

CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

26 November 2009

**REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Children and Young People – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Cunningham

WiFi in Schools – Stockton Borough Council's Position

1. Summary

This report gives the current position regarding use of WIFI in schools, identifying the concerns that have been raised and the response to these concerns as provided by the Health Protection Agency, including reports back on current research into this issue. The HPA remain the Council's source of expert scientific advice on radiation issues and the Council have contacted them directly to ensure decisions made regarding our schools are in compliance with both existing standards and the latest authoritative scientific evidence. The Council policy regarding WIFI or any electromagnetic radiation issues in schools is to closely follow and adhere to guidance from BECTA and the HPA.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended to Cabinet that:

- R1 The contents of the report be noted and to confirm that Council policy regarding electromagnetic radiation issues shall continue to be to follow and adhere to guidance from BECTA and the HPA.

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

In order to ensure consistent and proportionate decisions regarding the use of WIFI in Stockton's schools are made based on authoritative scientific advice.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (**paragraph 8**) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with

knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest (**paragraphs 10 and 11 of the code of conduct**).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting considering the business is being held -

- in a case where the Member is attending a meeting (including a meeting of a select committee) but only for the purpose of making representations, answering questions or giving evidence, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under statutory right or otherwise, immediately after making representations, answering questions or giving evidence as the case may be;
- in any other case, whenever it becomes apparent that the business is being considered at the meeting;

and must not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (**paragraph 12 of the Code**).

Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc; whether or not they are a Member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting (unless the interest arises solely from the Member's membership of, or position of control or management on any other body to which the Member was appointed or nominated by the Council, or on any other body exercising functions of a public nature, when the interest only needs to be declared if and when the Member speaks on the matter), and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room, subject to and in accordance with the provisions referred to above.

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MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET DECISION

Children and Young People – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Cunningham

WiFi in Schools – Stockton Borough Council's Position

Summary

This report gives the current position regarding use of Wireless Fidelity (WIFI) in schools, identifying the concerns that have been raised and the response to these concerns as provided by the Health Protection Agency (HPA), including reports back on current research into this issue. The HPA remain the Council's source of expert scientific advice on radiation issues and the Council have contacted them directly to ensure decisions made regarding our schools are in compliance with both existing standards and the latest authoritative scientific evidence. The Council policy regarding WIFI or any electromagnetic radiation issues in schools is to closely follow and adhere to guidance from BECTA and the HPA.

Recommendations

It is recommended to Cabinet that:

- R1 The contents of the report be noted and to confirm that Council policy regarding electromagnetic radiation issues shall continue to be to follow and adhere to guidance from BECTA and the HPA.

DETAIL

1. Concerns have been raised regarding the use of WIFI on wireless local area networks in schools. In particular a local pressure group PAMT (A Precautionary Approach to Microwave Technologies) have raised a number of electromagnetic radiation issues regarding Hartburn Primary school, including the use of WIFI.
2. PAMT have also expressed concerns regarding electromagnetic radiation from mobile telephone masts. There are no masts on the Hartburn school site but are in the locality. Queries regarding these masts have been answered separately and are not included in this report as they are not under the direct control of Stockton Borough Council and are subject to the Planning process.
3. In Stockton 55 out of 61 Primary Schools have WIFI installed and 11 out of 13 Secondary Schools. These installations cover either the whole school or selected areas. Hartburn Primary school installed WiFi shortly after October 2007
4. More Detail regarding the use of WIFI in schools is provided in the attached briefing note along with links to web sites to source more technical information.(attachment 1)

5. Scientific opinion differs regarding the risks involved in use of WIFI. There are a number of scientists who claim that there is a potential risk involved over and above that of the known thermal effect for which current standards are based (ICNIRP). However, studies carried out to date have not provided clear evidence that these technologies are harmful and many have not been published in recognised scientific journals where they would be exposed to rigorous scientific scrutiny.
6. The HPA continually review research published in science journals and formulate their advice and guidance based on the scientific consensus at the current time. They also carry out their own research the most recent of which is currently in progress and anticipated to be concluded in 2010.
7. The HPA is an independent body set up by Act of Parliament in 2004 to provide government and others with independent scientific advice on infectious, chemical and radiation hazards. The advice and guidance of the HPA is relied upon by BECTA, the LGA, HSE and all local authorities in the UK.
8. Stockton Borough Council do not have the expertise available to assess the credibility of the scientific reports and opinions available on electromagnetic radiation issues. We therefore rely on BECTA and HPA guidance. The HPA have been contacted regarding issues raised by PAMT and Dr Michael Clark from the HPA visited on 8th September 2009. He provided answers to PAMT's questions as covered in the meeting (attachment 2).
9. The HPA sees no reason why WIFI should not continue to be used in schools. However as with any new technology it is a sensible precautionary approach, as happened with mobile phones, to keep the situation under ongoing review.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10. There are no direct financial implications with regard to this issue. However, WiFi is now in place in the majority of schools in Stockton, with either the whole school or selected areas being covered. Hard-wired access points do exist within schools, the number of which varies according to the particular learning spaces. Replacement of WiFi with additional hard-wired connections would be about £35 per network point. A classroom which currently has one or two network points would cost approximately £1000-£1500 to hard-wire the whole room.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

11. None

RISK ASSESSMENT

12. The Council's position regarding use of WIFI in schools is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk at the present time.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS

Economic Regeneration and Transport

13. No significant impact

Safer Communities

14. No significant impact

Children and Young People

15. The use of WIFI in schools contributes to the transformation of education in both Primary and Secondary Schools hence supporting the Enjoy and Achieve outcomes of the five ECM outcomes

Health and Well-being

16. This report deals with the potential health risks to children of using WIFI within Primary Schools and considers the advice and evidence available

Environment and Housing

17. No significant impact

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

18. This report is not subject to an Equality Impact Assessment because the report is not seeking Cabinet approval for a new policy, strategy or change in the delivery of a service.

CORPORATE PARENTING

19. The content of this report will apply to looked after children who will attend many of the Primary Schools in Stockton on Tees

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD/COUNCILLORS

20. No specific consultation exercise has been undertaken however the Hartburn ward councillors and cabinet members have been heavily involved in issues relating to PAMT and WIFI in Hartburn School.

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Background Papers

Appendix 1 – Briefing Notes WI-FI in Schools, Stockton Borough Councils Position

Appendix 2 – Response to questions from PAMT by Dr Michael Clark, HPA dated 03/11/09

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors:

Hartburn Ward - Councillor Ken Lupton and Councillor Terry Laing

Property

The report will have an impact on all of the Council's schools as removal of WIFI is likely to require structural alteration to the property.

