

Council to spend £400,000 on new computers for libraries – existing software “outdated”

Computers in Edinburgh’s public libraries running on outdated software have been described as ‘not fit for purpose’, as the council pledges to spend over £400,000 on new equipment.

PCs in the city’s libraries which are free for the public to use, are currently installed with Microsoft Windows 7, which was launched in 2008.

Although Microsoft ended product support for the operating system (OS) in 2020, the council has continued to receive “extended support” which is “unlikely to be available beyond July 2022”, a report to councillors states.

It adds the computers are too old to be compatible with later versions of the OS and that a complete overhaul of Edinburgh’s public computers and internet, also known as the ‘People’s Network’ (PN), will be required by the end of June.

Between April 2019 and March 2020, computers and internet at Edinburgh’s 28 public libraries were accessed 232,596 times by 78,828 different users. Since reopening in May 2021, with limited occupancy due to Covid-19 restrictions, there were 11,452 internet and computer bookings up until the end of November.

It is estimated that it will cost the council £429,000 to buy new equipment and software.

The report, which will go before members of the Culture and Communities Committee on Tuesday states this will “greatly improve the network’s digital offer, widen its appeal for citizens by modernising the library service to better meet the needs of users (e.g. introducing wireless printing and providing more up to date software such as Microsoft Office Professional); and future proof the service”.

It adds: “This investment cost has been minimised and demonstrates best value for the Council by re-purposing (recycling) existing Council computer desktops (hardware) (which helps to make for a more sustainable solution, avoiding the unnecessary and costly purchase of new equipment).”

Of the funding required, the council is reallocating £350,000 originally set aside to get Edinburgh’s libraries set up with ‘Open Plus’ technology, which “interfaces with the Library computer system and self-service kiosks to enable customers to have access to basic library services”.

Used to open and close libraries and control and monitor equipment in the library including door access, security gates and lights, Open Plus allows premises to operate without any staff present and offer more flexible opening hours.

However, the council said its research has concluded the success of the system in Edinburgh’s libraries “would require significant improvements in library Information and Communication Technology (ICT)” and “indicated that Open Plus is best installed as part of a new library provision or refurbishment, where the technology can be considered as part of the overall design rather than retrofitted within an existing library layout”.

It added its libraries service “concluded that the Library ICT

technology provision, including challenges of reliability which were experienced with the Library Management System at that time, presented a risk to the potential success of Open Library and, as a result, Open Plus has not been implemented in Edinburgh and the capital funding has been rolled-forward”.

And whilst the roll-out of Open Plus will now not go ahead in public libraries, the council says the model has been incorporated into design plans for the new Macmillan Hub at Muirhouse and Ratho Hub.

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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