
Decision Maker: General Purposes and Licensing Committee

Date: 5 April 2022

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: **HYBRID MEETINGS AND COUNCILLOR IT PROVISION**

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Chief Officer: Tasnim Shawkat, Director of Corporate Services and Governance

Ward: All

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 This report updates Members on provision for hybrid meetings given recent upgrades in equipment in the Council Chamber, and sets out proposals for Members' IT provision from May 2022 onwards for approval. The aim is to equip Members for their role with the most appropriate equipment with access to the latest systems and security features and the most efficient levels of support. Priority will need to be given to equipping new Councillors, but the IT equipment issued to returning Members will also be upgraded in a second phase across the summer.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (1) That the Committee notes the provision of updated equipment and facilities in the Council Chamber, and the advice around hybrid meetings set out in this report.
- (2) New Councillors will be offered a standard Council laptop with the latest software and security features.
- (3) The reserve options of a Council iPad or BYOD connection remain available for those Councillors who choose not to opt for a standard laptop.
- (4) Returning Councillors will be migrated to the same new equipment and software after new Members have been equipped.
- (5) The desktop PCs in the Members Room be replaced with more modern PCs and docking stations for laptops.
- (6) A Council smart-phone should be available if required to all Members.

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children

1. Summary of Impact: Not Applicable
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Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy:
 2. MBEB Priority: Managing our Resources Well
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: Estimated Cost: Up to £110k
 2. Ongoing costs: Non-Recurring Cost:
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Democratic Representation
 4. Total current budget for this head: £1.1m
 5. Source of funding: Revenue Budget
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Personnel

1. Number of staff (current and additional): Not Applicable
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: Not Applicable
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: None:
 2. Call-in: Applicable:
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Procurement

1. Summary of Procurement Implications: Equipment will be sourced from BT, the Council's IT support contractor.
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected): there will be 58 Councillors serving from May 2022
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Not Applicable
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: Not Applicable

3. COMMENTARY

Hybrid Meetings

- 3.1 At the last meeting on 8th February 2022, Members asked for further guidance on hybrid meetings – what was technically and legally possible. During the covid-19 lockdown, the Government relaxed the requirement in the 1972 Local Government Act for Councillors in England to meet in-person, and Bromley, like most local authorities, swiftly moved to virtual, online meetings. Bromley used Webex for its meetings, linked to a Youtube livestream so that members of the public could watch and listen to councillors as they conducted Council business. The temporary provision enabling virtual meetings was not renewed by the Government in May 2021, forcing Councils to return to in-person meetings. In Bromley, the majority of meetings are being held in the Council Chamber with a new layout to facilitate social distancing and other covid precautions. The requirement to meet in-person applies to decision-making meetings, so some meetings have been able to continue online, including SACRE and some partnership meetings. Since May 2021, officers have continued to facilitate remote attendance by both Councillors and officers on a variety of equipment including phone lines and screens (via Teams meetings).
- 3.2 The requirement in the 1972 Act is that for Councillors to be legally present at a meeting they must be physically in the room. There is nothing to prevent any Member from joining a meeting online, and contributing if technology allows this, but they cannot be counted as formally present, do not count towards calculation of the quorum, cannot move or second motions and cannot vote. The Council does also have to make reasonable provision for members of the press and public to attend meetings in person if they wish, but officers and visiting members can join a meeting online.
- 3.3 During February 2022, the PA/audio-visual facilities in the Council Chamber were upgraded, with new loudspeakers, screens and electrical equipment. The new equipment makes remote attendance much more practical and professional, and was used for the first time at the full Council meeting on 28th February. The new system allows for cameras to focus on each speaker, linked to a range of a range of pre-set room layouts. A wide range of staff in the IT, Communications, Facilities and Democratic Services teams will be trained to use the new equipment, reducing the reliance on extensive input from the IT Team to support meetings. The new equipment should also allow the Council to livestream meetings if Members think that this would be helpful. One aspect of the project is outstanding, which is to replace the microphone units; delivery of the replacement microphones has been delayed by supply chain issues, but they should be available before the summer.

