POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

9th October, 2007

Present: Councillors Cowper, Freeman, Kellett, Lightley, Lodge, McDonnell, Martin, Simmons, Walker and Wolstemholme.

Also Present: Councillors Marsden, Robinson and D. Smith

Apologies for Absence: Apologies for Absence were received from Councillor Wilkes.

In the absence of the Chairman of the Policy Scrutiny Panel, Councillor Wilkes, the Vice Chairman of the Panel, Councillor Freeman, took the Chair.

Councillor Freeman in the Chair.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 11th September, 2007.

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 11th September, 2007, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

SICKNESS ABSENCE

- Following the Panel's Review of Sickness Absence a Draft Report had been prepared and was submitted to Members.
- After a general discussion Members agreed the Draft Report for submission to the Scrutiny Committee.

TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

- Following the Panel's Review of the Telephone Communications System a Draft Report had been prepared and was submitted to Members.
- After a general discussion Members agreed the following additions to the Draft Report and Recommendations.
- That an addition be made to the Report's Outcomes to the effect that the Policy Scrutiny Panel has serious concerns regarding staff retention in this area and how this is affected by comparative levels of remuneration at neighbouring Authorities.
- That an additional Recommendation be included to the effect that Cabinet prioritise the review and replacement of the current Telephone Communications Software and identify associated future staffing requirements.
- It was agreed that subject to the inclusion of the agreed additions to the Draft Report and Recommendations the Draft Report be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Meeting terminated at 5.55pm

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

SCRUTINY OF THE MEMBERS ON LINE SYSTEM

BACKGROUND

1. The Members Online System was introduced from 1st January, 2007, following a trial period beginning in June, 2006. The trial period had been agreed by Cabinet in May, 2006, following a report by the Director of Legal and Administration Services entitled, Council Agenda Papers – Efficiency Measures (Minute No. 43, Cabinet, 17th May, 2006, refers).

AIMS

2. To review the Members Online System

ACTIONS

3. At the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting in June, 2007, Members agreed that as there was a significant number of new Councillors following the election in May, a survey be carried out of all Council Members to identify possible individual problem areas and assess any Training/Instruction requirements for Members specifically in relation to the Members Online system but also to identify any further general computer training requirements.

3.1 A Survey of all Members in relation to the Members Online system was subsequently carried out between June and July, 2007.

3.2 At the Policy Scrutiny Panel Meeting in July, 2007, the Director of Legal and Administration Services was in attendance to give Members a background to the System.

OUTCOMES

4. Following agreement at Cabinet in May, 2006, the system had been introduced on a six month trial period, later extended to the end of December, 2006. All Members were invited to "sign-up" to the system during the trial period.

4.1 The introduction had been prompted following consideration of E Government Requirements and ongoing Efficiency Savings. The intention of the trial period was to encourage so far as possible Members to access agenda papers on line, to familiarise themselves with the process and to reduce significantly the number of hard copies of Committee papers that were being printed and transported and therefore engender significant efficiency savings.

4.2 When Members agreed to "sign-up" to Members Online, they were provided with hard copy Committee Papers, for only the Committees/Panels of which they were a member. All other Committee papers being available via the Members Online site. Those Members not choosing to "sign-up" to the system, continued to receive hard copies of all Committee papers.

This arrangement ceased on 1st January, 2007, when all Council Members began receiving only the papers for the Committees/Panels of which they are a member. All other Committee papers now being available via the Members Online site.

5 There was some concern that Members of the Council were not being afforded the same facilities as Members of neighbouring Authorities. To this effect, a survey of neighbouring Authorities was undertaken to establish their current practice and any developments in relation to the distribution of Committee papers to their Members.

5.1 The findings of the survey of neighbouring Authorities are attached at Appendix A

6. Members utilising the Members Online system are entitled to an appropriate allowance to cover the costs of printing etc. The Policy Scrutiny Panel notes that the original amount of the allowance was subject to review and indications seem to suggest, that due to the costs experienced by Members utilising the system, a review may now be necessary.

6.1 For Members with no personal access to PCs, two computers are available in the Members Room to facilitate access to the system and enable the printing of required copies. Initial difficulties with printing were experienced when the computers and printer were situated in the Town Hall as the printer had not been updated. However this problem has been overcome with the re-siting of the Member's PCs to 4 Saddler Street, where the PCs are linked to the office MFD.

6.2 No definitive figures have been produced for the Policy Scrutiny Panel but Members were informed by the Director of Legal and Administration Services that substantial savings have been made since the introduction of Members Online, both in the reduction in Courier time and expense and in the reduction in the use of paper for printing.

7. Survey Results

The results of the Survey of Members requested by the Policy Scrutiny Panel showed the following:-

- 31 Members responded to the Survey
- 24 Members were using the system at the time of the Survey
- 20 of those Members found the system easy to use

Those Members not using the system cited the following reasons:-

- 4 Members indicated that they had technical difficulties in accessing the system
- 4 Members indicated that they had difficulty printing documents or part documents
- 7 Members indicated that they required instruction or further instruction in the use of Computers

7.1 Overall, when asked whether they would be prepared to receive instruction or further instruction:-

- 21 Members indicated that they were prepared to receive instruction in the Members Online system (from the Democratic Support Team)

- 11 Members indicated that they would be prepared to undertake a general introduction to using a computer (as part of HR's Corporate IT Training Programme)

7.2 It was suggested and agreed that in the short term, instruction in the Members Online system would be given, to those Members requiring it, by Democratic Support and an invitation to this effect was forwarded to all Members on 31st July, 2007.

