

STRATA - JOINT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER 2020

Present:

Councillors Clarence, Hookway, King, Nuttall, Oliver, Sparkes, Twiss and Atkinson

Members Attendance:

Councillors Millar and Wrigley

Apologies:

Councillors Orme

Officers in Attendance:

Simon Davey, Strata Board Director

David Hodgson, Strata Service Director

Laurence Whitlock, Strata IT Director

Robin Barlow, Head of Security & Compliance

Martin Millmow, Head of Document Centres

David Sercombe, Head of Business Systems & Business Intelligence

Adrian Smith, Head of Infrastructure & Support

Peter Johns, Head of IT Solution Delivery

12. ELECTION OF CHAIR

Based on the existing annual rotation for the position of Chair, Councillor Twiss proposed that Councillor Atkinson representing Exeter City Council be elected Chair for the 2020/21 Municipal Year. This was seconded by Councillor Sparks, and

RESOLVED That Councillor Atkinson be elected Chair

13. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 January, 2020 were approved as a correct record. The minutes would be signed at a future date when practicable.

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

15. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER PROCEDURAL RULES

None.

16. QUESTION FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCILS UNDER PROCEDURE RULES

The following questions have been submitted by Councillor Millar of East Devon District Council. Answers were provided and circulated prior to the meeting.

Question 1

To ask the Committee, to confirm the total cost of purchasing Member iPads at East Devon District Council including maintenance and repairs, and to share all relevant papers containing the business case with Councillors.

Answer

In March 2018, Strata submitted a discussion document to the three authorities to present options for the support of councillor IT (attached).

Previously councillors provided their own IT, and there was an expectation that Strata would be able to support this privately owned IT.

One option that was presented was for the authority to provide councillors with a portable device enabling councillors to access emails, calendars, documents and the Modern Gov environment in a more consistent and supported manner. This enabled TDC and EDDC councillors to operate in a similar way to ECC councillors who had been using authority provisioned tablet devices for five years.

After internal debate within EDDC and TDC, Strata were advised to proceed with the purchase of portable devices for councillors and a project was initiated to procure, build, test and deploy Apple iPad devices to councillors.

EDDC made a decision to purchase the Apple iPad 12.9 inch Pro WiFi 64Gb for each councillor (see attached invoice)

TDC decided to purchase a smaller iPad device for each councillor, at a cheaper price.

The total cost for EDDC based on a five year usage of the Apple iPad devices is :

Total five year cost = £ 48,104

This cost is made up of :

- Application licensing included in Strata Core Licensing and base budgets.
- Councillor support provided as part of the Strata Service Desk service
- Councillor training provided as part of the Strata IT Training service.
- Initial iPad cost £ 47,089
- Current repair costs of £1,015

The costs for the devices were included and approved in the 2019/2020 budget process, ultimately by council in February 2019.

After deployment of the devices some councillors raised concern that they needed to be able to access emails, calendars from private devices (in addition to the iPad devices provide by the authority). To provide this functionality and to deliver access in a secure manner, Strata needed to purchase additional Microsoft O365 licences and Mimecast email security filtering.

The cost of this additional functionality over five years for the councillors who requested (36) this level of access is:

Total five year cost = £ 40,960

- EMS E3 Add-on (EDDC Cllrs) = £42.00 per user per year
- Mimecast Additional Email Security Filter (1st year free) £8,350 per Annum

These figures were presented to EDDC and they authorised Strata to proceed.

Strata believe that the provision of iPads to the councillors across all three authorities has:

- Enabled the authorities to provide a consistent delivery of Cllr content via a single supported device
- Helped to reduce print and paper usage, which has had a positive impact on the environment and costs.
- Provided improved levels of security for council data
- Improved levels of IT support for councillors
- Provided access to IT training (should it be required) via the Strata trainer.
- Provided a platform for the deployment of the Modern Gov application making it easier for Dem Services to support councillors
- Provided councillors with a lightweight device which can be used for all council related work and can be access remotely or whilst on council premises.
- Supported the secure deployment of the Zoom platform and enabled officers and councillors to operate effectively during the Covid19 crisis.
- Enabled councillors to access emails and content securely not just from the provided device but also from privately owned devices.
- In using Strata for the deployment and support of the devices there has been no additional charge made to the three authorities.
- Enabled Strata to offer a higher degree of support to Councillors than previously has been available.
- Using a single device has removed the previous high level of support burden on Strata, meaning that we have been able to keep support costs under control and delivered savings in excess of the original expectations.

Question 2

To ask the Committee, what progress they are making in assessing the potential for hybrid meetings.

