

SUBJECT:	E-DEMOCRACY
REPORT BY:	DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To provide information on the Council's current online democratic service provision and potential future ideas to improve democratic engagement.

2. Current Provision

2.1 As with all areas of the Council, the improvement of information technology and increased use of the internet have contributed to changing the ways in which democratic services engage with the public.

2.2 At a basic level, a number of simple form-filling services have been moved online for the convenience of the public; these include Ward Budgets applications, submitting questions for the Council Question Time, and creating online petitions.

2.3 For a number of years the Council has also offered access to public committee documents via the Council's website, including minutes and agendas.

2.4 Some moves in the direction of more interactive public consultation on decision-making have also been undertaken, including the 'You Choose' online budget consultation. This allowed members of the public to interact with the Council's budget for the following year, adjusting budgets for individual services and receiving feedback on the likely consequences related to their choices. People were then able to submit these responses to be taken into account by decision-makers when determining the budget.

2.5 In addition to these particular services, wider information relating to the democratic operations of the Council are provided on the website. This is under continual development, and features a significant amount of information relevant to the work of this Committee which could help the public or prospective councillors.

3. Future Changes

3.1 Paperless Committees

Democratic Services is currently in the process of transferring to new committee software, which will provide additional opportunities for members of the public to

engage with the Council's committees. While providing similar levels of access to committee documents as the current system, a number of minor improvements will be made including allowing the public to sign up to personalised email alerts for business transacted by particular committees or different types of decision.

3.2 Of potentially greater significance is the new system's capacity for reading electronic agendas on tablet computers. By downloading a free application for Android or iPad devices, councillors and members of the public will be able to access automatically downloaded agendas. These agendas can then be annotated and highlighted by users in a similar manner as a paper document. This new feature, with the capacity for private business to be provided, subject to meeting the Council's internal security requirements, through a secure version of the application for councillors offers a new opportunity for the Council to move towards increasingly paperless meetings.

3.3 This technology evidently offers new opportunities for financial and environmental benefits. However, it also presents a challenge in terms of adapting councillors to a new way of interacting with agendas. Until councillors as a body are ready to move away from printed agendas, paper is likely to continue to be the default choice for the majority. The new system should allow those members who are willing to trial a new way of working to trial paperless committee documents on mobile devices already issued by the Council or owned personally.

3.4 The Committee may therefore wish to offer views on the following topics:

- The advantages and disadvantages of paperless working.
- An achievable timescale for increasing the proportion of councillors using electronic agendas rather than printed papers.
- The manner in which an initial trial could be implemented, i.e. whether a trial should be undertaken with all interested members or by working with an smaller individual group who could then offer more specific feedback.

3.5 Online Training for Members

Following member interest expressed in the Council providing an online training service, access to the Modern Councillor area on the Learning Pool website has been provided since 2010. This allows councillors to complete online training modules on topics specifically relating to their roles and a number of other broader skills. Councillors are able to use this service at <http://cityoflincoln.learningpool.com> using the log-in details previously provided and available through Democratic Services.

3.6 Usage of the online training service has been very low from its start, owing to a likely combination of a lack of awareness of the service and a preference for training undertaken in person. In the past year, a total of four councillors have logged onto the system, undertaking a maximum of two modules each. Efforts have been made to promote the system to elected members, although these have had little impact to date. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the service is relatively well-received by those who use it.

3.7 In addition to training modules for councillors, the Council also uses the Learning Pool service for wider training provision to officers, with a particular focus on apprentices. As such, the majority of the costs for the service are met by other

service areas, although a contribution from the member training budget of £2,000 is made every year towards the specific cost of Modern Councillor and the more general costs of the overall Learning Pool service. These costs consume a significant portion of the Council's member training budget.

3.8 The service does provide a potentially valuable backup for the training undertaken annually for Planning Committee and Licensing Sub-Committee members. If unable to attend a briefing with officers, councillors are able to complete the relevant online module as a refresher to enable them to take part in meetings. In practice, this has not been a widely-used feature with the majority of members preferring training in person.

3.9 In view of the factors outlined above, members are recommended to offer views on the following areas:

- Whether the principle of online training is supported.
- Whether the cost of the current system can be justified in view of its current usage.
- Whether officers should seek to apportion the money currently spent on online training for councillors towards more traditional training methods.

3.10 Online Information Provision

As highlighted above, officers have continued to improve the quality and quantity of information available on the areas of the website addressing democratic engagement, while also trying to maintain a balance that does not overwhelm visitors to the website with an excessive amount of detail.

3.11 As part of the forthcoming changes to the committee management software, the areas of the website relating to councillors and committees are likely to change significantly in the near future. However, the type of information made available will remain broadly the same.

3.12 Members are therefore recommended to offer any views on the current operation of the website, and any proposals for potential improvements.

4. Strategic Priorities

4.1 The Council's commitment to reducing the city's carbon footprint is potentially well-served by a move towards increased electronic provision of democratic services. While digital services have an environmental impact in the production of the devices and subsequent electricity use, limiting the production of physical agenda papers will have an undoubted benefit through saving hundreds of thousands of sheets of paper every year.

4.2 The Council's Strategic Plan also includes its intentions to increase democratic engagement and to ensure a fit for purpose council, both of which require services to be delivered in an efficient and customer-friendly manner.

5. Finance Implications

5.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report, although any changes to future service provision, with particular regard to paperless committee

documents, would be likely to have an effect on service costs. Any change in the provision of online training for councillors would increase the amount available for spending on other training, while increasing the relative cost of the Learning Pool service in other service areas' budgets.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 The move towards increased online provision of services and information is supported, and often required, by recent legislation. Some anomalies remain with regard to pre-internet legislation, including the requirement to physically serve a summons upon all members prior to meetings of the Council. However, it is likely that an explicit agreement with councillors to receive summons electronically would be sufficient in this regard.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 That the Ethics and Engagement Committee offer views and guidance on the topics put forward within the report, with particular regard to paperless committee documents and online training for councillors.