7.3 Arrangements were subsequently made and those Members responding attended 4 Saddler Street to receive instruction in the Members Online system and to be issued with their individual passwords.

7.3 At the time of writing this Report 35 Members actively utilise the Members Online system. 15 Members have not chosen to utilise the system and therefore receive hard copies of the papers for the Committees/Panels of which they are a member.

8. Security/Continuity issues

The issues of security of the material on the Members Online site and of the continuity of the Site itself were a concern to Members and , in order to address those concerns, the Council's Website Manager has advised as follows:-

- Individual passwords have been issued to all Members to enable their personal access to the Member Online system. Clearly, under the Authority's Corporate IT Security Policy, personal user names/passwords must not be divulged to a third party.
- The Members Online system is located on the same set-up as the Council's Website. Clearly therefore, steps have had to be taken by IT to ensure it is constantly available.
- The site itself is hosted by a third party in a secure facility.
- We have our own dedicated, managed Server that is serviced by multiple connections to the Internet.
- The hardware is subject to a full service contract, which includes replacement of failed parts.
- The software is secured and has passed a rigorous penetration test carried out by an independent company.
- A support contract is in place with a back-up and recovery procedure.
- In the event of supplier failure contingencies are in place to ensure system recovery, as a mirrored copy of the information is available.
- Within the time it would take to requisition a new Server, realistically a couple of hours, the entire Website, together with Members Online, could be re-published.

8.1 Members who do not access the Members Online system raised the issue of venues and times of meetings of the Committees/Panels of which they were not a member, as they had no way of knowing venues and times or changes to them.

8.2 It was agreed that in order to assist, with immediate effect, a paper copy of the weekly Schedule of Meetings, be circulated to all Members in the weekly Courier. It was further agreed that Members with Email addresses be also sent an electronic copy of the Schedule of Meetings. The Policy Scrutiny Panel notes that these measures are now in effect and have proved useful.

<u>RECOMMENDATIONS</u>

1) That in view of the printing costs incurred, the allowance payable to Members for utilising the Members Online system be now reviewed.

2) That instruction in the use of the Members Online system offered by Democratic Support Officers continue to be made available to all Members.

3) That the requirement for general Computer Training for Members be highlighted with the Human Resources Section.

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

Distribution of Committee Papers
Survey of Neighbouring Authorities

QUESTION 1

Do all Members of the Council receive paper copies of all Committee papers?

Wear Valley - Yes

Derwentside - Yes

Chester-le-Street – Receive relevant Committee Papers

Sedgefield – Major Committees are sent to all Members

County Council – Only receive papers for the Comittees/Panels of which they are a member

Teesdale – All Members receive copies of Agendas, only Committee/Panel Members receive Committee/Panel Reports

QUESTION 2

Is distribution of paper copies limited only to members of relevant Committee/Panel etc?

Wear Valley – No, Policy Committees, Development Control, Licensing, all get Appeals, Licensing Sub just get Agenda

Derwentside - No

Chester-le-Street – No, Agendas are also circulated to the Executive for information.

Sedgefield – Area Forums and quasi-judicial, Appeals Committees are sent only to Committee Members

County Council – Yes, Members only receive paper copies of Committees or Sub-Committees of which they are a member.

Teesdale – Only in relation to Panel Meetings

QUESTION 3

Are all Committee papers made available electronically via Website/Intranet/?

Wear Valley – Yes, with the exception of those that contain exempt information.

Derwentside – Currently being developed

Chester-le-Street – Yes, available on Website and Intranet

Sedgefield – All Committee Papers are available on the Council's Website and Intranet. Exempt reports are only available on the Intranet Site – access is password protected. Some papers are restricted internally due to the confidential nature of business.

County Council – Yes, all Committee and Sub-Committee papers are available electronically to all members of the Authority and Co-opted Members.

Teesdale – All Agendas for public meetings are available on the Website

QUESTION 4

Has the Council provided Members with there own personal PC/Laptop to access papers electronically?

Wear Valley – Leader of the Council has a lap-top and there are 2 PCs for Members in the Members Room.

Derwentside – Proposals to undertake a "Pilot Scheme" with members of one of the Scrutiny Panels.

Chester-le-Street – No, although currently being looked at.

Sedgefield – Lap tops have been offered to all Members. Only a few have not accepted the offer. ICT are currently going through the process of providing them to newly elected Members. Training is also being given to those who require it.

County Council – Yes, the Authority has provided all Members with the necessary equipment.

Teesdale – A limited number of Councillors have lap-tops.

QUESTION 5

Have Members been provided with access to PCs on Council premises to view/download relevant papers?

Wear Valley – As above, access in Members Room.

Derwentside – PC's are available in the Members Room.

Chester-le-Street – Yes, in Members Room.

Sedgefield – PC's have been provided in all Members Rooms

County Council – Yes, the Members have a resource centre which has numerous PCs for their use; together with a member of staff who will offer assistance should it be needed.

Teesdale – There is a PC in the Members Room which all Members can access if they wish.

QUESTION 6

Have Members been provided with any additional allowance to cover the costs of printing/sundries for their personal home computers?

Wear Valley - No

Derwentside - No

Chester-le-Street - No

Sedgefield – No additional allowance is provided, but printer cartridges and paper are supplied by the Authority.

County Council – No, the Authority covers costs of printing, stationary and associated PC costs. Members do not incur any cost.

Teesdale – No, is considered part of their allowance. Paper, cartridges etc are supplied when necessary, by the Authority.