

## Governance Committee

15 November 2019

<b>Report title</b>	Introduction of Paperless Committee Meetings	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor Ian Brookfield Leader of the Council	
<b>Wards affected</b>	All Wards	
<b>Accountable Director</b>	Mark Taylor, Deputy Chief Executive	
<b>Originating service</b>	Democratic Services	
<b>Accountable employee</b>	Jaswinder Kaur Tel Email	Democratic Services Manager 01902 550320 Jaswinder.kaur@wolverhampton.gov.uk
<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	n/a	

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### Recommendation for decision:

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

Approve to undertake a pilot of 'paperless' meetings and, subject to the success of the pilot, to extend this approach to all Council and Committee meetings on a phased basis.

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 The adoption of a paperless approach to meetings will reduce the Council's carbon footprint, deliver printing, paper and production cost savings, and provide Councillors with improved access to information, thereby allowing them to undertake their duties more effectively and efficiently.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 In light of ongoing financial pressures, the Council continues to look at identifying ways of doing more with less. Part of the Council's strategy to achieve this is through the implementation of smarter ways of working in a digital age through its Business Transformation agenda.
- 2.2 A number of Councils have completed a transition to paperless meetings over recent years and there is a clear direction of travel in this regard, such that over the course of the next few years it is expected to become standard practice in local government.
- 2.3 Wolverhampton significantly reduced its own paper dependence in 2014, having migrated to the modern.gov application. Currently 36 Councillors request paper copies, with additional copies supplied to political assistants and Councillor Support.
- 2.4 Across a wide number of service areas, the Council is increasingly encouraging its residents to access services electronically. Moving to paperless meetings provides Councillors with an opportunity to lead by example in this regard and demonstrate that they too are prepared to embrace new forms of technology to deliver savings, embrace more efficient working practices and reduce the Council's carbon footprint.

## **3.0 Advantages of Paperless Working**

- 3.1 There are a number of potential benefits associated with a move to paperless meetings, which include:

### **Environmental Benefits**

- 3.2 The Council declared a Climate Change emergency on Wednesday 17 July 2019. The primary benefit of paperless meetings is the reduction of the Council's carbon footprint, highlighting the authority as being environmentally responsible. Paper and stationery usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers and less transport is involved.

### **Reduced Printing and Postage Costs**

- 3.3 The frequency of Council and Committee meetings and the size of agendas can vary significantly, and with the addition of ad-hoc Committees, extraordinary meetings, Sub-Committees and Working Groups, it is difficult to project a definitive cost saving that paperless meetings would offer going forward. An indicative cost reduction is provided by 2018-2019 figures however, when the total cost of printing and posting papers was just under £10,000.

## **Security**

- 3.4 The Modern.Gov app will enable Democratic Services to disseminate Private or Restricted (Exempt Information) papers securely to Councillors. This has the benefit of ensuring that only the people who should see the papers have access to them.

## **Employee Time**

- 3.5 The removal of the need to print, envelope and process hard-copy agenda papers for postage will result in efficiencies in Committee administrator time which can be reallocated to other areas of support.

## **Improved Access to Information**

- 3.6 Through the Modern.Gov app, Councillors are able to access meeting papers from any place, at any time to suit their personal commitments. Most tablet devices are small, portable, convenient and easy to use once Councillors become familiar with them; by contrast some agenda packs can be several hundred pages long and particularly cumbersome.
- 3.7 The Modern.Gov app can be set to retain six months' worth of Committee papers which can be accessed and referred to at any time (including during meetings), improving access to information. At the current time Councillors only receive a hard copy agenda for the Committees on which they sit; however, the app can be configured to provide Councillors with access to any Council meeting papers they wish to receive.
- 3.8 The Modern.Gov app has a range of annotation tools to allow Councillors and employees to make notes, highlight sections etc. as required.

## **Improved Councillor Skills**

- 3.9 An additional by-product of a move to paperless meetings is likely to be the upskilling of some Councillors' IT skills. Going paperless provides an incentive to embrace new technologies, and at a time when most Councils are adopting a "Digital First" approach for their communities, it can only help having Councillors who are more skilled and have an understanding of technology and how it can transform service delivery.

