

REPORT OF ADMINISTRATION AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER

SUBJECT: ELECTRONIC AGENDAS

Purpose of Report

Members are asked to consider whether papers for meetings of the National Park Authority and its Committees should continue to be provided in paper format.

Introduction/Background

It is a legal requirement that Members who are summoned to attend meetings of the Authority have to be provided with a formal summons. Schedule 12, Paragraph 4 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides as follows:

“(b) A summons to attend the meeting ... shall, subject to sub-paragraph (3) below, be left at or sent by post to the usual place of residence of every member of the Council.”

While the statutory provision refers to Members having papers delivered to their home address, sub-paragraph (3) of the Act does provide for an alternative:

“(3) If a member of a principal council gives notice in writing to the proper officer of the Council that he desires summonses to attend meetings of the Council to be sent to him at some address specified in the notice other than his place of residence, any summons addressed to him and left at or sent by post to that address shall be deemed sufficient service of the summons.”

Some unitary authorities have used this provision to allow their Members to opt out of the system, choosing either to receive their papers electronically or to collect them directly from their respective Council Offices.

Comparisons

Both Brecon and Snowdonia National Park Authorities (NPA) provide their papers electronically for the majority of their Members, as do Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC).

Options

A variety of methods are used by unitary authorities to distribute papers electronically. These include:

(a) Purchase of a Committee Management System such as Modern.Gov (used by both Pembrokeshire County Council and Brecon Beacons NPA). An App can then be downloaded onto Members' electronic devices which automatically downloads the relevant papers.

- (b) Conversion of papers to .PDF format which are either emailed to Members (used by Snowdonia NPA), downloaded from an Authority's Website/Extranet or sent to Members' Dropboxes from where they can be downloaded to their device. There are a variety of Apps/packages which could then be used to read/annotate the .PDF papers.

Obviously, a pre-requisite for provision of agendas electronically is that all Members have access to a laptop or tablet device which can be brought to the meeting. However, it is noted that most Members now have access to such a device as PCC introduced 'paperless' meetings in September 2016.

Nevertheless, it is accepted that some Members may wish to maintain the status quo (i.e. continue to receive a hard copy of all papers) and consideration would have to be given to how this would be managed; for example, PCC make a charge of £75 for all Council meeting papers, plus an additional £25 per Committee.

Financial considerations

In the 2015/16 financial year, the printing cost for Authority/Committee papers was £3,985; postage was £465.

There may be a need to purchase a tablet or laptop for officers' use during a meeting, or for the use of any Member who found themselves unable to access one. There could also be a cost implication for the provision of additional power sockets to allow multiple devices to operate from the mains during a meeting if they had insufficient charge.

Of the two options for distribution of agendas referred to above, purchase of a Committee Management System through Modern.Gov would cost in the region of £50,000 for a 5-year contract, which includes installation of the application software, training, maintenance, etc.

However, conversion of papers to .PDF format and uploading them to the Authority's website already takes place and therefore Option (b) would represent no additional resource implications with regard to implementation, and would result in a real cost saving to the Authority.

Risk considerations

Provision of electronic agendas is a practice that has been widely adopted across local government; there would therefore be a risk that the Authority would be compared unfavourably with other authorities in terms of its use of resources.

Compliance

The Authority currently complies with the requirements of the Local Government Act 1972 as set out above.

The 2015/16 Annual Governance Statement adopted by the Authority in June 2016 identified a need to provide Members with the most efficient distribution of Authority documents, and required a review of options to take place in conjunction with the practice of PCC. This report provides such a review.

Human Rights/Equality issues

Members may wish to consider what, if any, provision should be made for those Members unhappy with a move to electronic agendas.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

The proposal would represent a resource saving through a reduction in the amount of paper documents produced.

Welsh Language considerations

The summons to a meeting and the minutes of a meeting are currently published bilingually, and this will continue to be the case.

Conclusion

The move to electronic agenda would undoubtedly result in financial and environmental savings, particularly if Option (b) is adopted.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. That Members adopt the principle of paperless meetings and trial Option (b) above for all the Authority's meetings, with immediate effect;**
- 2. That Members give notice in writing to that effect, and**
- 3. That any Member wishing to continue to receive hard copies of all (or some of) the Authority's meetings be charged an appropriate fee.**

(For further information, please contact Janet Evans, Administration and Democratic Services Manager on extension 4834 or by emailing janete@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk)

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