

## **REPORT OF CENTRAL SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**(Special Meeting held 20 April 1999)**

### **1. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FACILITIES FOR MEMBERS (REPORT A) (MINUTE NO. 70).**

The Committee has considered a comprehensive report on the review by members participating in the 9 month pilot project to provide Information Technology (IT) facilities to members.

The Committee has supported the recommendations from the Pilot Project Review Workshop to extend IT facilities to additional members. Members participating in the pilot have found benefits through improved speed of communications (through electronic mail), diary scheduling and access to information. The Committee considers that there is scope for even greater benefits through reduction in printing and postage costs if more members and employees exploited the use of IT to distribute and manage documents. The extension of IT facilities to more members is consistent with the principles of Best Value and with the Council's commitment to sustainability. Appropriate provision of IT and access to information systems will improve communications between members and employees, reduce business journeys, printing costs, the amount of paper in circulation and provide members with access to a wide range of information in support of their roles.

A major benefit identified by the Pilot Project Group would come from the ability to access all of the Council's Committee documents on-line. This would significantly reduce the number of documents circulated to members. Hard copies would need to be distributed only to members of appropriate Committees.

Whilst enthusiastic for the extension of the IT facilities, the Committee is conscious that it will be important to ensure that the security of the Council's IT network is maintained and that any improper use of these facilities is prevented. It is proposed that members using IT facilities will be required to sign an undertaking binding them to observe the Council's security policy governing the use of the Internet, Intranet and Electronic Mail.

An amount of £15,500 has thus far been spent from a budget provision of £49,000 in the IT work programme for IT facilities for members. Having regard to the requirement to implement a more robust network access, it is estimated that a total of 40 members could be provided with IT facilities based on the remaining budget provision of £33,500. In addition to this there would be associated revenue costs through telephone line rental, user training and technical support. These additional costs would need to be included in the budget planning process. Based on experience gained from the pilot project, it is considered appropriate to provide members with portable (laptop) PCs rather than a conventional PC which requires a semi-permanent work station.

The likely take-up of any IT facilities offered is difficult to estimate, but if the demand is greater than anticipated consideration could be given to the provision of additional resources. Initially it is intended that the leaders of the political groups after the elections on 6 May make recommendations as to the members to be provided with IT facilities. There will be no obligation on members to take up any facilities offered.

The Committee has also authorised a review of the training and support requirements of members using the Council's IT facilities.

## **2. IMPLEMENTATION OF PERIODIC ELECTORAL REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS – 1999/2000 (REPORT B) (MINUTE NO. 71).**

The Committee has considered a response to a consultation from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the implementation of recommendations arising from the periodic electoral review of District Ward Boundaries and District Electoral arrangements. The review is due to commence formally on 20 July 1999.

The Government wishes to implement decisions arising from the electoral review recommendations as soon as practicable on a normal election day, whilst ensuring that no Council holds whole Council elections in consecutive years. The Government is therefore proposing that, for those Councils where final recommendations are received no later than July 2000, and where the recommendations are accepted, implementation should be on a normal election day in May 2001. New Forest District Council should fall into this group.

In the case of New Forest, this would mean that there would be additional, unscheduled elections for the whole Council in 2001. County Council elections are due to be held that year and it is the Government's intention to combine the District and County elections. The next scheduled elections for New Forest District Council are in May 2003 and these elections would proceed as normal. This would have the effect that Councillors elected at both the May 1999 and the proposed May 2001 elections would serve for periods of two years only. In 2003, the normal date for election of Councillors in New Forest, the elections would revert to a four year term.

The Committee has noted that the cost of an election to the District Council, shared with the County Council, was likely to be in the region of £75,000. The cost of a separate election for the District Council would be approximately £120,000. No provision has been made in the Council's Expenditure Plans for this expenditure.

The Committee does not favour the holding of combined elections for the District and the County Council. Combined elections cause inevitable confusion to voters and can effect voting patterns. Although there would be cost savings, the Committee does not support any proposal for a combined County/District election.

In addition to the costs on the Council for running the election, costs to candidates and political parties are substantial.

The Committee is extremely concerned at the timing of the Government's consultation, in the run up to the quadrennial elections. It is believed that some Councillors have decided not to stand for re-election because they did not wish to commit themselves to a further four year term of office. Their decision to not seek re-election could well have been different if it was known that the elections would be for a two year period only. Similarly, candidates who have been nominated have done so on the understanding that, if successful, they would not have to repeat the election campaign for another four years.

The Committee's has authorised the following response to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions –

- (i) This Council is opposed to the proposal to hold additional, whole Council elections in May 2001, for those Councils which have whole Council elections every four years, on the grounds of the substantial additional costs involved, both to District Councils and to candidates and/or political parties;
- (ii) Any proposal to combine the County and District Council elections is opposed because of the confusion to voters and the effect of combined elections on voting patterns;
- (iii) Considers that the imposition of additional, whole Council elections would not accord with the principles of Best Value because of the substantial costs of running the election and increased member training costs;
- (iv) The timing of the consultation is ill-considered in the light of the pending quadrennial elections for District Councils. The Government's position on the implementation of the periodic electoral reviews should have been clarified at a much earlier stage.

Councillor N D M McGeorge  
CHAIRMAN

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