

## Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel

# REPORT

### Provision of IT Provision For Members Review Panel

#### IT Provision to Members Findings and Recommendations of the Review Panel

##### **Panel Membership**

Councillors     M Baker (Lead Member)  
                       D McCarthy, C Mills and Miss M Tomlinson

##### **Purpose and Scope of Review**

This review was designed to be multi-layered so that, the findings from an earlier part could be fed into a later part to make the whole process self-perpetuating whereby questions generated could be answered by the next stage of research.

The first area to be reviewed was simply to establish what equipment was given to Councillors by SDC for their IT package (including hardware, software and any support services). This could be found out by talking to the IT Unit who will know the details of the full package.

Once the actual provision has been established, then the next step is to discover the level of skill and proficiency held by Members in using their equipment and other general IT applications. This information can be obtained by the use of a simple questionnaire to Members.

Thirdly, it is important to ascertain what savings can be made by SDC in moving towards a paperless, more electronic way of working, especially for Members. This will involve establishing the cost of using paper for meetings and other council work.

And finally, it will be necessary to establish how any proposed improvements to IT use by Members could be facilitated.

##### **Questionnaire to Members**

In October 2003 a questionnaire was distributed to all Members (in both an electronic format and hard copy). The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify what use was made of their IT equipment by Members, and also, their thoughts on the type of hardware and software provided, together with the support service provided by PC World.

Within the questionnaire, there was also an attempt to identify any skills gaps that may exist in Members' knowledge which could be to the detriment of moving forward with the council's IT and e-government strategy.

##### **Interview - 9<sup>th</sup> December 2003**

On this date, the Review Group (and also the Chairman of the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Councillor Ian West) met with Councillor Jeremy Nettle (e-advocate for the Conservative group), Les Wright (Head of IT Unit) and David Neudegg (Policy Director responsible for IT).

The purpose of this meeting was to establish the reasons behind the strategy of providing equipment and services to Members, to find out how this is likely to change in the future and also any other thoughts anyone may have on the future use of IT for and by Members in the course of their Councillor role.

## **Findings**

- It had been established that the IT Unit within SDC does not have sufficient resources to offer a full support service to Councillors and this led to PC World (Business) being contracted as the provider of the Council's IT Support Service for Councillors. One of the principle reasons was that PC World (Business), out of all the potential companies contacted, was a member of GCAT (an on-line catalogue compiled by the Office of Government Commerce to provide public sector organisations with a fast and simple route to procure and contract IT and telecommunications products and associated services). The service being offered was a 24-hour 7 days a week service at an attractive price that beat its competitors.
- Leasing had not been adopted as an alternative to purchasing PCs outright because it had proved to be difficult to find a package that offered everything the Council wanted, including a 24-hour a day support service. Also, there is an accounting school of thought that states that it is always desirable to purchase, rather than lease, if funds are available to do so.

The contract SDC has with PC World includes an annual performance review of the IT equipment supplied to Councillors to ensure that they are still powerful enough to meet the demands placed upon it. So far (as of December 2003) there had been no issues involving the specification of PCs.

- It was established that the cost, in terms of paper and printing, for one Area Committee meeting (Southern Area Committee – 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2003) was £14.96. However, the cost of posting and dispatch of these agendas came to £55.84 making the full cost of this meeting's agenda £70.80. However, this particular agenda was quite small and so these costs are only ever going to be a minimum and could, as a total, reach almost £100. (see appendix d)

When you calculate that there are 12 meetings a year (and for some Committees, 13 meetings, as they take place every 4 weeks rather than monthly), and there are 4 Area Committees (plus a bi-monthly City Area Community Committee) the cost could be close to £5,000 for printing and posting agendas. This does not take into account Cabinet and Council meetings whose agendas are very much larger; and the various Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

Also, it was estimated that the cost in terms of staffing time for 1 Area Committee agenda was 8 hours. No costs have been included for paper and staff time for other units outside of Democratic Services.

