

To: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 4 June 2019
Report of: Chief Executive
Title of Report: Accessibility and disability support review

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To update the Scrutiny Committee on the accessibility and disability support review.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Members:	Councillor Linda Smith, Leisure and Housing (including Member Support) Councillor Mary Clarkson, Culture and City Centre (including the Town Hall)
Corporate Priority:	Efficient and Effective Council Strong and Active Communities
Recommendation(s): That the Scrutiny Committee:	
1. Notes and comments on the report and the options for improving Town Hall access.	

Appendices
1. Access Audit Report of Oxford Town Hall and St. Aldate's Chambers, Jane Topliss Associates Ltd., June 2018

Introduction and background

1. In January 2018 the Chief Executive convened an officer working group tasked with reviewing how the Council meets the needs of elected members and election candidates with disabilities. The working group involved officers from Community Services (the Town Hall), Committee and Member Services, ICT and HR and engaged with members and election candidates with disabilities.
2. This report provides an update to the Scrutiny Committee on the work undertaken to date which has focused on the following issues:
 - a. Election arrangements
 - b. Induction, buddying and support for councillors
 - c. Meeting arrangements

- d. Provision for reasonable adjustments
- e. ICT
- f. Town Hall access
- g. Audio visual equipment
- h. Hearing Loops

Election arrangements

3. In advance of the City Council elections on 3 May 2018 the Working Group considered the arrangements for the count venue to ensure that it would be fully accessible and suitable for all candidates to participate in the count process and declaration of results. The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that the Electoral Commission has clear rules on accessibility standards for polling stations and count venues. It was also confirmed that candidates did not access the main stage (which is not accessible by wheelchair) when results of local elections were declared.
4. The Working Group identified that it would be useful for election candidates with disabilities to have a familiarisation tour of the Town Hall building in advance of the count. This was offered to candidates via Group Leaders and Councillor Tidball and was attended by three candidates and one serving councillor. Feedback from candidates highlighted issues with door handles, signage/maps, lighting, the positioning of members' pigeon holes and the accessibility of the Council Chamber. Attendees also suggested that welcome pack and induction materials should be made available online as well as in paper formats.
5. The Elections Team and Town Hall staff also made specific accessibility arrangements to enable one councillor to attend the count, which were not required on the night.

Induction, buddying and support for councillors

6. Post-election, all new and returning members received a welcome pack (in electronic or hard copy) and undertook an induction programme and compulsory training. One lesson learnt is that the training would have been more accessible had training materials such as slides been made available to members in advance.
7. All new and returning councillors were asked to declare any special requirements and, where appropriate, offered the chance to discuss their personal needs with the Council's Occupational Health provider. One member met with Occupational Health and this option remains available to all councillors. It is expected that any needs identified by Occupational Health could be met from the budget Council has allocated for reasonable adjustments for members with disabilities (see paragraph 14).
8. New members were also assigned a "buddy" from within the Committee and Member Services Team to provide general support and advice as they settled into their roles, including regular face to face meetings and telephone conversations in the early months. In 2018 buddies were given a checklist of items to discuss with new members and this checklist included items related to disabilities / special requirements to ensure that these would be identified.
9. In early 2019 all members elected in 2018 were asked to provide feedback about the support they received during their early months in office to inform future induction and support arrangements and ensure that members' needs were being met. A number of questions were posed, including whether members had

experienced any particular barriers in standing for election and becoming a councillor and whether they found the induction and support arrangements accessible for their particular needs. The feedback received was very positive, particularly in respect of buddying, and no disability-related barriers or accessibility issues were raised.

10. In response to feedback from members including the Members Mental Health Challenge Panel on the need for pastoral support to be made available to members around mental health, access to the Council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) has been extended to include elected members. The EAP was commissioned to provide all Council employees and their families with support, information, expert advice and specialist counselling to help prepare for life's predictable milestones and its unexpected events. Members have been notified of this support by email and leaflets have been placed in members' pigeon holes.
11. Members have also been given access to the corporate Mental Health First Aiders; officers who have undertaken a two-day mental health first aid course and can be a first point of contact during normal office hours to provide support, guidance and reassurance to anyone who feels they may need it. Outside of these hours members and officers can access support from the EAP as well as other agencies such as the Samaritans and MIND.

Meeting arrangements

12. Consideration has been given to adjusting meeting practices to support members with disabilities in playing a full part in Council meetings, for example by being mindful of members' requirements when allocating seats and asking presenters to circulate slides in advance and to vocalise any visual elements. Some specific arrangements have been made in particular cases:
 - Paper copies of meeting agendas have been sent to a councillor's home address (the expectation is that councillors will access meeting packs online).
 - A councillor has been provided with pointers on which pages of agenda packs they may wish to focus on.
13. At the Council meeting in July 2018 two members attended in wheelchairs. In one case this presented logistical challenges as the members' normal seat in the Council Chamber was not in a position that can be accessed in a standard wheelchair. A personal carer and staff from the Town Hall and Committee and Member Services were able to assist this member to and from their normal seat but this would not be a sustainable solution (see also paragraph 17).
14. At the Council meeting on 13 February 2019, the passenger lift in the Town Hall was out of service due to a breakdown so there was no wheelchair access to the Council Chamber or to the room where the meeting was screened live (the public gallery is not wheelchair accessible in any event). This issue was notified on the Council website and social media and no one who tried to access the meeting was unable to do so. Officers are actively working on a technical solution to enable the online live streaming of full Council meetings and all political groups have confirmed their support for this approach.

