

CABINET

**Morecambe Meteorological Station
16th February 2010**

Report of Corporate Director (Regeneration)

PURPOSE OF REPORT				
To consider the future of Morecambe's Meteorological Station.				
Key Decision	X	Non-Key Decision		Referral from Cabinet Member
Date Included in Forward Plan		January 2010		
This report is public.				

RECOMMENDATIONS OF COUNCILLOR THOMAS

(1) To approve Option 3 and discontinue the existing meteorological service.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Morecambe operates a Meteorological Station (Weather Station) and the current site is situated in the gardens of Morecambe Town Hall with equipment also located within the Town Hall. The service is provided by the City Council at a cost of approximately £1,500 per annum with equipment being provided by the Meteorological Office.

1.2 This report provides background information about the meteorological service and provides a number of options for maintaining, extending or terminating the provision of this service.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Meteorological Service provided up to 2004

The station has never been involved in forecasting local weather conditions and has only been involved in collecting and maintaining meteorological observations more commonly known as weather readings. The following weather readings were undertaken 365 days per year until the service was reduced in 2004.

- Morning Readings

These were carried out for 'climatological' purposes and allowed information to be supplied to the Met Office, to maintain Morecambe's meteorological database and to supply a weekly report to The Visitor. Information was also supplied to a number of internal services for construction projects, sea and river defences and to verify abnormal microbiological results for shell fish samples and poor bathing water samples. Information was also supplied occasionally to assist members of the public with insurance claims for storm damage.

- Afternoon Readings

The same readings were also carried out every afternoon as part of the Met Office's 'Health Resort Scheme' and this allowed data to be sent to the Press Association. Morecambe then appeared in some daily national newspapers the following day and was occasionally mentioned on the national television weather summaries. This publicity has also been referred to as Morecambe's 'weather slot'

2.2 Cabinet 2004

The budget for carrying out the weather readings was held by the Economic Development and Tourism Service and Cabinet approved the deletion of the budget from 2004/05 as a budget saving. This was on the basis there was no tourism benefit in continuing the readings.

2.3 History of the Service since 2004

The morning readings continued in 2004 to evaluate their worth for coast protection purposes and to augment the weather data collected from an environmental monitoring station on the Stone Jetty. The reduced cost of operating the service was charged initially to Engineering Services.

The City Council indicated it was prepared to consider offering an honorarium to any local organisation that was prepared to undertake the readings. Cabinet subsequently approved the proposals and £3,100 was reinstated into the Economic Development budget for 2005/06. Efforts to find an organisation proved unsuccessful and the budget was removed again as the cost of providing the reduced service was already being charged to Planning Services – Sea and River Defences.

2.4 Current Position and Present Service

The morning readings are still being undertaken 365 days per year and the service outlined in the above paragraph (2.1) is being carried out by 2 members of staff from Property Services. Equipment and stationery are supplied free of charge by the Met Office who inspect the station every two years to check the accuracy and exposure of the instruments.

The Coastal Team in Planning Services do sometimes find uses for the rainfall data collected but the service provided is no longer essential for maintenance purposes as other data sources are available. Also various initiatives by national bodies in the field of emergency planning for flood and storm events are increasing the provision of weather related forecasting information to local authorities. In addition to this the team is intending to upgrade the environmental monitoring station on the Stone Jetty from existing budgets as the current equipment has been in place for some time and is becoming unreliable. The improvements would incorporate a system that is capable of displaying information on the web to enable remote monitoring at critical

times. The weather parameters of interest to the coastal team during storm events are wind speed and direction, tide heights and pressure and these services are not recorded on a continual real time basis by the current in house weather service.

Also as previously mentioned, data is occasionally supplied to verify abnormal microbiological results for shell fish samples. Although this data can be obtained from the Environment Agency the information supplied from the weather station is particularly useful as it is taken in close proximity to the shellfish sampling locations and is therefore more relevant and of greater accuracy.

2.5 Automated Weather Stations

An automated weather station could be installed to undertake the full range of weather readings. This would be a separate initiative to the environmental monitoring station due to the parameters required by the coastal team and the locations of the respective equipment.

The Met Office is upgrading many of its own automatic stations over the next 2-4 years and is keen to roll-out this technology to stations operating on the voluntary network such as Morecambe. However, this is subject to the Met Office's own funding bids and this is unlikely to happen in the near future. An automatic weather station could be purchased by the City Council for approximately £10,000 – £15,000. With both these options the City Council would have to provide an electrical supply at a cost of approximately £800 and there is no funding available for this within the current or future year's budgets.

