Comparison Microsoft 365 and Local Council Community Cloud

Introducing Microsoft 365

Microsoft 365 is a product family of productivity software, collaboration and cloud-based services owned by Microsoft, designed for general use for both personal and private sector users. Users can access Office Suite and other programs through a web browser or locally installed applications.

Most council customers provide the web-browser version to councillors in order to reduce license costs and support issues related to installing software on councillors' own devices.

Amongst other things, Microsoft 365 includes:

- Microsoft Office, enabling users to edit documents, presentations, etc
- SharePoint, enabling users to share documents, and to collaborate. Where permissions allow, multiple users are able to edit documents simultaneously.
- Microsoft Teams* web conferencing and messaging

Microshade VSM support a number of customers using Microsoft 365, and would be happy to the same for Kidlington Parish Council. However, we believe there are good reasons to use Local Council Community Cloud.

* The European court has ruled that including Teams as part of the Microsoft 365 bundle is anti-competition. This is a developing situation, however currently the expectation is that Microsoft Teams will be removed from the Microsoft 365 bundle.

Introducing Local Council Community Cloud

A community cloud is designed for multiple organisations with common operational and regulatory requirements.

Local Council Community Cloud is designed specifically for the local council sector, providing applications and services from solution specialists in the sector. Applications can be delivered via an app or a web-browser.

Applications are delivered via Citrix Virtual Apps, a system designed with security at its heart. Citrix specialise in securely delivering applications and services to user's desktops, and this solution is used for secure collaboration by many global enterprises around the world, and government bodies in tier1 and tier 2.

For Kidlington Parish Council we deliver to staff and officers:

- Microsoft Office
- Rialtas accounts, bookings, and cemetery management
- Pear Mapping, with cemetery maps linked to Rialtas

- VSMShare, enabling officers to share documents read-only with councillors or other 3rd parties, accessible from any web browser on any computer or device.

Data Security

Local Council Community Cloud

All files, folders, emails and other data in our secure data centre in Plymouth, UK, under U.K. jurisdiction.

Data Security is central to Citrix systems:

- No data ever leaves the data centre: files are not copied to the local computer, even while users are editing them. This ensures that:
  - problems or viruses at the local computer cannot corrupt or infect the files.
  - in the event a device is lost, there is no risk of file data falling into the wrong hands, as it has never existed on the device.

Microsoft 365

Files, emails, and other data is held "in the Cloud" at one or more undisclosed data centre locations. The data (any data hosted by a US company, no matter where physically stored) is subject to US jurisdiction.

While Microsoft security is good, convenience and accessibility are at the forefront. Data security is an add-on, with various user licenses available each unlocking additional security tools according to how the customer's choice.

Data is generally downloaded to all devices, for convenience:

- users can continue to work without Internet
- a rigorous security policy must be pushed out to any device which logs into 365.
- as local copies of files are synchronised back to the cloud and from there to other user's devices, corruption or infection of a file at one device can be transmitted.
- in the event that a device is lost, there is a risk of data breach

Mailboxes

Microsoft 365 provides Microsoft Exchange mailboxes hosted on Microsoft's servers. Emails are accessible via webmail or a variety of local email client (Outlook etc).

Microshade VSM offer Microsoft Exchange mailboxes hosted on Microshade VSM's servers. It is exactly the same system and version as offered on Microsoft 365, and is up to date to the latest updates published April 23rd. Emails accessible via webmail or a variety of local email client (Outlook etc), exactly the same as Microsoft 365.

Spam, Malware, and Impersonation Filter

Kidlington Parish Council originally migrated their mailboxes to Microshade VSM in response to a series of repeated incidents where councillors received spam messages containing malware, which infected the councillors' computers and enabled the sender to take over the councillor's mailbox, which was then used to send further malicious spam to their contacts and other email addresses.

Microsoft mailboxes include a basic spam filter; however, we recommend a third-party solution provided by a company specialising in email security.

Every mailbox provided my Microshade VSM is protected by Vipre advanced in-cloud spam and malware filter, which is centrally managed for efficiency and rapid incident response.

Vipre advanced in-cloud spam and malware filter has an excellent performance record for intercepting in-bound and outbound spam, and includes:

- Impersonation filter developed following an incident at Kidlington Parish Council**,** to prevent spammers from using staff or councillor names in an attempt to impersonate them, which is a very common occurrence in the sector.
- Zero-day* attachment protection. Each attachment is unpacked into a sandbox in the spam filter in order to ensure there is no malicious activity
- Zero-day* link protection – links are tested on click, as hackers tend to deliver links to benign web content to bypass the spam filter, then update the web content once they know the email has been delivered

* Zero-day refers to newly emerging cyber threats that have not yet been identified and as such anti-malware programs are not able to protect against them.

Data Backup

Local Council Community Cloud includes backups and backup management included for all data, including files, folders, databases, mailboxes, etc.

