however, this work is seeking to establish where this technology can be deployed by the end of quarter 4 in the financial year 2023/2024.

What are the Expected Benefits?

9. It is anticipated that the adoption of Copilot for M365 will deliver efficiencies by releasing staff time currently focused on administrative or repetitive tasks to deliver higher value, more complex work. Copilot will enable the streamlining and automation of a range of burdensome processes and workflows.

The Procurement Process

10. The Copilot EAP was only available to organisations with existing Microsoft Enterprise Agreements, Microsoft Unified Support and Microsoft Azure Commitment Contracts and on an invitation only basis.

Other Options Considered

11. Other options considered for M365 Copilot Adoption:
 - a. MS365 Copilot became 'generally available' on 1 November 2023, and the option to wait for licences to be available through usual routes was considered. However, there is a minimum licence commitment of 300 copilot licences which is in line with the EAP offer but does not include the additional licences that are available to us under the EAP, nor does it include access to the deployment support being provided by a dedicated Solution Architect, and additional project resource. This option was therefore discounted due to the higher cost and lack of additional support.
 - b. The MS365 Copilot EAP offers significant support and assistance for the safe deployment of Copilot, along with the opportunity to feedback to the Microsoft development team to

help them finesse the product going forward. Given the benefits and the risks that the user of Generative AI poses, on balance it was decided that the best way to embrace this evolving technology was to do so in partnership with Microsoft through the Copilot EAP.

Reasons for Recommendations

12. The Council recognises the benefits and risks of using innovative technologies such as Generative AI and has a track record of safely implementing new functionality in partnership with Microsoft and others. The power of Generative AI is such that it was recognised that to safely deploy this latest innovative technology the Council needed to continue to leverage its partnership with Microsoft through participating in the MS365 Copilot EAP.

Statutory and Policy Implications

13. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS (National Health Service) Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability, and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

14. The cost of the pilot is £82,000 and will be funded through underspends on staffing.

Data Protection and Information Governance

15. An addendum to the existing MS365 DPIA (Data Protection Impact Assessment) will be completed during the course of the Copilot EAP.

Smarter Working Implications

16. The safe and considered adoption of MS365 Copilot will enable the streamlining and automation of routine repetitive and administrative tasks, enabling our resources to be focused on higher value, more complex workloads. Copilot will enhance and augment the work that has been done on digital transformation, enabling services to increase capacity and deliver greater benefit to communities.

Implications for Residents

17. The deployment of Copilot alongside the development of low code/no code features such as chatbots and virtual assistants will ultimately improve residents experience by enabling routine enquiries to be handled in a more efficient manner, getting residents quickly to the information they need and allowing staff resources to be more focussed on higher value, complex tasks that deliver better value to our residents.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1) That the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources approves the Council's participation in M365 Copilot EAP.

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Constitutional Comments (28/11/2023)

18. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources has delegated responsibility under F&R.4 for ICT. The proposal in this report is therefore within the remit of the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources.

Financial Comments (SES 12/12/2023)

19. The financial implications are set out in paragraph 14 of the report.
20. The cost of the pilot is £82,000 and will be funded through underspends on staffing.
21. In the period 7 financial monitoring report, ICT Services were forecasting a £125,000 underspend for the 2023/24 financial year. – mainly relating to staff vacancies within the service.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- [Covid and Copeland Cyber Lessons | UK Authority](#)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All