## **4.0 Options for Implementation**

- 4.1 Some local authorities are known to have used a 'guillotine' approach to introducing paperless meetings, whereby all meetings from an agreed cut-off date are to become strictly paperless. This approach has had mixed results, with some Council's finding that this allows little time for Councillors to build confidence.
- 4.2 Other local authorities have opted initially for a pilot, followed by a gradual meeting-by-meeting approach.
- 4.3 It is considered that Cabinet, as the Executive of the Council, lead by example to undertake a pilot of this nature.

- 4.4 The Cabinet meeting scheduled for Wednesday 4 December 2019 represents a suitable opportunity to hold the pilot.
- 4.5 Subject to any further feedback/concerns arising from the pilot paperless meeting, it is then recommended that a phased Council-wide transition to paperless meetings be implemented, with the timetable to be agreed in consultation with each relevant Committee Chair.
- 4.6 The implementation of the paperless meetings pilot will be evaluated after a few months and progress will be assessed.

## **5.0 Support for Councillors**

- 5.1 It is recognised that some Councillors will adapt quicker than others to a transition to paperless meetings, therefore the level of support provided to them will be crucial.
- 5.2 With the exception of Councillor Steve Evans all other Councillors have a device (Council supplied) which is compatible with the Modern.Gov app.
- 5.3 Councillor Support will ensure that all Councillors are content with the IT equipment they have and that it is fit for purpose.
- 5.4 It is also proposed that, in order to put Councillors at ease with using the Modern.Gov app, ongoing drop-in sessions will be held prior to Committee meetings to deliver high quality one-to-one support and advice. Support will also be requested from IT to ensure that the Councillor Wi-Fi facility is regularly tested for reliability (although as long as the agenda pack is downloaded before the meeting, a weak or intermittent Wi-Fi signal should not affect Councillor participation at meetings).
- 5.5 It is intended that during paperless meetings the agenda will be projected onto the meeting room screen, to provide a useful a training aide and reference point. This will also be particularly helpful for enhancing the transparency of Committee meetings to any members of the public in attendance.

## **6.0 Core Principles**

- 6.1 To ensure paperless committees are successfully implemented the following core principles will be adopted:
- Chair's will be provided with a copy of papers.
  - Councillors who may have an accessibility issue will be provided with a copy of papers.
  - Tablets will be provided at meetings to Councillors who require a set of papers.
  - Officers will endeavour to produce all reports in a form that can be used on a device. It is acknowledged that there will be some exceptions and, in such instances, paper copies will be produced to aid their readability.
  - That Councillors participate in training from Democratic Services so that they are able to take advantage of the various means of annotation that the modern.gov app offers.

- That Councillors who are experts with the Modern.gov app provide peer to peer support.

## **7.0 Financial implications**

- 7.1 The total printing and postage cost associated with Council and Committee papers in 2018-2019 was just under £10,000. These costs will vary each year with the number of meetings held and the size of agendas and individual reports, but the 2018-2019 figure gives an indication of the cost reduction to be achieved through the conversion to paperless meetings.  
[GE/05112019/Y]

## **8.0 Legal implications**

- 8.1 Consideration has been given to the Local Government Act 1972 – (specifically those sections relating to Access to Information), the Local Government Act 2000.
- 8.2 The Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015 permits delivery of an electronic summons to Councillors for a Committee meeting subject to the consent of the Councillor.
- 8.3 The security settings within the Modern.Gov App allow for all common types of information to be published securely, safeguarding sensitive documents and applying where necessary the exemption criteria relevant to Access to Information legislation.  
[TS/03112019/Q]

## **9.0 Equalities implications**

- 9.1 The Council recognises that Councillors with hidden disabilities, such as dyslexia or visual impairment, may require additional support and all appropriate measures will be put in place.

## **10.0 Climate change and environmental implications**

- 10.1 The Council declared a Climate Change emergency on Wednesday 17 July 2019. The primary benefit of paperless meetings is the reduction of the Council's carbon footprint, highlighting the authority as being environmentally responsible. Paper and stationery usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers and less transport is involved.

## **11.0 Human resources implications**

- 11.1 There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

## **12.0 Corporate landlord implications**

- 12.1 There are no corporate landlord implications arising from this report.
- 12.2

### **13.0 Health and Wellbeing Implications**

13.1 There are no health and wellbeing implications arising from this report.