- Backups are taken up to 4 times daily.
- Backup retention 2 years.
- Restore test included: all data restored monthly.
- Escrow included – an encrypted copy of all data is stored in a Firesafe at a council office local to the data centre, to be made available the unlikely event that Microshade VSM cease to trade.

Microsoft 365 does not include a backup solution. Microsoft recommend customers to find their own backup solution, and your Cyber insurance provider will almost certainly require this. Full data restore tests are not an option. Escrow is not an option to protect against your ISP ceasing to trade.

"**We strongly advise you to make regular back-up copies of Your Content.** Microsoft can't be held responsible for Your Content or the material others upload, store or share using our Services." Microsoft Services Agreement, Section 2a. https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/servicesagreement/

Anti-Malware

Microshade VSM regularly review our anti-malware provider, selecting a security specialist provider which consistently puts its solution forwards for most independent tests, and performs best.

Microsoft 365 provides back-end anti-malware and Microsoft Defender for end user devices where licensed. We recommend installation of a 3rd party solution from an organisation specialising in endpoint security.

Connection Security

All connections into or out of Local Council Community Cloud are monitored by National Cyber Security Centre (part of GCHQ). Connections from our hosted web browser to malicious website are blocked. Attempts to connect to or from malicious sources are notified to Microshade VSM support in order that we can investigate and follow up if required.

We understand that Microshade VSM are unique as a private sector organisation in being enrolled to this service, normally restricted to public sector bodies, due to our specialisation in the local council sector.

Permissions and Account Administration

Microsoft 365 expects the customer to have users (normally 2) with administration permissions, who are able to create, remove, or modify accounts and access permissions.

On Local Council Community Cloud, requests for new accounts and changes of permissions must come through Microshade VSM, where our support staff can ensure that permissions are appropriate and as intended.

Bandwidth Requirements

Local Council Community Cloud requires some bandwidth at all times, however the bandwidth requirement is extremely small as files are never downloaded, even while editing, ensuring the system works well even when bandwidth is low.

Microsoft 365 allows for documents to be synchronised locally, which means that users can continue to edit local copies even without Internet. This requires more bandwidth as for each user, files and folders are synchronised back and forth to Microsoft's data centre. The customer should consider security of local copies of sensitive data. The feature can be disabled if required.

Third Party Applications

Local Council Community Cloud seamlessly provides 3rd party applications from sector specific specialist providers. Kidlington Parish Council currently subscribe to:

- Rialtas Accounts, Facility Bookings, and Cemetery Management.
- Pear Mapping with linked cemetery maps

Microsoft 365 provides no equivalent mechanism to deliver Rialtas, Mapping, or linked Cemetery maps. Rialtas Software offer a cloud solution "Rialtas Cloud". This is in fact the same Microshade VSM service that the council currently subscribes to, re-badged with a Rialtas badge. After reviewing all delivery alternatives, including Microsoft 365, Rialtas determined that Local Council Community Cloud was the platform from which to provide Rialtas Cloud. Rialtas Cloud does not provide for linked mapping.

Supportability

Local Council Community Cloud provides for un-rivalled supportability which cannot be matched. Every user at every customer, including our own staff, is identical, and logs into one of an identical set of servers at our data centre.

When Kidlington Parish Council staff logon:

- It makes no difference what local computer the user logs in from, the user will receive the same desktop, programs and experience, whether or not the local computer has problems.
- With approximately 1000 users on the system, including our own staff, issues are quickly identified. Issues reported by one user can often be resolved before the majority of users are aware of the problem.

- Support staff are always logged into the servers, enabling rapid engagement to investigate problems at source
- Fixes are made centrally on the server without ever connecting to the user's local computer.
- Any fix made for one user applies to all users on the system, instantly
- Programs can be updated centrally and rolled out to all users instantly, without connecting to local equipment

Microsoft 365 is supportable, and Microshade VSM have a proven track record, but engagement and trouble shooting are inevitably going to be more time consuming, no matter how good the support company.

Identifying the cause of a problem will be more complex:

- Each user may be set up differently in Microsoft 365
- Users have permissions to make changes to their account, access permissions to folders, etc
- The same user may have different experience on different computers:
    - Each computer may have a different operating system
    - Each computer may be configured differently, with different apps or programs installed
    - Each computer may have different updates applied to the computer or programs
    - Microsoft Office 365 may be configured differently on computer

Problem resolution will often involve logging into the local computer and finding the credentials and logging into the customer's Microsoft 365 admin account, which delays a support company's ability to engage with the problem.

Any fix may need to be rolled out to all users on a user by user or computer by computer basis.

Responses to Statements Made by Councillors

Microshade VSM Provide an Old Version of Microsoft Exchange

This is not correct.

Our Microsoft Exchange installation was bang up to date at the time of the problem with Cllr Mawson's issue, running Exchange 2019 cu 14, which is the latest version available released in March 2024.