Councillor IT provision

- 3.4 Prior to each local election a review is carried out to consider the IT software and hardware requirements of Councillors, both those newly elected, and those re-elected to serve for a further four years. As part of reviewing Member IT requirements, the Council's IT contractor, BT, carried out a survey of Members' IT needs in the autumn of 2021. About three quarters of Members responded to the survey, the outcomes from which inform this report. In particular, three quarters of responders expressed a preference for either a standard corporate laptop or an iPad, with small numbers wanting to connect to Council systems using their own equipment. One Member preferred a Council Android smart phone as their main means of working.
- 3.5 Current Councillors are using a range of different equipment, some of it dating back as far as 2014, much of which is now nearing the natural end of its useful life. This equipment does not support the latest operating systems and enhanced security features and is increasingly difficult to support and repair. Since the last local election in 2018, Council systems have undergone considerable modification and all officers have been issued with a new generation of personal

laptops which support a modern, agile working environment. A new corporate intranet, Transform, has also been implemented and it is essential that Members have easy access to this. Equipment suited to mobile, agile working has been invaluable during the pandemic when most Council staff have been working from home. It is important that Members are brought up to this new standard and are able to take advantage of the improvements in security and access to systems.

- 3.6 One of the most mentioned problems with current equipment was the difficulty and delay in logging in using the VPN connection. The new laptops use an improved method of logging-in, utilising facial recognition technology, and are less reliant on passwords. They offer much faster and more reliable connection. The wide range of equipment currently being used means that support can be difficult to provide. Standardising the equipment in use with other Council users will simplify the support arrangements and enable BT to provide a much more efficient and effective service to Members.
- 3.7 Many Members currently prefer to use Apple iPad devices and it is proposed that this option will be retained. In the past, iPads offered less access to standard Office applications and corporate systems, such as the Intranet, but the Council's move to Office 365 means that many of the systems previously unavailable can now be accessed more easily, and the limitations of using an iPad compared to a laptop have been reduced.
- 3.8 There is still a demand for bring Your Own Device (BYOD) facilities, and it is proposed that Members should retain the option of using their own equipment to log in to Council systems using a Citrix connection.
- 3.9 The Council has previously offered Councillors a basic mobile phone to use for Council business and as a public contact point which can be separated from their personal phone details. Alternatively, Members have been offered a monthly allowance of £10 to use their own phones (mobile or landline) for Council business. Relatively few Members have taken up the option of a basic mobile phone – many Members do not want to be carrying multiple devices. Smartphones have not been provided except in limited cases to portfolio holders where there was a business need. The cost of providing these basic mobile phones is modest, but extending the offer to a Council smart phone with access to Council email and other systems should be considered. The cost of providing a Council smartphone with security license would be about £330 per device, an additional expenditure of up to £19k if all Members took advantage of this option. Members views are sought on whether a Council smart phone should be offered to Members.
- 3.10 As part of this programme, it is also proposed that the IT equipment in the Members Room should be upgraded, with new PCs and docking stations for Council laptops.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The cost of providing IT equipment to new and returning Councillors from May 2022 onwards could be up to £55k if all Members take up the offer of a standard laptop. But, it is likely to be less than this considering that some Members will not need or want new equipment at this stage, or will want cheaper iPad options. This cost can be met from within the existing Democratic Representation revenue budget in 2022/23 if members agree to a carry forward of £25k from the projected underspend in the 2021/22 budget for this specific project.
- 4.2 Additional expenditure of up to c£19k may be required if Members wish to consider the option of a Council smart phone for which further funding would need to be identified.

5. PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 All new IT equipment for Councillors will be procured through the Council's IT Support Contractor, BT, under existing arrangements.

Non-Applicable Sections:	Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children/Policy/ Personnel/Legal
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	"Councillor IT Provision" – Report to GP&L Committee on 20/3/18 and Executive on 28/3/18 "Member Induction" – Report to GP&L Committee on 30/11/21