- A decision was taken to provide all Members with the same level of software and hardware.
- Members, unless they physically come into the Council offices, do not have access to the intranet and also to the Council's network so files and folders are not available to Members from a remote position. The establishment of a "Members Only Library" on the internet, which would be password protected, and should make available to all Members every report and document that they are likely to need access of during the course of their work.
- The questionnaire identified that there are only 2 Members without a PC, and of the 37 Members with PCs who responded, 34 of those are using PCs supplied by SDC.
- Virtually all the respondents to the questionnaire have access to the internet, but only a small number use Broadband technology.
- The vast majority of Members check their e-mails daily, with a number doing so more than once daily.

## **Conclusions**

The Review Group acknowledges that there has been a strategy for the procurement and distribution of IT hardware and software to Members, but the Group believes that, in hindsight, this strategy was not the best solution to the needs of Members and the Council as an organisation.

The strategy that was used does not appear to be forward thinking enough, and so, the emphasis is being placed on trying to solve the problems that exist today without sufficient consideration being given to the problems that will emerge in future years. Also, a limited number of Councillors have contributed to the e-government strategy with the result that there is minimum integration of the Members with the strategy. It is therefore vital that all Members and officers of the Council are made aware of the e-government strategy and how it will affect them individually.

As the e-government strategy is very important, it is going to be an integral part of future CPA inspections the scoring of which will be weighted quite heavily on this subject, the Review Group is surprised that there is not a Cabinet level portfolio specifically for e-government. Currently, this partly falls within the Resources Portfolio, however, the budget for the Council wide strategy is quite fragmented with several service units receiving funding. If there was a single portfolio with representation in the Cabinet, funding could be centralised into one budget and directed/prioritised as needed.

Most Councillors have now reached a point where they are happy in using their computer equipment for everyday use, such as e-mail and internet usage. Therefore, it is logical that this usage is now moved forward and used as part of an e-government strategy, so that the computer and electronic working takes precedence over paper and the telephone. This may involve some training of Members, and will inevitably, lead to a requirement for more flexible ways of working, which leads onto the replacement, over time, of desktop PC's with laptops. By progressing this to its logical conclusion it is possible to see a day where Members are supplied with electronic versions of all Committee papers, then, instead of bringing paper to a meeting, Members come armed with a laptop (as part of the process would be to install ports into all Council meeting rooms). Ultimately, video conferencing would remove any need for Councillors to physically come into SDC offices at all, except to meet members of the public and other organisations. However, this scenario is looking quite far into the future.

Following the local elections on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003, there was a period following when the Council had some trouble trying to get returned IT equipment from ex-Members (especially those who had not retired or stood down but simply been defeated). There does not appear to be in place any kind of early warning system to advise Councillors that should they not be returned then all equipment must be brought back to SDC, unless their equipment is within the category that will allow them to keep it (i.e. has depreciated by such a degree that it has no value). The early warning could also give details of the procedure for making this return efficient, quick and effortless on the part of both SDC and the ex-Councillor.

## **Recommendations**

The Review Group would like to recommend that the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommend to Cabinet the following:

- The e-government strategy for the Council should be formalised and circulated to all Members and Officers so that everybody is made fully aware of how this strategy will effect their working practices.
- The e-government strategy should be centralised into a full Portfolio in it's own right, with it's own Portfolio Holder in Cabinet with responsibility for the whole budget, prioritisation and direction of this strategy
- The Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel, or any relevant replacement, to keep a watching brief on the e-government strategy, with leave to scrutinise any aspect of it.
- Future IT provision to Members be included as part of the e-government strategy of the Council.

- In the 6 months leading up to a Council election, all Members are to receive periodic communication from SDC reminding them that IT equipment must be returned to the Council should they not be re-elected and instructions for this return to be distributed in good time prior to the election, unless the Member is given leave to keep their equipment due to it's age.
- The facility needs to be put in place that will allow Members to, remotely, access SDC's intranet and also document files and folders. This access could be gained through the internet and using a Member-only password leading to a site specifically for Members.
- All Members should be provided with an ADSL or a Broadband connection to their home by the Council in the long term as and when the technology becomes available in South Wiltshire.
- Cabinet should report back to the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel within a suitable timescale (6 months is considered appropriate) to describe which recommendations have been adopted and acted upon and the reasons why others have been rejected.