Report to the ICT and E Government Standing Scrutiny Panel
Date of meeting: 22 September 2005

Portfolio: ICT and CSS

Subject: Members Connectivity Scheme

Officer contact for further information: Simon Hill (ext 4249)

Committee Secretary: Simon Hill

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1)   To receive a progress report on the implementation of the Committee Management Scheme and member connectivity; and

(2)   To give consideration to the proposed connectivity scheme and comment as appropriate.

Report:

Background to the Strategy

1.   The Council has previously agreed an IT Strategy for Research and Democratic Services. The aim of the strategy was twofold. Firstly to set out timescales for the implementation of an electronic committee management system (CoMS) and secondly to decide upon a strategy for member connectivity to the Councils network.

2.   At that time it was agreed it was preferable to those members canvassed, that direct provision of IT equipment was not their favoured option as over 70% of respondees already had equipment in their homes and didn't want another computer provided by the council.

3.   As part of the Council's budget making, CSB growth was built in over a three year period to assist members in providing their own IT equipment. A pilot scheme was undertaken by ICT that highlighted that connectivity at that time was limited as no searchable archive or committee system was available. Officers were also concerned that levels of printed distribution were also increasing, the council's budget for printing was exceeded year-on-year, partly due to the balanced nature of the Council and the request that all agendas were sent to everyone. Additionally a sum of Capital monies was secured through the IEG Grant to fund the implementation of a Committee Management System.

4.   The need for such a system was included within the three-year initial business plan of Research and Democratic Services. A Project Board was established to oversee the implementation of the scheme managed in-house by the Committee Section and overseen by Chief Internal Auditor. A successful tendering exercise was undertaken during the autumn 2004 and Nte (product name Modern.gov) were appointed in January 2005. Implementation took place over the period January – 31 March 2005 and the system when live as planned on 1 April 2005 within budget.

Progress Since 1 April 2005

5.   Since 1 April the Council has:

(a)   Gone live on our website with all our publicly available agenda and minutes;

(b)   Undertaken a printed distribution review to establish the need for paper copies and implemented (as far as is practical at present) the results of the review; and

(c)   Discussed and drafted a Member Connectivity Scheme.

Member Connectivity

6.   Attached at Annex 1 to this report is the proposed Connectivity Scheme. The scheme has been drafted to reflect member's view that direct provision of equipment is not desired. It is based upon an annual grant of £500 to each member. From this sum the member undertakes to:

(a)   Provide a computer with Internet access capability;

(b)   Provide broadband access to the Internet via a provider;

(c)   Provide paper and print consumables except members headed stationary which will continue to be provided by the Council; and

(d)   Only to be provided with paper copies of agenda for those Committees they either are a member of or are required to otherwise attend (e.g. as a member of the Cabinet).

Implementation Issues for Members

7.   Provision of a computer – It is known that most members now have their own computer. For those that currently don't it is proposed that if they sign up to the scheme by the start of December they will receive all of the first year grant in January 2005 to assist their purchase. The scheme means that use of that computer is not restricted by the Council to only official uses. A guidance note on use of IT by members is attached at Annex 2. This is subject to consideration by the Standards Committee.

8.   Broadband Access – This type of Internet access is much faster than older dial-up methods. This is essential for members as some of the agenda documents are large in size.

9.   Paper copies of agenda – members will continue to receive paper copies of agenda for those Committees they sit on as well as those that they are required to attend. Additionally, paper copies of agenda will be available at Council meetings should non-members attend. The expectation is that members will use the on-line system to view agendas and minutes. Publication events will be notified to all members by email.

10.   Level of Grant proposed – The issue of the Grant is to be considered by the Council's Remuneration Panel at its next meeting. In researching the scheme Officers have found two other examples of this type of grant. Basildon Council (£500 pa paid monthly) and East Cambridgeshire Council (£375 pa). Most authorities who have undertaken connectivity schemes provide equipment but are prescriptive about its use and these schemes are resource intensive. The views of the Panel on the proposed level of grant will be forwarded to the Remuneration Panel.

11.   It is proposed that a demonstration of the CoMS system and a presentation of the porposed scheme will be given to members prior to the Cuncil meeting on 27 September 2005. Any views of the Panel would be welcomed by officers.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: CSB sum of £28,000 for scheme
Personnel: within existing
Land: nil

Community Plan/BVPP reference: whilst no reference is contained within the Community Plan or BVPP the IEG statement refers to the scheme as does the council's own strategy document.

Relevant statutory powers:

Background papers: IEG statements and RDS Strategy and Business Plan refer
Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:
Key Decision reference: (if required) not a key decision