Answer

Strata has submitted a paper on a handful of technical solutions to run hybrid meetings to the Democratic Services teams of all three Councils.

The paper also highlighted some challenges that we will come with running hybrid meetings, including the anticipated number of participants for meetings. The recommended solution would change if there were 10 people in attendance to if there were 20, for example.

Strata have recommend waiting to see how Teignbridge District Council's Hybrid meeting approach performs, which we are anticipating will begin initial testing later in September. TDC purchased a solution prior to Covid19 using the Public-I solution, though the implementation was delayed because of it. The three Democratic Services teams have worked well together through the pandemic, sharing knowledge and thinking, and we are encouraging that EDDC and ECC are involved with the testing of TDC's new solution as a way of helping to assess the viability within their own councils.

EDDC Democratic Services have accepted Strata's recommendation of reviewing the TDC hybrid project.

Question 3

To ask the Committee, have any town and parish Councils in the District approached STRATA or support since the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Answer

Strata have not received any requests from either town or parish councils within EDDC since the Coronavirus Act 2020.

In August 2020, we did receive a request from Dawlish Town Council regarding GIS data and in Sept 2020, we received a request from the Devon Association of Local Councils as to whether we could assist with the provision of training services.

In previous years, Strata have received enquiries from Seaton Town Council (2017) and Dawlish Town Council (2019).

Question 4

To ask the Committee, does it remain the policy to wind up the STRATA Joint Scrutiny Committee and has this been assessed in terms of transparency and Member/democratic oversight?

Answer

The operation of Strata has been subject to scrutiny since the formation of the organisation in 2014 / 2015.

Currently there are multiple levels of governance of Strata, these include the Strata Management Team, the Strata Board, the individual IRB's of each authority, the Joint Scrutiny Committee and the Joint Executive Committee. There are also external audit controls in place to monitor the organisation both in terms of financial and process / performance, these are provided by Francis Clarke (financial auditors) and the Devon Audit Partnership.

Strata produce a highly detailed monthly report for the three authorities along with an annual Business Plan, these documents are circulated widely and are discussed at a Strata Board and individual IRB level.

After five years of the successful operation of Strata which has seen considerable achievement against the original objectives of Reduced Risk, Reduced Cost and the provision of an IT service which has capacity and capability.

Financial performance is strong with Strata delivering in excess of £1m of savings in the financial year 2019/20, this added to the savings from previous years shows the original saving targets can not only be met and exceeded.

Devon Audit Partnership has shown Strata to be of a 'Good' standard and offers substantial assurance of the IT service.

Adding all existing governance commitments together, it shows that there is already considerable scrutiny of Strata and it's operation at multiple levels by all three authorities both individually and jointly.

We feel that given the success of the Strata business the time has come to simplify the governance structure, whilst ensuring that each authority still has the ability to scrutinise Strata through individual scrutiny committees, rather than having one Strata scrutiny committee.

Our plans prior to Covid were to review the existing governance structure and to reduce the governance burden on Strata, allowing Strata to focus on the delivery of exceptional IT service.

In October 2019, Strata produced a discussion document entitled 'Governance Framework', and this was subsequently presented to the JSC and JEC and discussed with a recommendation that we undertook a review of the Shareholder Agreement and worked to put into place the required changes.

However, unfortunately this has not been progressed further at this stage due to the demands put on Strata and the management team during the Covid 19 crisis and this has had to be a priority.

Moving forward once the current level of demand drops, it is the intention of the Strata Board to re-commence the work to make the change to the governance framework of Strata.

Supplementary Questions

Councillor Millar asked supplementary questions in relation to his questions 1 and 4 above as follows:

1. The cost of the provision of Ipads and remote o365 to EDD Councillors exceeded £80,000. How open was the decision between Members and Strata?

In response the Strata Director confirmed that this was a proposal that Strata put to the authorities in 2018 to improve the support for Councillors' IT. The options were discussed by both this Committee and Strata Joint Executive. The EDDC Strata Director confirmed the above adding that the minutes of the Joint Executive were ratified by EDDC's Cabinet, both initially and again when it approved the financial implications for the option in the budget. EDDC Overview and Scrutiny Committee would have also approved the budget which included the financial implications.

2. Can there be a reconsideration of this issue because now is not the time to reduce the scrutiny role given the changing environment in which we are now working and the scrutiny work of the committee has been good.

In response the Strata Director referred to this matter being discussed at the Committee at its last meeting during the Strata governance update. It was referred for consideration to the Strata Joint Executive in June. Teignbridge District Council provide legal support to Strata, and have been engaged to look at Strata's stakeholder agreement and constitution in relation to changing the governance structure. The Covid situation has meant Strata's focus has been on the delivery of the IT service rather than on the governance framework which has been delayed. The Strata Director for EDDC confirmed that the matter would need to back to all three Councils for agreement to the constitutional changes.

