report

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF MEMBERS' SERVICES

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FOR COUNCILLORS

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To present information about the Council's performance in this area and make recommendations about improvements.

BACKGROUND

The arrangements for the provision of information technology for Councillors were approved by this Committee on 6 April 2005. They are shown in Appendix A.

Details of these arrangements were notified to all Councillors immediately after the Election, when they were also invited to 'order'/request such equipment as was needed to enable them to perform their roles.

Members' Services and IT Services have been working together since that time to provide the equipment requested and to support Councillors in their use of it. This support has included training courses, one to one tuition, problem solving and trouble-shooting.

The costs associated with the provision of IT support for Councillors are met from Members' Services' budgets. The current financial position is as follows:-

	Kit	Internet/e-mail charges including Broadband installations	Mobile phones
Budget	£91,724	£15,059	£7,000
Spent	£72,087	£4,881	£3,070
Committed	£85,789	£11,301 *	£6,141

* Arrangements are being made for 24 Councillors to be connected to Broadband. This figure includes a charge of approximately £255 for each telephone line connection. There is also a charge of approximately £350 for each installation.

At the time of writing this report, the following IT facilities had been issued/installed:-

No of desk-based PCs   16

No of lap top PCs   37

No of Compaq Ipacs   6

No of mobile phones   13

During the summer, the opportunity was taken to evaluate the arrangements made. A feed-back form was sent to all councillors. 35 forms were returned and a summary of the responses is attached at Appendix B. Councillors were also asked to submit personal comments on both the approved arrangements and our delivery of them. These are dealt with later in this report under 'Matters for consideration'.

As far as the results of the questionnaire are concerned, the Committee might wish to note the following:-

Health and Safety – arrangements are being made for councillors to use the package introduced within the Council for computer-users to undertake a Display Screen Equipment assessment themselves. The package has two purposes: it provides training in the safe use of computers, as well as assessing the responses made by the user to a series of questions. The assessment takes 30 minutes and the results will be available to Members Services so that any necessary adjustments can be made. The package assesses both desk-top and portable PCs.

Training – is offered at the point at which a computer is ordered. Preliminary training is given at delivery and further training is available as required for all councillors who use IT. Each Group will have their own arrangements for the identification of learning need. Alternatively, individual councillors can approach Members Services direct and we can arrange or commission training through approved arrangements.

Equipment – it is pleasing to note that the majority of councillors have indicated that the equipment provided meets their needs, is easy to use, that they are confident in using it and that they can access a range of internal information. This is especially important during an elections year, when new councillors will be using systems and information with which they may not be familiar (of the 35 responses received, 14 or 40%, were from 'new' councillors). On the other hand, a fairly large proportion indicated that they felt that there could be other IT facilities which would be more useful. This aspect is dealt with later.

Use of e-mail – 67% of responses indicate that councillors regularly use e-mail for Council business. This includes receipt of and replies to

correspondence, receipt of links to electronic briefing material and to information about delegated decisions which affect their electoral divisions.

Web-sites – the County Council's web-site has a page for each Councillor, which includes photograph, political party, contact details, surgery information where available, roles (e.g. Cabinet Member, spokesperson), a note of any other/external appointments and a link to the regular report which each Councillor is required by the Members' Allowances Scheme to produce.

These pages are produced and kept up-to-date by the Council. They complement and contribute tot he range of information which the Council is required to publish or have available for inspection. The use of the web-site in this way enables links to be made between different types of information.

National e-government targets require the introduction of a facility where individual councillors may have a personal web-site which they can use to publicise their activities, seek views etc.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

IT Equipment

Since the introduction following the elections of the IT arrangements agreed by the Committee, the pace of change within IT has remained the same. This has affected hand-held technologies especially, where it is now possible to use a mobile phone/IPAQ which is a single piece of equipment. This equipment operates via a GPRS connection, which avoids the need for it to be 'docked' alongside a PC or laptop to enable information to be updated. A small number of councillors are currently using this equipment on a trial basis. Preliminary results of the trial are that this equipment is useful, as it enables immediate data transfer, rather than having to wait for any up-dating to be performed when the equipment is brought back to the office and 'docked' alongside the computer on which it has been configured. There is, however, a cost involved and it is estimated that the call charges for this type of equipment are likely to be £200 pa. This is in addition to the figures shown above, which are related to current arrangements. The agreed arrangements currently do not provide for us to be able to issue these new kits and Committee is asked to indicate whether it wishes them to be extended to include them. The cost of the equipment itself would need to be met from the Members' IT budget, whilst call charges would need to be met from elsewhere within Members' Services and, possibly, by way of permanent virement in future years' budgets.

