

# **Report to Constitution Working Group**

**Date of meeting: 26 June 2019**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Subject:** Paperless Working & Digital Roll-Out (Councillor S. Kane (Customer Services Portfolio Holder))

**Officer contact for further information:** S. Tautz (01992) 564180

**Democratic Services Officer:** V. Messenger (01992) 564265

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) That the Working Group note current progress with regard to the proposed move to paperless working in respect of the publication and distribution of the Council's committee agenda and minutes etc.;**
  - (2) That a report be made to the Council recommending that:**
    - (a) in order to complete the roll-out of mobile devices and appropriate training for all members of the Council, the general cessation of the publication and distribution of committee agenda and minutes etc. in hard copy, take effect from 30 August 2019; and**
    - (b) that, subject to the receipt of appropriate consent from members of the Council to the publication and distribution of committee agenda and minutes etc. by purely electronic means, such arrangements commence with effect from 2 September 2019; and**
    - (c) that, until the commencement of arrangements for the publication and distribution of committee agenda and minutes etc. to members by purely electronic means, such publication and distribution continue to be made concurrently in both hard-copy and electronic forms; and**
  - (3) That pursuant to Recommendations 2(a), (b) and (c) above, the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make any necessary revisions to the Council's Constitution to give effect to the publication and distribution of committee agenda and minutes etc. by purely electronic means, from 2 September 2019.**
1. In light of ongoing financial pressures, the Council continues to look at identifying ways of doing more with less. Part of the Council's strategy to achieve this is through the implementation of smarter ways of working in a digital age. A number of Councils have completed a transition to paperless meetings over recent years and it is anticipated that this will become standard practice in local government.
  2. Across a wide number of service areas, the Council is increasingly encouraging residents to access services electronically. The opportunity to move to paperless meetings provides members with an opportunity to lead by example in this regard and demonstrate that they are prepared to embrace new forms of technology to deliver savings, embrace more efficient working practices and reduce the Council's carbon footprint.

3. Each year the Council publishes around 20,000 pages of agendas, minutes and reports. The cost of providing each paper agenda to all members, based on an average number of meetings and report pages, has previously been estimated at over £5.00 per agenda. The frequency of Council and committee meetings and the size of agenda can vary significantly and, with the addition of ad-hoc and extraordinary meetings, sub-committees and Working Groups etc., it is difficult to project a definitive cost saving that paperless meetings would offer. However, it is considered that the paperless initiative would deliver cost savings. The removal of the need to print, envelope and process hard-copy agenda papers for messenger or postal distribution will result in service efficiencies that can be reallocated to other areas.
4. The Council has published its committee agenda and minutes online for many years using the Modern.Gov committee management system, through the publication of agenda and minutes to the Council's website and the issue of relevant hyperlinks to members by electronic mail.
5. In 2015, the concept of 'paperless' committee meetings was encouraged by the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government through the introduction of new legislation that enabled local authorities to hold entirely paperless committee meetings and to issue the agenda (or summons) to meetings, to an email address specified by each member. The Local Government (Electronic Communications) Order 2015 came into force in January 2015, which modified provisions in Schedule 12 to the Local Government Act 1972 for the purpose of enabling and facilitating the use of electronic communications in the sending of meeting summonses to members of the Council. However, the Order provided that members may only receive summonses electronically where they consent to agenda being transmitted by email and that they may at any time withdraw their consent for purely electronic publication.
6. In addition to the likely significant cost savings, the benefits of holding paperless meetings include a reduction in the Council's carbon footprint, improved member access to data at any time, improved data security and the saving of time and resources (printing, paper and production costs). Since the introduction of the 2015 Order, all members have therefore been regularly encouraged to consent to the receipt of agenda for meetings by electronic means wherever possible, as part of the incremental adoption of a paperless approach to meetings. As part of this approach, members have been able to choose to receive committee papers electronically, or remain with traditional paper copies (or a combination of both). For those agendas that members have chosen to receive electronically, no physical copy of the documents have since been provided.
7. The Modern.Gov app for the committee management system allows agenda, minutes and reports etc. to be downloaded to mobile devices and enables members to access other relevant information during meetings, thereby allowing them to more effectively and efficiently undertake duties. The Modern.Gov app also has a range of annotation tools to allow members and officers to make notes and highlight sections of agenda and reports etc. as required. The app allows anyone to download publicly available meeting papers, which saves the Council time and money when coordinating meetings and reduces the need to print and distribute significant volumes of hard-copy documentation.
8. Through the Modern.Gov app, members are able to access meeting papers from any place, at any time to suit their personal commitments. The app can be set to retain twelve months' worth of committee papers which can be accessed and referred to at any time (including during meetings), improving access to information. The app can be configured to provide members with access to any Council meeting papers they wish to receive, not just for those committees etc. that they are a member of.
9. The Modern.Gov app also allows the authority to push Private or Restricted (Exempt Information) papers securely only to those members of a committee that should have

access to the information. This also saves the Council time and money, but has the added benefit of ensuring that only the people who should see the papers have access to them. This 'restricted' version of the app allows members to access exempt or non-public Committee papers on their device through the Council's internal network. The security settings within the Modern.Gov app allow for all common types of information to be published securely, safeguarding sensitive documents and applying where necessary the exemption criteria relevant to Access to Information legislation.