The Chair referred to Minute 8 of the meeting of the Committee 13 January 2020, when the matter was discussed, and asked that it be included on the next agenda.

17. STRATA IT DIRECTOR & MANAGER'S REPORT 1 MAY TO 31 JULY 2020

The Strata IT Director referred to the report circulated with the agenda. The Covid pandemic and consequential unprecedented working environment had resulted in Strata focusing on providing and delivering the IT service and support to officers and councillors in an exemplary way, and which has enabled Strata to demonstrate its true value. Strata had to increase its skills base to provide the support needed, and had achieved much over the last few months in adapting to the needs of the authorities. This included the creation of community hubs, support with virtual councillor meetings, and moving from office to remote working for officers in a period of about two weeks. This was testament to the standard of infrastructure provided to the authorities and procurement processes to achieve the provision of hardware to enable remote working in a secure way.

In addition, the Committee noted the following: the savings delivered last year were in excess of forecasts set out in the Business Plan at over £1million; the delivery of hybrid meetings was being investigated; the availability and standard of Strata systems has been maintained during the pandemic for most of the time, being

stable, reliable, flexible and adaptable to the environment; the majority of staff were still successfully working mainly remotely, with staff migrating back into the office; employee broadband issues were out of Strata's control; demand for IT services had significantly increased; these had been dealt through the implementation of a new service desk system; and customers were happy with the service delivery based on customer satisfaction survey; support had been given to the Councils' Members during remote meetings working with democratic services; hybrid meetings were being tested at TDC before investing in other solutions at EDDC and ECC; agile working for TDC was facilitated with the roll out of laptops and docking stations and the purchase of new software to support remote working; digital mailroom was being developed and had increased to deal with remote working which enabled post to be circulated the day of delivery; ECC had brought its leisure centres back in house and Strata were assisting the authority in implementing technology to allow the leisure premises to open again over the next couple of months; the importance of investment in staff resources and IT backup, and security of data, with about 40% of incoming emails being rejected; Strata are currently in the processes of undertaking the annual IT Health Check to enable PSN certification; cyber security training would be rolled out for all authorities; the IT Solutions Delivery was keeping projects on track and helped with delivery; Strata staff had adapted to the Covid situation well, supported Strata visions, were accepting of the need for continuous improvements and development, and have an exceptional low sickness rate; the Board would be considering governance at its next meeting and how the Councils would like Strata to be governed; the 2020-21 Business Plan had been agreed by ECC and EDDC and would be considered by TDC at the end of the month; and the 2021-22 Business Plan was being prepared and would be considered by the three Councils in due course.

In response to questions the Committee were advised on password security; that internet connection of Councillors and remote meetings running on private internet feeds were outside the control of Strata. Strata had no influence or access to the networks to resolve these issues but have given advice and guidance as to how home broadband provision could be improved; an issue with Global Desktop had been identified and was in the process of being resolved but which required software to be loaded onto all council devices of which there were some 2000; and the importance of investing in security systems.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

18. STRATA BUDGET MONITORING QUATER 1 2020/21

The Strata Director for Finance referred to the agenda report relating to the financial position of Strata. Strata was given £6.6million to run the services for 2020/21. The Covid pandemic had resulted in all Councils looking for savings. Additional Strata savings have been identified at £330K due to for example, delaying staff appointments, and procurement adjustments, resulting in a forecast

£1m refund to the 3 Councils this year. In addition, the Statement of Accounts 2019/20 which had been signed off by the Auditors. The Director explained the differences between a company and a Council in terms of financial management and practices, which enables Strata to return a refund to the Councils at year end.

RESOLVED

The report be noted.

19. STRATA ICT AUDIT SUMMARY 2019/20 DEVON AUDIT PARTNERSHIP

The Strata Director referred to the Devon Audit Partnership, an organisation which works with Strata. An audit plan is produced at the beginning of the year in relation to Strata services which measures performance and effectiveness, particularly project management and delivery and cyber security. The Audit concluded that the three Councils has substantial assurance that Strata can fulfil its role as the IT service provider with an adequate internal control framework.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

20. LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 - EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item particular on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

21. BUSINESS CASE FOR THE NEW FINANCE SYSTEM

The Committee referred to the agenda report. The strata Manager reported on the business case following its presentation to the Joint Executive Committee in June 2020.

RECOMMENDED

The Strata Joint Executive Committee is recommended to approve the recommendations set out in the report.

CLLR Y ATKINSON
Chairman