Further detailed discussions with the Met Office would be required to fully appreciate the likely automation timetable and the feasibility of whether an automated station could be used to undertake the morning readings and/or the afternoon readings.

2.6 Information obtained from Meteogroup

A company called Meteogroup supply a 'health list' to the national newspapers based on afternoon readings taken from weather stations around the UK. The health list is only used by the newspapers whose page ready panels are produced by Meteogroup. Meteogroup cannot guarantee that any newspaper will use the information if Morecambe provided afternoon weather data. However, they offer a revised list of UK locations to the national newspapers twice per year and the newspapers choose which locations they want to use based on readership and other criteria. Bogner Regis and Hastings recently started providing data to Meteogroup and their data is now being used by a number of national papers.

2.7 Value of the 'Meteorological or Weather Slot'

In the past there has been concern about Morecambe losing its 'weather slot' and the valuable publicity that was generated from the daily entries in newspapers and the occasional billing as "the sunniest place in Britain" However, an alternative view from the Tourism Service is that there is no evidence that visitors will come to a destination because of the previous day's weather. If the cost of providing the present or even an extended service was charged to the tourism budget, their view is that funding could be better used on targeted marketing exercises with quantifiable results.

A further suggestion has been made relating to the use of webcams and some resorts are already using them to show weather conditions in real time. Discussions

have already been held with the Midland Hotel about placing two webcams on the hotel roof and linking them to the Council's website. If this was introduced potential visitors could check the weather conditions in real time before making a decision whether to visit the resort and the surrounding district. The provisional one-off cost of providing a webcam facility is estimated at £2,000 to £3,000 with some limited recurring costs and there is currently no specific budgetary provision for this.

3.0 Proposal Details

The options and options analysis section of this report outlines four options for the future of the Meteorological Station

4.0 Details of Consultation

The Met Office, The Visitor, Morecambe Town Council, the local Chambers of Commerce and of Trade, Morecambe Hotel and Tourism Association and Bay Tourism have been consulted over the future of the Weather Station. Various Heads of Service have also been consulted. Comments from the consultees will be made available at the meeting.

5.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

The following options are available based on the above information:-

5.1 Option 1 - Maintain the Existing Service

Maintaining the existing service will allow the continued collection of data from the morning readings taken throughout the year. Information could still be supplied to the Met Office and The Visitor. Information could also be supplied to internal services and members of the public on request.

This option would provide a further opportunity in the future for the Met Office's roll-out of automated stations. This would potentially automate the carrying out of the morning readings and might also allow the automation of the afternoon readings to reintroduce the 'weather slot' but this would all be subject to detailed discussions with the Met Office.

This would require the ongoing budget of £1,500 p.a. in Planning Services and ongoing access to the staffing resources required to undertake the manual readings. The City Council would have to finance the provision of an electrical supply for the automated equipment at a cost of approximately £800 p.a. although automation might reduce some of the ongoing staffing costs required for manual readings. It is possible therefore, that the cost for electrical supply will be contained within the existing budget.

5.2 Option 2 – Extend the Existing Service

This option is to extend the service to reintroduce the afternoon readings in order to try to secure the 'weather slot' through Meteogroup. As previously mentioned there is no guarantee that the information supplied to Meteogroup would be used by any

national newspapers. There is also the view that the value of the 'weather slot' is limited and that destination choices are based on more up to date information about local weather conditions.

This would require an additional budget of £1,500 p.a. (over and above the existing provision) and assumes that additional staffing resources would be available to carry out the afternoon readings every day of the year. The staff providing the extended service would find this very onerous as this would require them to undertake readings twice per day including weekends and bank holidays. A review would be required of the number of staff needed to deliver this service and the indications are that volunteers would be very difficult to recruit.

5.3 Option 3 – Discontinue the Existing Service

This option is to implement the decision previously approved by Cabinet and terminate the provision of the whole meteorological service. This would result in information no longer being provided to the Met Office, The Visitor, other services and members of the public.

Information is currently available from the following web sites that provide information on local weather conditions:-

<http://www.morecambe-weather.info/index.asp>

<http://www.wunderground.com/weatherstation/WXDailyHistory.asp?ID=ILANCASH5>

There is also a link on the tourism website www.citycoastcountryside.co.uk to the BBC weather forecast for the district.

