

**THE USE OF ONLINE MEDIA
PROCEDURAL IMPLICATIONS
(Report by Head of Administration)**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 A working group led by Councillor A N Gilbert submitted a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) in September following an investigation into ways of promoting and communicating the work of the Council's scrutiny panels and the use of information and communications technology generally to highlight the work of the Council. As support was expressed by the Panel for the use of on-line petitions, a further report was requested on the potential constitutional implications and this was considered by the Panel in November.

1.2 The purpose of this report is to bring the Panel's conclusions to the attention of the Corporate Governance Panel and the Cabinet.

2. E-FORUMS WORKING GROUP

2.1 A copy of the group's report prepared by Councillor Gilbert is attached.

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel concluded that –

- councillors should try and make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, although the decision whether to maintain a 'blog' should remain a matter for each individual councillor;
- the Council should not host on-line forums because of the substantial resource implications involved but that officers should look for cost effective ways of increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction through the Council's website;
- an on-line petition facility should be added to the Council's website in the most cost-effective way possible; and
- Scrutiny Panel members and Chairmen should be more proactive in using in-house methods of communication and engaging with external media.

The Modern.Gov software system used for the publication of agenda and minutes on-line enables Members to host their own web pages and 'blogs' and both training and day-to-day assistance is available from the Democratic Services Section to help Members who wish to avail themselves of this opportunity. An upgrade to the system is anticipated in December which will enable petitions to be undertaken on-line.

3. PETITIONS

- 3.1 An avenue exists currently for a petition on matters of relevance and containing a minimum of 50 signatories to be presented at a meeting of the Council. A similar mechanism applies to meetings of the Huntingdonshire Traffic Management Area Joint Committee.
- 3.2 Having considered whether an on-line petition should be treated any differently to one organised in a traditional manner, the Panel were of the opinion that, provided it contained the names and addresses or places of work of the signatories as opposed to e-mail addresses and someone being prepared to present it at a Council meeting, an on-line petition should be dealt with in accordance with the existing provisions of the constitution. There is a presumption that on-line petitions may be easier to organise and thus will be used more frequently. However subject to existing rules being complied with, this could stimulate interest in local democracy and attract more publicity for Council meetings. In order to prevent the possibility of a succession of petitions slowing down the business of the Council, the Panel suggest that an upper limit could be imposed of three per meeting.
- 3.3 The Panel were conscious that the Council has had to introduce a vexatious complainants procedure to prevent officers and Members from being bombarded with e-mails by individuals. On-line petitions, because of their immediacy, could provide a similar mechanism to generate excessive submissions to the Council. If this occurs, it may be necessary to re-visit the petitions and vexatious complainants procedures to prevent the process from being abused.
- 3.4 In the event of an on-line petition not generating the 50 signatures required to trigger its presentation to Council, it is suggested that it be dealt with by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel, as long as it contains a minimum of 10 signatures. If an individual member of the public wishes to raise an issue with the Council, this will be dealt with under the 'community call to action' provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Police and Justice Act 2006. Regulations and guidance on the implementation of those provisions will be issued in the New Year and will be brought to the attention of Members when they become available.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The experience of those authorities that have introduced the facility of on-line petitions is that this is a successful way of engaging with the community and enhancing the democratic process. The Modern.Gov software upgrade will enable this to be introduced at minimal cost other than staff time in moderating the process and, while there is no evidence that this will result in a large influx of petitions, a limit on the number of petitions per meeting, whether submitted on-line or in a traditional format, will mean that this will be kept at manageable proportions at Council meetings.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Having regard to the investigations they have commissioned, the Panel

RECOMMEND

- that councillors make use of the personal website facility on the Council's website as a means of communicating with ward residents, although the decision whether to maintain a 'blog' should remain a matter for each individual councillor;
- that on-line forums be not hosted by the Council because of the substantial resource implications involved but that officers look for cost effective ways of increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction through the Council's website;
- that an on-line petition facility be introduced using the Modern.Gov software system when this becomes available;
- that on-line petitions be processed under the existing constitutional arrangements, subject to a maximum of 3 petitions being presented at any meeting;
- that in the event of an on-line petition not having the requisite number of signatories or the organiser not being prepared to present it to Council, the petition be submitted for consideration to the relevant overview and scrutiny panel, subject to the petition containing the names and addresses of at least 10 persons who live or work or own property in the District;
- that in the event of an excessive number of petitions being organised by any one individual, the Corporate Governance Panel be requested to consider amending the vexatious complainants procedure accordingly; and
- that the Corporate Governance Panel recommend the Council to approve the necessary constitutional changes.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report by E-Forums working group submitted to Overview & Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 11th September 2007.

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