10. Regular training in the use of the Modern.Gov app has been provided for members as part of the annual Member Development Programme, since 2016. Since the introduction of the power to hold paperless meetings, a 'dual running' arrangement has been in place for most members, whereby they have received paper copies of agenda packs for meetings alongside an electronic copy. It is anticipated that this arrangement has helped to build member confidence in paperless arrangements and the use of the Modern.Gov app, over the last few years.
11. It is recognised that the introduction of paperless working would increase the effectiveness of members by enabling information to be accessed more quickly, alongside the generation of ongoing cost savings. The Customer Services Portfolio Holders for 2018/19 and 2019/20 have therefore been keen to accelerate the roll-out of paperless working arrangements, through the issue of suitable mobile devices to all members of the Council during the early part of the current municipal year. Such aspiration has been supported by the recent launch of an enhanced version of the Modern.Gov app, which brings significant additional functionality to the concept of paperless working.
12. A project was therefore initiated early in 2019, to provide members with appropriate mobile devices (iPad Pro), pre-configured with the new version of the Modern.Gov app, to assist them in undertaking their official duties. Alongside this roll-out of mobile devices, the Council also adopted a standardised approach to the issue of '@eppingforestdc.gov.uk' domain email accounts for all members, to address concerns around the security of personal data regulated by the General Data Protection Regulation, which had been identified as part of an Internal Audit assessment undertaken during 2018. The mobile devices issued to members were also pre-configured with the new email addresses.
13. It is likely that a move to paperless meetings would result in the upskilling of members' IT skills. Going paperless provides an incentive to embrace new technologies and, at a time when most councils are adopting a 'digital first' approach for their communities, it will be beneficial for members to have an understanding of technology and how it can transform service delivery.
14. At the time of the preparation of this report, nearly all members have been supplied with a mobile device for the use of the Modern.Gov app and the management of official email. Alongside the completion of the roll-out, the Customer Services Portfolio Holder, in liaison with the Leader of the Council and the Service Director (Customer Services), identified that the phasing-out of the hard-copy publication and distribution of agenda, should commence with effect from the meeting of the Cabinet to be held on 13 June 2019.
15. The roll-out of the mobile devices commenced in May 2019 to all members that formally gave consent to the receipt of published committee agenda and minutes etc. by email, in accordance with the provisions of the 2015 Order. However, a small number of members have declined the offer of a mobile device and at least one member that originally accepted the offer of a device, has since indicated a wish to withdraw their consent for the electronic receipt of committee agenda etc. Although some members initially experienced issues with the functionality of the devices supplied, these have been addressed by the Service Director (ICT and Business Support).

16. The Portfolio Holder has also recognised that the introduction of paperless working would mean a fundamental change to the way in which members access information and acknowledges that training and support will need to be provided to all members to assist with the transition to the new way of working. As some Members will adapt more quickly than others to a transition to paperless meetings, the level of support provided will be critical.
17. It is intended that (at least initially), technical support for the mobile devices issued to members will be provided at committee meetings by the Service Director (ICT and Business Support). In addition, support for members in the use of the Modern.Gov app will be provided by the Democratic Services Manager and infrastructure facilities in the Council Chamber have been enhanced to provide power supplies to each seating position. The roll-out of purely electronic publication of committee agenda and minutes etc. is not limited just to members of the Council and such arrangements are also being applied to officer and other internal meetings in the Council.
18. The Customer Services Portfolio Holder has recently considered a number of representations that have been made by members with regard to the paperless working initiative. In order that such matters can be fully addressed, the Portfolio Holder has agreed that the cessation of the publication and distribution of committee etc. agenda in hard copy, be delayed to 30 August 2019. Some hard-copy publication of agenda etc. will continue after this time, to address requirements for agenda to be available for public inspection at the Civic Offices and to enable copies of reports to be available to public attendees at meetings.
19. In the meantime, the full publication of all committee agenda and minutes etc. in hard-copy will continue concurrently with the existing arrangements for electronic publication, alongside the completion of the roll-out of mobile devices and the provision of appropriate member training. The Portfolio Holder intends that, subject to the receipt of appropriate consent from members of the Council, the publication and distribution of committee agenda and minutes etc. by purely electronic means and the Council-wide transition to paperless working, will now commence with effect from 2 September 2019.
20. The proposed delay in the move to full paperless working arrangements will not affect the issue of Epping Forest District Council domain email accounts for all members, which will continue over the coming months.