Additionally the County Council is introducing wireless technology in parts of County Hall, which enables the use of specially-adapted laptops without the need for the cables/power leads usually associated with them. Such computers would also be capable of use in other buildings where wireless technology is available (eg hotels, conference venues, trains)

Finally, during the 'roll-out' of councillors' IT, some councillors have asked for both a desk-top PC and a lap-top computer. The reasons given include, in the case of those with senior positions, the capacity and speed of the laptop. For others, personal safety issues have been raised when using public transport, or where the Councillors concerned do not travel by car.

The arrangements currently approved by the Committee do not currently permit councillors to have both a laptop and a PC. The Committee is asked to consider whether it wishes a dual facility to be available and, if so, indicate the criteria to be used.

Access to County Council Systems –

Some councillors already have IT kit at home. In some cases it will be business related and in others, it will be wholly private. Councillors also have access to computers at their place of work. It has been suggested that it ought to be possible for Councillors to be able to access their e-mail and other County Council IT facilities using these 'external' PCs.

A small number of the Councillors who responded to our questionnaire indicated a strong preference to be able to operate in this way. This is because they did not wish to have more equipment installed in their homes. IT Services have been asked to consider whether this is possible.

Service Improvements –

Members' services are currently working with a small group of Councillors to develop 'personal' web-sites. These will be hosted by the County Council but the responsibility for keeping them up-to-date and within the Code of Conduct will rest with the individual Councillor (with support as required). These web-sites will give the public the opportunity to engage directly with their local Councillor through on-line polls, forums, notice boards etc. The sites are currently being designed and it is hoped that a pilot/trial will commence in the near future.

Work is also taking place with colleagues in IT services and the e-content and communications teams to improve the information for Councillors and the public which we already publish electronically. What is proposed is that the Diary on the internet and intranet will be re-defined and will link in with the electronic diaries which Councillors already have within their e-mail accounts. It will be possible to search individuals' availability for meetings and to alert them to new entries in the master diary. It will be linked more effectively to the meeting papers which we publish and to the Decision Record. The decision Record itself is also being extended to include Council, Cabinet and Committee decisions.

RECOMMENDED

1. That The outcome of the evaluation of Members' IT be noted and the Head of Members Services and Head of IT be asked to continue to work together to progress and address any outstanding issues raised by Members.

2. That the Committee consider whether to extend current arrangements by agreeing that the new hand-held technology described in the report should be made available to councillors and to indicate appropriate criteria to be used for determining each request.

3. That the Committee consider whether any Councillor ought to be able to have both a PC and a lap top computer.

P A Holt-Murphy
Head of Members' Services

Statutory and Policy Implications

This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, personnel, Crime and Disorder and those using the service. Where such implications are material: they have been described in the text of the report.

Legal Services Comments (KK)

The Administration Committee has the delegated authority to determine the level and nature of support services for Members of the County Council. The proposals in this report are therefore within the remit of this Committee.

Director of Resources Financial Comments (MB)
Provision has been made for Members IT development in the in the 2005/06 members Services budget.

Facility	Agreed Provision	Take-u[p
Computers	Each Councillor is offered either a desktop PC or Laptop PC, with a minimum specification of 512mb of RAM and access to the Council's standard suite of packages for e-mail, internet and intranet, diary/calendar, word processing, spreadsheets, presentations and databases. Councillors who also occupy a position of responsibility (e.g. Leaders, Cabinet members), the computer has a higher memory and processor specification, owing to the volume of data likely to be stored or accessed.	16 Councillors have desktop PCs, whereas 37 have laptops. Additionally there are 9 desktop PCs located in shared workspaces, which can be used by any Councillor.
Home connection	Under the Members' Allowances Scheme, Councillors who choose the laptop option may reclaim the cost of installation and call/rental charges of an additional telephone line or broadband connection provided only for the purpose of using County Council IT facilities.	1 Councillor has chosen to have a dial-up facility using an ordinary telephone line. 26 Councillors have opted to have Broadband. Of these, 24 installations have been completed.
Hand held technology	Councillors who need to maintain constant or regular contact with the Council, or those who wish only to access a diary and read e-mails, can have a hand-held device and blue tooth telephone.	1 Councillor chose to have only a Compaq Ipaq, which give access to e-mails, diary etc. In addition, 5 Cabinet Members/group officers use Ipaqs in addition to PCs, so that they can maintain regular e-mail contact. use of an Ipaq avoids the need to carry laptop PCs to meetings etc.
E-mail addresses	All Councillors have a County Council e-mail address, which is published on the Council's web-site. Councillors who do not access their e-mails regularly or at all can have them forwarded to a generic address (usually their political group) so they can be dealt with.	E-mail addresses were set up for all Councillors shortly after the Elections. They are published on the Council's website and on business cards, letterheading etc. Arrangements have been made for e-mails to be forwarded to generic e-mail addresses within the Groups, to Councillors' own e-mail addresses or to nominated group support staff where requested by Councillors.
Telephony	Councillors are not able to reclaim the costs of their home telephones (provision for increased use of a home telephone is included with Basic Allowance) Cabinet Members, Group Leaders and Committee Chairs may borrow a mobile phone. There are also a small number of phones available through	All Cabinet Members have a mobile phone. There are 5 other phones currently used by Cllrs. Mrs K L Cutts, G Gilfoyle, J Napier, S Place Mrs N Smedley.

