

Item 9 - Question Time

To the Chair of the Corporate Resources Committee

“It was recently highlighted that this Council is being charged £55,000 to upgrade Internet Explorer on its computers. That amount of money is equivalent to two full time salaries for a whole year.

Can I ask how such an extortionate charge for free software has arisen so early in the new IT contract and how many more scenarios like this can we expect to see for the remainder of this contract?”

Response to Mr G Cruickshank

It is correct that Internet Explorer is free software. However an upgrade of a core software component in an estate as complex as the Council's is not a straightforward process.

A number of the Council's key applications, such as the social work and payroll systems, rely on Internet Explorer for access to the system. In addition to the Internet Explorer web browser there will be a number of add-on components such as Java that are also required for systems to run.

It is vital that full testing is carried out on these key systems with any upgraded software components to ensure there is no loss of functionality, and to make changes to configurations where required. To add to the complexity the Council is also running with 4 separate environments – schools, corporate, Citrix “thin client” and the public access computers in libraries. To further complicate matters all changes have to be in line with the PSN security requirements and this usually involves testing by an external independent company. All this makes such an upgrade in the Council environment very different from a simple upgrade on a home computer.

The costs for such a work package will be a mixture of project management (as there are a number of strands of work to coordinate) and technical. Those skills are charged to the Council based on a contractual rate card and the number of days required to complete the work is agreed up front as far as possible. For this particular work package certain elements were unknown at the start so some work was carried out on a time and materials basis. That work was up to an agreed ceiling which has not been breached.

The £55,000 cost for this piece of work was split between the Council's former supplier (Fujitsu) and new supplier (Wipro) as this was one of the projects that was ongoing as the Council transitioned from one contract to the other. The bulk of the costs fell with Fujitsu (approx. £43,000). Undoubtedly there was some additional cost involved due to a handover from supplier to another but that was unavoidable.

There will always be additional projects and work packages arising in the Council's ICT environment and these will often mean additional cost on top of the core contract value. However a lot of scrutiny goes into any proposals from suppliers and all costs presented in a transparent manner as per the overall contract requirements. Funding for additional works is either met from ICT Revenue or Capital Budgets, or Service Budgets as appropriate, and will form part of this initial scrutiny which will assess the technical requirements, business necessity, and investment requirement.