This is exactly the same version available through Microsoft 365.

As of April 26th the system includes the latest update for April 2024 which was released on April 23rd.

Councillors quoting "**you have to select "Exchange 2013 or Earlier**" are out of date that has not been the case for many months.

Problems Connecting to Exchange

Ian Middleton has had some issues but few. We have always responded quickly and generally resolved any issues very rapidly, except in the case of the recent problem with Cllr Mawson's computer, which is clearly a problem with the computer itself.

We have around 1000 councillors using our mail service and who do not have issues.

The System Isn't Set up to be Used with a Standalone Email Client

This is not correct. We provide Microsoft Exchange, the same as you would get from Microsoft 365. Our system is compatible with exactly the same standalone clients as Exchange from Microsoft 365.

It is Difficult to Set Up the Email Client

If you use Outlook 365 to connect to our service, it assumes that the mailbox is on Microsoft 365, and any other provider (Gmail, Yahoo, Apple mail, or our own service), you have to tell it the service is not on 365. Many people describe this as anti-competition on Microsoft's part.

The configuration process is very simple and only normally needs to be done once, unless there are reliability problems at the local computer:

- In Outlook, select "Add an account"
- Type in the email address
- Click "Configure manually"
- Select "Exchange"
- Click "Other user" and add your username and password
- That's it, your mailbox is ready to use. No need for server addresses etc

Webmail

Webmail is an option only. All email clients supported by Microsoft 365 are also supported by Microshade VSM's Microsoft Exchange service.

Webmail provided by Microshade VSM webmail is the same as provided through Microsoft 365.

Councils normally provide Councillors 365 through a web browser. Most councils provide their councillors "Microsoft 365 Basic" because (i) it is a big cost saving and (ii) it means there is almost no support overhead, because access to all programs is **via web browser** – there are no locally installed Microsoft Office programs.

Zoom vs Teams

Security Issues raised about Zoom are unfounded. Zoom is a company that specialise in secure web meetings, to the point where the phrase "Zoom meeting" has become synonymous with web meeting. The idea that Zoom meetings are insecure arose during first lock down when:

- Many other companies responded to demand for web meeting software, and flooded the market with sub-standard offerings, all of which were collectively referred to as "Zoom meetings" despite not being offered by Zoom the company. In a similar way, many people still believe they are "using the Hoover" despite their vacuum cleaner being made by Dyson or some other manufacturer.
- Many users and organisers of web meetings were inexperienced and made rookie mistakes when sending out meeting invitations, such as not using passcodes to prevent hackers joining, or even sharing meeting admin credentials with meeting invitations

Microsoft are not a specialist in web meetings.

Microsoft are being forced to remove Teams from Microsoft Office bundles. EU courts have ruled that bundling Teams with Microsoft Office is anti-competition. This is emerging information but may impact any 365 agreement that the council take up, including on-going costs.

If the council believe that Teams is a better solution than Zoom or other offerings, Teams can be used for free without adopting 365:

Microsoft Teams (free)

- Unlimited group meetings for up to 60 minutes
- Up to 100 participants per meeting
- 5 GB of cloud storage per user
- Unlimited chat with co-workers and customers
- File sharing, tasks, and polling
- Data encryption for meetings, chats, calls, and files

VSMShare

VSMShare is not "picky about platforms". It is only a website. Any web browser on any computer or device connected to the Internet can access the system in exactly the same way.

Inevitable Shift to 365

Microsoft are getting many customers – their advertising budget is hard to compete with.

However, Microshade VSM have 170 councils on our dedicated service and growing. We have seen customers leaving Local Council Community Cloud to go to 365 but equally we have customers moving the other way, from 365 to Local Council Community Cloud. more customers coming to our service than leaving it to go to 365. In addition, over 100 councils who are customers of 3rd party companies and this number is growing very quickly. This includes Rialtas Cloud. Rialtas trialled various service providers including 365, and elected ours as the most suitable platform to provide their online service.

Microshade VSM do not have the number of customers that Microsoft have, but our reputation for support leaves Microsoft far behind.

Issues with Fiona Mawson's Computer Connecting to Exchange

We found that:

- councillor Mawson's computer could not connect to our server to open the Kidlington mailbox. We tried to re-add the mailbox (standard procedure) and again the computer could not connect to our server to re-add the mailbox.
- At the same time:
    - Councillor Middleton's computer was able to connect to the service
    - I was able to add the Cllr Mawson's mailbox to my own computer, in exactly the same way that we were attempting with Cllr Mawson's computer
    - Cllr Mawson's computer was able to open the mailbox through Webmail, which narrows the problem down to the email programs on the local computer.

We concluded that this clearly demonstrates a local problem with the email programs on Councillor Mawson's computer, and that our service was fully functional. We are not engaged nor insured to carry out work on councillor's own equipment and so provided advice but had to stop working on the problem