

Recordings of Meetings 17 December 2014

Report of the Chief Officer (Governance)

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report, providing information on the costs of recording Council meetings, was requested by Council at its meeting on 22 October 2014.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Council is asked to consider the information in this report on the costs of recording Council meetings.**

1.0 Introduction

1.1 At its meeting on 22 October 2014, Council approved necessary changes to the Council's constitution to ensure consistency with the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014.

1.2 During debate, it was suggested that Council might keep its own recordings of meetings "to avoid future misrepresentation and misquotation" as a result of observers recording meetings themselves.

1.3 It was noted that there would be cost implications to the recording of meetings and Council therefore resolved:

"That a further report be brought back to Council with information on the costs of keeping its own recordings of meetings to avoid future misrepresentation and misquotation."

1.4 This report provides the necessary cost estimates and additional background information about the last time this issue was considered by Council, in 2013.

2.0 Background

2.1 On 13 May 2013, Councillor Mace proposed the following motion to Council:

"That Council adds digital recording equipment to the new system of microphones in the Council Chamber and makes recordings of council

meetings publicly available on the Council's website."

2.2 Council resolved:

"That Council asks Council Business Committee to consider adding digital recording equipment to the new system of microphones in the Council Chamber and making recordings of council meetings publicly available on the Council's web site. Council further asks Council Business Committee also consider the costs and practicalities of webcasting Council meetings as soon as possible."

2.3 Council Business Committee considered a report with costings and reported back to Council on 17 July 2013. At the Council meeting on 17 July 2013, the following motion was considered:

"That speakers in Council meetings declare their names before speaking, always use a microphone and that sound recordings be prepared on an experimental basis and made available to Members and officers on request, prior to further consideration of the subject in budget discussions for 2014/15.

That recording should stop when a restricted item is being discussed and the requirement for giving one's name and speaking into the microphone should be limited to the period of the experiment and that a further decision on continuing the experiment should be made after 3 council meetings have been recorded."

2.4 The motion was lost with 16 Members for the motion, 29 Members against and 3 abstentions.

3.0 Equipment and Installation Costs for Audio Recordings

3.1 The Democratic Services Manager has sought up to date costings for audiotaping and webcasting. A digital taping system to add on to the current microphones at Morecambe Town Hall would be in the region of £500 including installation and nine additional microphone units and two charging blocks would also need to be purchased to ensure sound quality. Currently, the microphones are £650 per unit and the charging blocks are £480 each, making a total cost of approximately £7,310.

3.2 However, the microphone system installed at Morecambe Town Hall is soon to be discontinued by the supplier, and it may not be possible to purchase new microphones and charging blocks which would be compatible with our system. Our supplier has checked stock levels of the matching units, and supplies are very low. If matching units are not available, the costs quoted above are likely to be higher because of the installation difficulties regarding compatibility.

4.0 Costing for Webcasting

4.1 The equipment, installation and ongoing costs for webcasting meetings to a sufficiently high standard are considerable. An established provider of webcast services to local authorities has provided an estimate of around £15,660 for the first twelve months which would include a total package comprising:

- leased hardware (4 cameras and cabling)
- software licence
- project management
- installation, support, maintenance and training
- 30 hours per annum content fully hosted

An exact figure could only be given if a site survey was undertaken and there are discounts for longer leases if paid up front. Examples of the standard of broadcasts can be viewed on the Lancashire County Council and Leicester City Council websites.

Whilst it would be possible to film meetings at a cheaper cost, the quality would be poor and unlikely to meet public expectations of new technology.

5.0 Additional Costs and other Issues

5.1 Staff costs also have to be taken into consideration. If audio tapes are to be put on the Council's website, there would be officer time involved in maintaining and updating the library. If recordings are to be made purely for the benefit of Members and Officers, access would have to be given on request, or the recordings uploaded to the Council's intranet, both of which would entail officer time. Any confidential or exempt items discussed could not, of course, be recorded by any method and made available to the public. The recording equipment would need to be stopped and restarted again or editing would need to take place before the files could be made available.

5.2 In addition, any recording system could only be used for full council meetings and other meetings in the Council Chamber at Morecambe Town Hall. The equipment would not be transportable to use for Committee meetings in other rooms at Morecambe Town Hall or at Lancaster Town Hall.

6.0 Misrepresentation/Misquotation

6.1 The additional costs noted above are considerable, even for a simple system of digital recording. The future risk of misrepresentation or misquotation would clearly need to be significant to justify the cost. Officer advice would be that the risk is minimal. At this point it is impossible to predict whether any members of the public or media will wish to record Council meetings and put those recordings in the public domain. It is also not clear how audio recordings would assist if someone deliberately chose to record snippets of debate at a Council meeting and piece them together to misrepresent the words said. There are many instances of high profile politicians, including the Prime Minister, who have recently been parodied by 'mashup' artists such as 'Cassetteboy' and there appears to be little that can be done about it.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Council is asked to consider the costings in this report and the financial and resource implications of recording meetings and balance those against their concerns that Members may be misrepresented or misquoted as a result of observers recording meetings.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

None.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

It should be emphasised that there is no legal requirement for the Council itself to record or film meetings. The 2014 Regulations simply permit any person attending a meeting to do so.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications of the equipment needed are set out in the report but are only rough estimates ranging from one off costs of £7,310 to costs of up to £15,660 per annum. If it is decided to go ahead with a recording system a final estimate will need to be reported and built into future year's budgets as part of the budget process. There will be some staff time involved as well, but it is expected that this will be managed within existing budgets.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**Human Resources:**

Officer time would be required to operate, maintain, edit and upload or provide access to the files.

Information Services:

Limited ICT staff resources would be required with regard to planning and implementation of a system. It is assumed that none of the audio-video files would be stored on the council's network storage facility; if this is not the case then there would be cost implications because such files, especial video ones, can be very large.

Property:

None.

Open Spaces:

None.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

If Members are minded to put forward audio recording or webcasting for consideration as part of the budget, then in order to demonstrate value for money to the taxpayer there should be a reasonable case that the investment is expected to provide worthwhile benefits, informed by the needs of potential users.

Cost/benefit analysis should inform prioritisation of budget proposals, in context of what is affordable.

Based on information to date, there is no such case presented. The S151 Officer cannot see, therefore, a reasonable basis on which to support such investment at this time.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

Contact Officer: Debbie Chambers

Telephone: 01524582057

E-mail: dchambers@lancaster.gov.uk

Ref: