



COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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| Council name | COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL |
| Name and date of Committee | CABINET 7 SEPTEMBER 2020 |
| Report Number | AGENDA ITEM 15 |
| Subject | PAPERLESS OR PAPER LESS – COUNCIL/CABINET/ COMMITTEE – AGENDAS, REPORTS |
| Wards affected | All |
| Accountable member | Councillor Joe Harris, Leader of the Council Email: joe.harris@cotswold.gov.uk |
| Accountable officer | Claire Hughes, Business Manager Corporate Responsibility Email: claire.hughes@publicagroup.uk |
| Summary/Purpose | To discuss and consider whether all Councillors should receive Council/Cabinet/Committee papers electronically. |
| Annexes | None |
| Recommendation/s | a) <i>That Cabinet discusses whether Councillors should receive papers for Council/Cabinet/Committee electronically by default and determines the way forward.</i> b) <i>That members of the public view the relevant papers online/electronically, as necessary.</i> |
| Corporate priorities | Respond to the challenge presented by the Climate Change emergency Ensure that all services delivered by the Council are delivered to the highest standard |
| Key Decision | No |
| Exempt | No |
| Consultees/ Consultation | None |

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. This paper highlights the opportunities and barriers associated with a 'paperless' service.
- 1.2. Previously Democratic Services have printed, posted and distributed Council, Cabinet and Committee papers, to Councillors, Officers, press and public. There have also been occasions where documents have been provided to the Honorary Alderman.
- 1.3. During the Covid-19 emergency, and due to limited access to reprographics and franking machines, it became necessary to restrict print papers to Councillors and even then, only post them out as necessary.
- 1.4. Officers were asked to work at home and therefore the internal post system was no longer an appropriate mechanism for distribution to staff. Officers were asked to view their reports electronically and have made the switch seamlessly. In a similar way, the press and public were asked to view documents through the Council's website. We are not aware of any adverse comments in relation to these arrangements

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1. The issue for this paper is whether councillors should adopt a comparable system. In essence, should Council, Cabinet, Committees and working parties have less paper (paper-less) or eliminate routine paper copies (paperless).
- 2.2. It is obvious that the current crisis has necessitated significant change over a very short period of time. It is a credit to all those involved, that as soon as the necessary legislation was put in place, the Council took full advantage of new technology to address the democratic deficit that had been created.
- 2.3. These virtual gatherings have changed the way meetings work very quickly. Officers have been able to work efficiently and effectively from home and we have been able to sustain public involvement in a virtual environment.
- 2.4. Whereas officers have been largely able to use their existing laptops at home and during meetings, due to the arrangements for Councillors, it was a testament to the IT infrastructure that so many different machines with every conceivable operating system were able to join Webex meetings. This was so successful that all Councillors were able to join the Annual Council Meeting on 3 June 2020. This was the first meeting that Agendas and Reports were printed only for Councillors.
- 2.5. To put this into context prior to Covid-19, a normal Cabinet meeting would involve printing 36 paper copies of agendas and associated reports with a Council meeting increasing this to 55 paper copies.
- 2.6. Given the new arrangements, a typical cabinet meeting would now only need 10-12 copies at the most. Overview and Scrutiny Member also receive Cabinet papers.
- 2.7. The Council now wants to consider how it can harness these changes and how it can move forward with the technology available, reducing costs and contributing to its climate change targets.

2.8. There are a number of considerations which need to be taken into account:

- (a) If agendas and reports are not printed, would Councillors adapt by printing them at home?
- (b) The intention of the original IT allowance was to give Councillors the ability to operate remotely to Trinity Road. It is noted that not all of a Councillors correspondence originates from the Council Offices. If the Council was to move to paperless and given the fact that equipment, ink cartridges and paper are no longer a huge expense, then a modest adjustment in the allowance may be justified.
- (c) If paper-less is considered more appropriate then papers could be distributed on request. It is suggested that this could be after the electronic version is distributed so that it would arrive just in time for the meeting. In this way Councillors would be making an informed decision based on the contents and complexity of the agenda. This option should be restricted to ONLY those Councillors sitting on the committee.
- (d) It is readily acknowledged that whilst virtual meetings persist, it may be difficult for Councillors to view papers and take part fully. Currently, the legislation for virtual meetings lapses automatically in May 2021. Consideration is being given to allow councils to continue with totally virtual meetings, but more likely is to allow councillors and the public to participate remotely. As such, any decision on this paper must be read in combination with the future of virtual meetings.
- (e) Should virtual meetings continue in either version, consideration should be given to the use of second monitors being connected to the councillors devices. This would allow the virtual meeting to be streamed to and from the host device, with documents available on the supplementary screen. This poses a problem for those using pure tablets (such as Amazon Fire or older I pads) where additional screens would merely mirror the host device. However, those councillors who invested in tablet PC's or true laptops will be able to add second (extended) screens simply. We would envisage a small training requirement in this configuration, but this is not unsurmountable.
- (f) Those who chose to work remotely could be encouraged to invest in such screens. Retailers offer suitable screens at £70 - £80.
- (g) Councillors who choose to attend Trinity Road would find it difficult and cumbersome to carry a second screen. Therefore the Council could consider equipping each 'seat' with a monitor with HDMI connection, although this would need costing and a detailed business case.

- (h) If meetings are to take place solely in the Council Chamber, there would not need to be additional monitors as the Councillors IT equipment would be available for reading documents. As webcasting is being considered this could be used to view papers electronically, from the screen, for Councillors and public whilst the meeting is taking place.

3. PROS AND CONS OF PAPER

- 3.1.** It is appreciated that the feel of paper, particularly of a good book holds a special magic for the reader. For Council documents this is less likely, but there are still reasons why Councillors may feel that the paper copies are preferable.
- 3.2.** Having a bundle of papers hit the 'mat' is a nudge that there is reading to be done. A physical document would be a reminder of meetings to come and difficult to lose.
- 3.3.** Readers often like to highlight passages or bookmark a page (fold over the corner). The use of a pen or highlighter is a great way to add thoughts to a document and a few years ago these simple tasks were beyond the ability of simple software solutions. However, as technology progresses such things are now possible.
- 3.4.** Those who have embraced the paperless (or paper-less) world, would, however, counter that PDF documents can be:
 - (a) Searched Saving the reader scouring long documents for a particular passage;
 - (b) Allows the user to highlight whole sentences and leave comments in the virtual margin;
 - (c) Allows for the user to create multiple versions and track the changes;
 - (d) Share thoughts with colleagues by emails and google docs;
 - (e) Search a whole folder (or hard disk);
 - (f) Back up documents so they can't be lost (as easily);
 - (g) The font size can be increased to aid reading;
 - (h) Can be read out for those who find long documents difficult (for example those with dyslexia or other requirements);
 - (i) Copy and paste of passages into other documents, notes or emails;
- 3.5.** For those who prefer paper, it is often remarked that they won't have data protection issues. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and in fact the distribution of paper files could make the problem worse.
- 3.6.** Recently we had an incident where the envelope containing all the documents for the Annual Council were split open and all the contents were visible. This included confidential information within the package. It is accepted that this is not a regular occurrence, but given the sensitivity of some of this information, one failure is perhaps one too many.
- 3.7.** Disposal could also be problematic in that Councillors may recycle documents (including annotations) which could be intercepted. It would be best practice for all council documents to be shredded but would be essential for anything with notes, containing personal data or pink pages. Deletion on an electronic device has a variety of efficiency, but password protected documents would remain protected regardless of deletion method.

3.8. Currently, exempt information is loaded onto CMIS, with Councillors being able to login to view the papers, confidentially.

4. COST OF PRINTING AND DISTRIBUTION

4.1. Cost of printing papers for meetings since virtual meetings began in June 2020 are detailed in the table below. As mentioned previously, postage and distribution has been largely reduced during covid-19 so this only gives a flavour of the financial savings that could be achieved :

| Meeting | Meeting Date | Print Cost (£) | Postage Cost (£) | Total Cost |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------|
| Cabinet | 01-Jun-20 | £46.45 | £27.81 | £74.26 |
| Annual Council | 03-Jun-20 | £36.03 | £74.15 | £110.18 |
| Planning & Licensing | 10-Jun-20 | £55.80 | £33.37 | £89.17 |
| Cabinet | 06-Jul-20 | £33.65 | £36.34 | £69.99 |
| Planning & Licensing | 08-Jul-20 | £74.42 | £45.75 | £120.17 |
| P&L | 10-Jun-20 | £1.62 | £25.74 | £27.36 |
| Council | 15-Jul-20 | £24.61 | £46.34 | £70.95 |
| O&S | 28-Jul-20 | £17.05 | £17.44 | £34.49 |
| Council | 29-Jul-20 | £20.79 | £58.15 | £78.94 |
| Audit | 30-Jul-20 | £42.09 | £43.00 | £85.09 |
| Planning & Licensing | 12-Aug-20 | £25.77 | £61.52 | £87.29 |
| | | | TOTAL | £847.89 |

5. OPTIONS

5.1. There are a number of options for taking this forward:

5.2. Option 1 is the do nothing option. Continue to print and distribute paper agendas and reports.

5.3. Option 2 is a move to less paper. In this option councillors would be able to opt-in to paper agendas. In these circumstances the councillor would continue to receive paper copies for Council and for committees where they are a member.

5.4. Option 3 is a move to paperless. In this option all agendas and reports will be issued by electronic means only (except in circumstances where there is a genuine requirement for paper e.g. a disability).

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1. A move to paperless would see a reduction in the costs associated with printing and distribution as detailed within this report. It is anticipated that a full paperless option would see financial savings in the region of circa £5,000 per annum.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The legal position for access to council documents is set out in Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972. This provides that a summons to attend the meeting, specifying the business proposed to be transacted at the meeting, and authenticated by the proper officer of the council, shall be **sent** to every member of the council by an appropriate method. The traditional approach has been to send a paper copy as this was the only way to comply with the legislation.

7.2. In order to address this position, the Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015 was enacted. This amended the 1972 Act to allow the definition of “sending” the summons to include sending the papers in electronic format where the member has given consent.

7.3. It is without doubt that there are far more benefits than disbenefits to providing the papers electronically, not least that electronic documents can be password protected to comply with GDPR. The only other point to be made is that officers may need to provide logistical support for a time to ensure that members have access to all of the documents for the meeting so that they have sufficient information to make an informed decision.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT

8.1. None other than those identified within the report.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT (IF REQUIRED)

9.1. The move towards a paperless system has the potential to have a negative impact on some, as such it will be important that the Council retains a paper option. On the flip side the continued use and expansion of electronic agendas, reports and meetings does increase accessibility and therefore can potentially have a positive impact.

10. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS (IF REQUIRED)

10.1. A move to paperless would contribute towards the Council’s climate change targets.

11. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 11.1.** The options are detailed within this report and include do nothing, a move to full paperless, or a move to reduce paper without enforcing paperless.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1.** The following documents have been identified by the author of the report in accordance with section 100D.5(a) of the Local Government Act 1972 and are listed in accordance with section 100 D.1(a) for inspection by Councillors of the public:

- None