Smart phone trial 2018

Overall Summary:

Eight ward members volunteered to undertake a smartphone trial to assist Herefordshire Council to assess whether smartphone technology could form part of the council's ICT offer to members. The trial was run over a four month period and included gathering evidence on:

- **The usage** – with quantitative information gathered on data usage, frequency of calls made/received and monthly costs; with quantitative information gathered on ICT support requested/provided and the level of cost and complexity associated with that support;
- **Triangulation** – with other local authorities where members are using smart phones to assess their policies on allocation/supply; the usefulness of this technology to members and what their costs and/or cost savings have been since the introduction of this technology.
- **Member feedback** – gathering qualitative feedback from members involved in the trial about their experiences and main usage patterns

Key outcomes of the trial:

Usage:

There have been a few issues/ improvements identified with such phones occasionally not registering on the network and occasional unreliability of the Biometric access systems. As a result of these early observations the original handsets issued as part of the trial were replaced with a higher specification model which addressed some of these manufacturer issues.

Settings on the phones meant that if it was not used for 24 hours the phone would not allow access via the biometrics and you have to put your pin in.   On two occasions during the trial, smartphones were taken on non-work related overseas trips, in both instances members were able to stay securely in touch with their council emails. No other technology related issues were registered and on the whole, phones were felt to be reliable and secure.

Triangulation:

It is important to note that this trial of smartphone technology was undertaken as a result of the widespread use of smartphone technology within the professional work environment. To some extent, Herefordshire Council could be considered a 'late adopter' of such technology. Observations drawn from the working practices of other local authorities have identified similar benefits to those experienced in this trial. Key observations drawn from reviewing other local authorities ICT Policies where that smartphones are in use and have indicated some common themes. These can be summarised as follows:

- Acknowledgement that as we move into a mainstream digital era assistive digital technologies need to evolve with local authority ways of working;
- Greater flexibility within the workforce as a whole can be realised by adopting new technologies such as smartphones. For example, many local authorities, like Herefordshire, are rationalising their estates.   They are able to do this not just because of budgetary pressures but because more flexible working means that less office space is required;
- ICT costs are reducing meaning that ICT options are becoming more affordable and therefore more mainstream;
- As broadband and mobile infrastructure is being improved, smartphone technology becomes more reliable and necessary;
- As was tested in Herefordshire several years ago, other local authorities have found that local authority supported devices is a more manageable option. Where members have been

given the opportunity to purchase their own devices costs and reliability can be diminished. Local authority purchasing means that greater value for money can be achieved (due to economies of scale) and device protection systems can be consistently applied.

Member feedback:

The eight ward members involved in the trial have all utilised their smartphones to varying degrees. Five of the eight members involved in the trial also travel extensively within and outside of the county as part of their council business or as a result of their other professional work commitments. The phones have enabled members to receive and reply to their council emails while travelling and/or working remotely from the council's offices. Key feedback from members has indicated that:

- They have found they are responding to their constituents a lot faster with constituents being appreciative of the speed of replies members were able to provide.
- For those members who routinely commute to work – the phones have been 'extremely beneficial' as their time travelling can be used to deal with council business as opposed to replying once they have returned home via their lap-tops.
- Members have also found the calendars useful as it provides reminders and prompts in connection to council business and meetings.
- Some members have noted that phones also provided better access to their council emails than connecting via their lap-tops and local broadband. The mobile signal was more reliable and faster than the broadband connection in that part of the county.
- The phones have been used slightly less for viewing committee agendas and minutes -the screens are too small to view large volumes of text in committee papers.
- The majority of the members involved in the trial also noted the benefits of not having to always take their council provided lap-tops whenever they travel. This enables members to travel without the need to take their lap-tops with them.
- When asking members whether their working practices would have been improved as a result of adopting smartphone technology all members involved with the trial have indicated that it has been.
- Voice recognition worked well with some members in the trial using this assistive technology to good effect
- Members would like to see a bit more symmetry with their lap-top programmes. For example members would like the email system to enable them to access sub folders and to enable use of voting buttons when members are asked to indicate their availability/attendance at meetings. In addition, members would like the council to explore whether the smartphones can be integrated with the Council's pull-print systems and would like the modern.gov app installed on any future smartphone roll-out to enable them to review council papers more easily.