the Groups which other Councillors may borrow. In all cases, the Councillor is required to meet the full cost (including VAT) of home-business calls.

EVALUATING IT FOR COUNCILLORS   APPENDIX B

The following table gives details of the evaluation forms received in respect of the arrangements for delivery of the Council's IT and telephony policy for councillors.

The percentages shown are related to the number of replies received, not the total membership of the Council. In this regard, it should be noted that there were 35 responses from 67 councillors. Where figures do not total 35 or 100%, this is because a question was not answered on one or more forms.

		Yes	No	Don't know/not applicable
1.	Did you receive information about IT for councillors following the election?	31 (88%)	2 (6%)	
2.	Have you ordered any IT equipment?	27 (77%)	8 (23%)	
3.	If yes to 2 above, was the equipment delivered/installed within an appropriate timescale?	18 (51%)	3 (9%)	7 (20%)
4.	Have you received IT training to enable you to use the Council's IT facilities for councillors?	28 (80%)	3 (9%)	4 (11%)
5.	Has a display screen assessment or other risk assessment been undertaken with you in relation to your use of IT	10 (29%)	19 (54%)	7 (20%)

		Yes – through NCC	Yes – I have my own	No-not registered	Don't know
6.	I have Data Protection registration	27 (77%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)

		Strongly Agree		Agree	Strongly Disagree		Don't know/ not applicable
		5	4	3	2	1	
7.	The IT equipment I have received helps me in my role as a councillor and meets my needs	11 (31%)	8 (23%)	7 (20%)	1 (3%)		5 (14%)
8.	The IT equipment is easy to use	9 (26%)	5 (14%)	10 (29%)		1 (3%)	6 (17%)
9.	My role means that I have additional IT needs	6 (17%)	2 (6%)	9 (29%)	7 (20%)	4 (11%)	7 (20%)
10.	There are other IT facilities which I feel would be more useful	4 (11%)	3 (9%)	1 (3%)	9 (29%)	4 (11%)	8 (23%)
11.	I am confident in my use of the County Council's IT provision	5 (14%)	6 (17%)	14 (40%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	

		Strongly Agree		Agree	Strongly Disagree		Don't know/ not applicable
		5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	
12.	I understand the security/Data Protection and Freedom of Information issues arising from my use of IT	14 (40%)	9 (26%)	8 (23%)			2 (6%)
13.	I know how to access a range of internal information using IT	6 (17%)	7 (20%)	9 (26%)	8 (23%)	2 (6%)	3 (9%)
14.	I am aware that additional support and learning on IT matters can be sought from Members' Services	16 (46%)	6 (17%)	9 (26%)			1 (3%)
15.	I regularly use e-mail for County Council business	16 (46%)	1 (3%)	7 (20%)	2 (6%)	4 (11%)	3 (9%)
16.	The receipt of links to Delegated Decisions through my e-mail account is useful	7 (20%)	5 (14%)	6 (17%)	2 (6%)	5 (14%)	6 (17%)

		Yes	No	Don't know/ not applicable
17.	Do you want to receive email notifications about decisions that affect your electoral division, and/or decisions that affect Nottinghamshire as a whole?	28 (80%)	5 (14%)	1 (3%)
18.	We are looking for councillors who will help us to design and trial hosted web-sites for councillors. These would be linked to the Council's own web-site, but would be more locally focussed and kept up-to-date by councillors themselves. Would you volunteer to help us?	15 (43%)	4 (11%)	3 (9%)

Any other comments about members' IT generally?

Please return to:
Head of Members' Services, Chief Executive's Department, County Hall,
West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 7QP