

I Can't Get In



A Corporate Scrutiny Committee Report on reported difficulties accessing the Council ICT system

February 2011

Report, together with written evidence

The ICT Scrutiny Working Party



***Cllr Jones
(Chairman)***



Cllr Smith



Cllr Stevenson

The council's scrutiny committees examine, in detail, selected areas of the council's work, responsibilities and policies.

The aim is to find out if there are ways in which the council could be doing things better and to influence national issues.

This report is the result of an examination of a particular subject. It sums up how the scrutiny committee carried out the examination, its findings and considerations, conclusions and recommendations for any improvements.

We published a further document together with this report as a record of all the meetings held in the course of the work to prepare this report.

Contents

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	5
BACKGROUND	7
AREAS OF WORK.....	7
EVIDENCE GATHERING	7
WRITTEN EVIDENCE.....	7
ORAL EVIDENCE	8
ISSUES CONSIDERED	8
THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED	8
ACTION TO ALLEVIATE THE ISSUES.....	9
ADDITIONAL MATTERS	9
CONCLUSIONS	9
RECOMMENDATIONS	10
APPENDICES - EVIDENCE	11
WITNESSES	11
LIST OF WRITTEN EVIDENCE	11
WRITTEN EVIDENCE	13
<i>Email received from Councillor G Allman</i>	13
<i>Email received from Councillor R Bayliss</i>	13
<i>Email received from Councillor M Blain</i>	13
<i>Email received from Councillor C Bowley</i>	13
<i>Email received from Councillor F Fenning</i>	13

Summary, conclusions and recommendations

In response to anecdotal evidence of difficulties encountered by members in accessing the council's computer system, the ICT working party held a special examination.

We received written and oral submissions from a number of members and we were able to discuss the issues raised with the ICT Manager, Phil Clark.

We would also like to thank all those who have helped us with our work, particularly those who attended our meetings.

The ICT Scrutiny Working Party makes recommendations that;

The main difficulties were explained clearly to us and the ICT Manager was able to take immediate action on many of them. We hope that this examination has resulted in a real improvement for members.

R1. The steps taken by the ICT Manager to address the issues encountered by members are noted and welcomed.

Bearing in mind that members use ICT equipment primarily to access email and websites and most will already have the necessary equipment we do not feel that universal provision is necessary any longer..

R2. The Head of Legal and Support Services makes the necessary arrangements to withdraw the support currently offered to members regarding the universal provision of ICT equipment following the 2011 elections.

Old ICT equipment has little residual value. If practical, we would like the Council to dispose of surplus ICT equipment, other than computers, in a socially beneficial way

R3. The Head of Legal and Support Services explores the possibility of disposal of surplus ICT equipment, other than computers to charitable organisations.

We feel that we have completed the remit given to us and that the working party completes its work in presenting this report containing our recommendations.

R4. The Corporate Scrutiny Committee disbands the ICT Scrutiny Working Party.

Background

1. Members accessing the Council's ICT system remotely reported anecdotally difficulty in gaining access.
2. The then Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee asked that the ICT Scrutiny Committee be re-convened to look at this specific issue.
3. In response, the ICT Scrutiny Working Party comprised of Councillors G Jones (Chairman), N Smith and D Stevenson held a special examination.
4. In our earlier report,¹ we noted "Security and the inconvenience that this leads to arose several times" and "There is a genuine need for security in dealing with information held by the council".
5. Since that report, some members have continued to voice complaints regarding difficulties accessing the system.

Areas of Work

6. The Working Party has consulted with members in order to;
 - a. Investigate the difficulties encountered,
 - b. Explore possible action to alleviate the issues.

- c. Make recommendations for steps to improve the situation and appropriate longer-term approach.

Evidence Gathering

7. At a meeting, we received written submissions from members, oral evidence and heard from the ICT Manager.
8. All comments were constructive, explaining the issues and looking for resolution.
9. We would like to thank all those who gave us evidence in person or in writing.

Written Evidence

10. In advance of our meetings, we invited written evidence from ward members.
11. We received written comments from a number of members. We have attached these as an appendix to this report.²
12. Although we did not receive many responses, we notice the similarity of the comments made. All submissions say that emails are the prime use and members have arranged to forward these to private email addresses or access them through the council's webmail service.
13. Several of the submissions refer to the complexity of accessing the council's full system.

¹ "E-Support for Members – Meeting Expectations" published in August 2009, available at http://www.nwleics.gov.uk/pages/scrutiny_completed_examinations

² Appendix Written Evidence, Page 13

Oral Evidence

14. At our meeting, we heard from Councillor John Legrys regarding difficulties he encounters in gaining access to the council's ICT system.
15. Councillor Legrys does access the council's full system regularly. He has arranged for the forwarding of email to his private email account but he uses the council's webmail service for more sensitive issues.
16. Councillor Legrys described to us difficulties he experiences with the webmail system when the system appears to 'time-out'. When this happens, he loses any work in progress.
17. He also has trouble with 'timing-out' when downloading large documents. He specifically referred to plans downloaded from the planning system.
18. Councillor Craig Bowley told us that he had also experienced 'timing-out' when using the webmail service that he had otherwise found very useful.
19. Councillor Legrys suggested that the council should make greater use of low-cost video-conferencing and social networking services to enable members of the public to contact officers and members.
20. Phil Clark, ICT Manager told us that he is not aware of any major issues affecting access to the council's system.
21. The degree of security is a requirement of connection with the Government Connect Secure Extranet³.
22. Although he accepts that the access procedure is tiresome, it is not difficult once it is familiar.
23. Most members use the system for email only.
24. The majority of members have emails forwarded automatically to their private email account.
25. A lesser number use the council's webmail service.
26. Phil Clark recommends the webmail as it offers greater security of email content.
27. A recent change in the council's internet provider has provided a fivefold increase in bandwidth available.