The provision of data for the maintenance of sea and river defences is no longer essential as this is available from other data sources and improvements to the environmental monitoring station are planned that will include the facility to display information on the web for remote monitoring. As previously mentioned the weather parameters of interest to the coastal team are not recorded in real time by the in house weather service discussed in this report. The data supplied for shellfish and bathing water samples is available from the Environment Agency as previously mentioned.

The removal of the weather station from the front of Morecambe Town Hall would require discussions with United Utilities over their automated rain gauge that is also located within the weather station enclosure.

This option would save approximately £1,500 per annum in the 2010/11 Draft Budget and future years.

5.4 Option 4 – Discontinue the Existing Service and Install Web Cams

This option is to again terminate the provision of the whole meteorological service but to introduce the use of web cams as another alternative source of providing weather information.

Some resorts are already using webcams linked to local authority or local tourism web sites to show weather conditions in real time. Tourism officers believe this is a more appropriate method of promoting Morecambe and the surrounding district and some preparatory work has already been undertaken to determine the associated costs.

As previously mentioned there is no budgetary provision for the one-off purchase and installation of web cams and this would require a growth item in the 2010/11 Draft Budget. However, the £1,500 per annum revenue saving in 2010/11 from discontinuing the existing service could be re-allocated leaving a one-off shortfall in the region of £1,500. It is expected that there will be an annual revenue saving from 2011/12 onwards, however it is not possible to quantify what this will be until the ongoing annual running and ad-hoc maintenance costs associated with the web cams have been determined.

6.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

The officer preferred option is Option 3 to discontinue the existing service.

The main beneficiary of the existing service is the Met Office due to the weather data that is supplied to them. The internal services who are supplied with information can obtain this from other sources and the coastal team are planning improvements to their environmental monitoring station for the weather parameters used for coastal monitoring. The methodology for collecting the manual data under the current arrangements is time consuming and is very onerous on the limited number of staff who provide the service.

The tourism benefits from the introduction of the afternoon readings and the 'weather slot' are not quantifiable as there is no evidence that visitors will visit a destination because of the previous day's weather. The decision to re-allocate the existing budget and to request a one-off growth item for 2010/11 for the installation of web cams is a matter for Cabinet to consider.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

There are no links to the Council's Corporate Plan for 2009/10. However, local meteorological data extending over many years is currently available and this could be used to inform any studies that might be undertaken as part of the Medium Term Objective of developing responses to Climate Change.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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

There are no impact assessment implications.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Option 1 would result in a continuation of the £1,500 p.a. from the Planning Services - Sea and River Defences budget. However, should automation by the Met Office be forthcoming within the next 2-4 years this is likely to require the City Council to fund the electrical supplies for the automated equipment, estimated to be in the region of £800 per annum at current prices. Subject to whether or not automation leads to reduced staffing requirements this could be cost neutral, otherwise it will need to be treated as a growth item in a future year's budget, or savings made in other areas of activity to accommodate.

Option 2 would require an additional budget of £1,500 p.a. in 2010/11 and subsequent years and this would again need to be treated as a growth item. This assumes that staff would be available to undertake the afternoon readings on the same basis as the morning readings. This option might also lead to an automated station in the future and the points already raised concerning the electrical supplies as outlined within Option 1 could also apply under Option 2.

Option 3 would result in an annual saving of £1,500 from 2010/11 onwards and this would be taken from Planning Services – Sea and River defences budget.

Option 4 - should Members resolve for the webcam(s) to be installed, then Members are reminded that there is no budget currently available for the associated one-off installation cost. The revenue savings identified under Option 3 for 2010/11 could be re-allocated, however, leaving a one-off shortfall in the region of £1,500 to be treated either as growth or offset by savings made elsewhere. There may also be potential ongoing revenue implications for annual running and ad-hoc maintenance costs, which are still being investigated by Officers. It is not expected that these will be significant and are likely to be contained within the existing £1,500 budget from 2011/12 onwards, with potential for an overall annual saving arising.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

Whilst there are some issues regarding the history and how this has led to the current position, at this stage the s151 officer would comment only that any potential growth should be considered alongside other competing demands and in context of the Council's financial prospects, Cabinet's proposed priorities/non-priorities and the need to obtain value for money.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

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

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Briefing Note to Chief Executive
Property Services working file

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