Provision for reasonable adjustments

15. In February 2018 Council amended its Councillors' Allowances scheme based on the recommendations of its Independent Remuneration Panel. The agreed

changes included making provisions within the scheme for reasonable adjustments for councillors with a permanent or temporary disability and allocating a specific budget for this purpose from April 2018 (currently £3k per annum). The Committee and Member Services Manager has authority to pay the costs of reasonable adjustments up to a maximum of £1k per councillor per year and the Head of Law and Governance can exercise discretion to approve spend in excess of this figure.

16. To date this budget has largely been used to cover councillors' costs of travelling to and from meetings within the City of Oxford boundary. To facilitate the transportation of members to and from Council meetings as a reasonable adjustment, Committee and Member Services have opened a corporate taxi account with Royal Cars. This is charged to the budget for reasonable adjustments, negating the need for members to pay upfront, retain receipts and submit claim forms for these journeys.
17. The budget for reasonable adjustments has also been used to cover 50% of the purchase cost of a specific piece of equipment. This was a narrower than standard wheelchair to enable a councillor to gain access to their seat in the Council Chamber. The budget and spend on reasonable adjustments will be kept under review annually to ensure that sufficient provision is available.

ICT

18. The online provision of Council information is generally considered to be the best approach for most people with disabilities as it allows them to use devices, hardware and software that is appropriate to their specific needs. The preferred approach of ICT has been to identify what devices and software councillors with declared disabilities already use and explore how these can be made to work with the Council's member endpoint solution. In May 2018 all new and re-elected councillors with declared disabilities were offered the chance to discuss their personal needs with an officer from ICT.
19. One member found that the accessibility software installed on their device did not function correctly when used in a Citrix environment, which necessitated a workaround solution. As a result of this and other issues, ICT are replacing Citrix with a more up-to-date system from Microsoft. Accessibility testing will be included in the testing of the new system to ensure all existing software is compatible, or can be substituted with a more recent compatible alternative.
20. Committee and Member Services have an objective to review the requirements of the new Accessibility Regulations for public bodies, which aim to make all web content accessible from September 2020, and to ensure compliance in respect of content published through the Modern.gov system and app.

Accessibility of the Town Hall

21. With the intention of improving the accessibility of the Town Hall and St. Aldate's Chamber for all visitors, staff and councillors, the Town Hall Commercial Manager commissioned accessibility audits of the buildings from Jane Topliss Associates Ltd., specialist consultants with experience of historic buildings who had done work with the Council before. The consultants met with a disability user group as part of this work. A final report has been received which includes a series of detailed recommendations. The summary report is attached as Appendix 1.

22. The report compiled by Jane Topliss Associated Ltd. raised numerous outcomes and possibilities. The Disability Working Group agreed that the Town Hall accessibility issues were of significant importance to all user groups to justify setting up a separate officer group, including officers from Property Services and Conservation, to review the accessibility audits in detail and take this work forwards.
23. It was identified that resolution of all the issues raised in the reports would require a very significant financial commitment from the Council, so it was necessary to properly consider the findings and reach a considered view about the Council's priorities for improving Town Hall access. The larger and more costly items, such as those that would require building alterations, would need to be further prioritised and, subject to Council making funding available, progressed incrementally. The Officer Group identified the following areas for further consideration.

Emergency procedures

24. Town Hall and Health & Safety personnel are currently reviewing the emergency procedures for the venue as recommended in the report and are also consulting with a fire consultant on these new procedures. The aim is to have these live by mid-way through 2019. From the initial work with the consultant there may be a need to increase staffing levels for certain events which are not within the current staffing budget and to utilise other staff as Fire Marshalls throughout the building.

Map & Signage

25. The signage has only recently been installed in 2017, so the preferred option is to create a new map available at reception for easier navigation around the facility. Officers have worked with a design consultant to create this new map, to be funded from the Town Hall budget. This map will be available in the second quarter of 2019 as a download from the Council website with hard copies available on site. The Town Hall website will also have a new access page so users will be able to plan their visit in advance.

Accessible Entrance

26. Improvements to the main entrance would be ideal but due to the very high costs and need for building alterations this solution is not advisable. The favoured solution is to re-work the current accessible entrance by:
- Improved signage in and outside the Town Hall (£4-5k);
 - Making the entrance more noticeable and welcoming, removing any access restriction currently in place;
 - Automatic doors right through to the reception area (£10k).

Accessible Toilets

27. Access to the toilets with the current doors is problematic to disabled users. Property Services are working on closures on these doors to provide easier access to the main disabled toilet on the ground floor, this is being done from the current property budget. There are another two disabled toilets which will require further works to improve access at a cost of around £10k.

Floor Level Changes

28. The two main floor level changes are on the approaches to the café and the Court Room. There are platform lifts in place which are slow to use. As with all lifting equipment these platform lifts are on a replacement schedule. The options provided in the access report would be at a very high cost and would impact on toilet provision on the ground floor. The proposed approach is to replace these with

improved lifts with a higher specification and improved usability ahead of schedule. To ensure the correct lift is procured a consultant would be required at a cost of around £5k. To purchase and install both lifts there would be an estimated cost of £25k.

Reception Desk

29. The proposed action in the access report is to create a drop down level in the current desk for wheelchair users. Due to the size of the current desk and the services installed, to create lower access level a new desk would be required at an anticipated cost of around £30k. The proposed approach would be to leave the desk as it currently is given that no user complaints or comments have been received on the issue.

Lighting

30. The Town Hall currently has a light replacement programme, moving to LED lighting where possible on a phased approach. This approach will address lighting issues identified in the access report.

Main Hall Stage

31. Currently there is no provision to allow wheelchair access to the stage in the Main Hall. There would be an option of creating a permanent in built access, however this would either reduce the stage capacity or the floor space which would have an adverse effect for certain events. The proposed approach would be to purchase a mobile platform lift to allow access to the stage. A company recommended by Jane Topliss Associated Ltd stocks these lifts at a cost of £7k. An annual maintenance agreement would need to be put in place.

Doors

32. The doors in places throughout the venue are narrow or heavy and could be improved with new handles for easier access. This may be difficult due to impact on heritage significance but this can be looked into. In the public areas of the Town Hall on the ground and first floors, there are 19 double doors and 24 single doors that should be improved. The estimated costs are £3k for a single door and £6k for a double door, so overall a cost of £186k. Comments from users regarding the doors have been minimal so it may be advisable to prioritise certain doors to reduce the cost.

Council Chamber

33. This is the room that poses the most issues for use by people with disabilities. The starting point would be to undertake a feasibility study and produce an options paper. This would have to be worked through with key stakeholders, for example Historic England. To undertake a feasibility study would cost around £25k. Council meetings could be held in the Assembly Room as an alternative if the Council Chamber was unsuitable for disabled attendees.

Audio Visual Equipment

34. Audio specialists Oxford Audio were commissioned to conduct a full survey and condition report of the audio visual (AV) facilities in Town Hall meeting rooms. Oxford Audio recommended works including new sound systems in the Assembly Room, Old Library and Long Room, replacement of portable televisions and screens and other maintenance and improvements. The estimated cost would be £133k, or £173k with the addition of a wireless conference system in the Assembly

Room. These improvements would enhance the accessibility of public meetings and improve the Town Hall's commercial offer.

Wi-Fi

35. The internal Wi-Fi network for councillors and officers has been upgraded. The cost of upgrading the Wi-Fi for customers and visitors would be between £25k & £40k and to boost the 4G signal would cost a further £8k. As well as improving accessibility for the public, these upgrades would improve the package the Town Hall could offer commercially.

Hearing loop systems

36. Action on Hearing Loss was commissioned to review the condition of the hearing loop systems in the Town Hall and St. Aldate's Chambers. A working group of staff with hearing impairments assisted with this project.
37. The Town Hall has a hearing loop system available in 7 of the 13 meeting and events rooms (rooms detailed below). The audit found that all systems work to aid the user apart from the Main Hall system which requires modifications. These works will be covered through the Town Hall budget. It was also recommended that these systems are serviced on an annual basis which will now be programmed in.
- Plowman Room
 - St. Aldates Room
 - Main Hall
 - Assembly Room
 - Old Library
 - Long Room
 - Council Chamber
38. The hearing loop systems in St. Aldate's Chambers were found to be not fit for purpose. Working with Action for Hearing Loss new systems have now been installed into five meeting rooms. Other rooms were checked and found to be unsuitable for a hearing loop system.

Conclusion and next steps

39. This report summarise the work undertaken to date as part of the accessibility and disability support review. The Council strives to ensure that councillors receive the support they need in an inclusive environment and while much of this work now represents business as usual, feedback and suggestions are always welcome.
40. The report also details proposals for improving Town Hall access. Some identified improvement works have or will be taken forwards within existing resources while others would require Council to allocate funding and their delivery would be subject to resource capacity. Indicative costs are provided for information and any new spending commitments would need to be considered in next year's and future budget rounds in the context of the Council's overall finances.
41. The Council is also undertaking a wider Equality Review over the coming year, covering the Council's delivery of services and its communication with Oxford's diverse communities. It is envisaged that the ongoing work on accessibility and disability support will form a key strand of the inclusive governance theme of that review.

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