Issues Considered

The Difficulties Encountered

28. The reason that we met was reported difficulty accessing the council system.
29. It seems that most members have circumvented the difficulties, while meeting their needs, by using the webmail or forwarding emails to their private email address.
30. The main identified issue was one of apparent 'timing-out' or loss of connection, particularly when working online with webmail or the planning system.
31. Internet speeds vary across the district and if low in a member's

³ A secure, private network that enables secure interactions between connected local authorities and other connected organisations

area, this might lead to difficulties in retaining a working connection when transferring larger files.

Action to Alleviate the Issues

32. After carrying out an investigation, Phil Clark reported to a further meeting on his findings.
33. He adjusted the settings to extend the period before 'timing-out' of the email system from ten minutes to thirty minutes. He felt that this would resolve the issue that members were experiencing.
34. He confirmed the Internet speed was correct and in accordance with the anticipated provision.
35. After test, he found that the planning documents were large files that took a time to download. This was unavoidable due to the nature of the files, often images of large plans.
36. Initial investigation had indicated that the low-cost video-conferencing would only be successful over the internet with few participants, effectively one-to-one.
37. More participants required 'more-professional' systems.

Additional Matters

38. Although not included in our original remit we also considered ICT equipment to elected members.
39. We feel that universal supply of ICT equipment is not necessary. Most people already have the equipment necessary to access emails and information.

40. We are also aware that following the election, ex-councillors will return used equipment to the Council.
41. Most of this equipment will not be current and no longer appropriate and of little value to the Authority.
42. If practical, we would like the Council to dispose of surplus ICT equipment, other than computers, in a socially beneficial way.

Conclusions

43. The main issue for members reported to us was not, as we had pre-supposed and the reason for this examination, difficulty accessing the council's system.
44. It has been difficult for us to assess accurately whether members are avoiding access due to the difficulties or that the lesser access simply meets their needs.
45. It would seem that although access has been described to us as 'tiresome' most members do not require or use the full system.
46. Indeed a large number seem satisfied with forwarded email or webmail.
47. With the needs of the Government Connect Secure Extranet,⁴ we find it difficult to suggest that the council can reduce the security levels.
48. Communication with the council's computer system is, of course, largely across the Internet with all the variations that this brings.

⁴ A secure, private network that enables secure interactions between connected local authorities and other connected organisations

49. We feel that we have fulfilled our remit with the investigation of the difficulties encountered by members.
50. We are grateful to Phil Clark, ICT Manager, who has put in place solutions to the issues that are within the council's control and we believe largely resolved the issues.
2. The Head of Legal and Support Services makes the necessary arrangements to withdraw the support currently offered to members regarding the universal provision of ICT equipment following the 2011 elections.
3. The Head of Legal and Support Services explores the possibility of disposal of surplus ICT equipment, other than computers to charitable organisations

Recommendations

51. The Working Party recommends that;
 1. The steps taken by the ICT Manager to address the issues encountered by members are noted and welcomed.
 4. The Corporate Scrutiny Committee disbands the ICT Scrutiny Working Party.

ICT Scrutiny Working Party

February 2011

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Appendices - Evidence

Witnesses

Thursday 20 January 2011

Councillor C Bowley, North West Leicestershire District Council

Phil Clark, ICT Manager, North West Leicestershire District Council

Councillor J Legrys, North West Leicestershire District Council

Wednesday 16 February 2011

Phil Clark, ICT Manager, North West Leicestershire District Council

List of Written Evidence

1. Councillor G Allman
2. Councillor R Bayliss
3. Councillor M Blain
4. Councillor C Bowley
5. Councillor F Fenning

Written Evidence

Email received from Councillor G Allman

“No problems that are not sorted by the IT dept and non that keep re-occurring.”

G Allman

Email received from Councillor R Bayliss

“I make fairly limited use of the system: my Council e-mails are all forwarded to my own equipment and I am aware of no problems.”

R D Bayliss

Email received from Councillor M Blain

“I access the system on a regular basis for Webmail which I find easy and simple to do. All you need for this is your username and the token code.

I’ve long since given up accessing anything else as the password rules are too strict and I can never remember which letters are capitals, lowercase etc.

Hope this helps!”

M Blain

Email received from Councillor C Bowley

“I would just like to say that I have not had any problems lately although an issue I did have last year with my RSA key⁵ was resolved quickly by the IT team. I would also like to add that since the Council enabled us to connect to our council email through webmail this has really helped me and made my role as a Councillor easier and more effective when I am out and about.”

C Bowley

Email received from Councillor F Fenning

“I have never accessed the Council system as I cannot, or have not seen the point.

I have email re-routed to my home computer. I have assumed that I am missing out on something special but have not been motivated by any good reason to use the system. This is out of pure ignorance so it may help new members in May 2011 to be guided through the purpose in accessing the main system.”

F Fenning

⁵ A component of the access security system used by the Council, providing secure password access.