



## Recording of Council Meetings

17 July 2013

### Referral from Council Business Committee

#### PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider a request from Council Business Committee to trial audio taping of meetings for the use of Members and officers only, not for the public.

**This report is public**

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) **That Council considers the request from Council Business Committee set out in this report.**

##### 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Members will recall debating the following motion, which was submitted to the 13 May 2013 Council meeting:-

"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."

1.2 Clear support was expressed for making recordings of meetings available for the public and Council resolved to ask Council Business Committee to consider this matter and also to consider "the costs and practicalities of webcasting Council meetings as soon as possible."

1.3 The matter was referred to the next meeting of the Council Business Committee, held on 27 June 2013. The report, which set out three options with estimated costs, is attached for information.

1.4 The Committee discussed the options and made a proposal, set out below, to make recordings available to Members and officers only, not the public.

##### 2.0 Proposal

2.1 Council Business Committee felt that it would not be appropriate to recommend webcasting at this point, given the costs involved and the need for the Council to find savings to balance its budget in future years.

2.2 Regarding audio taping of meetings, the Committee noted that, since the Council meeting, further research had been done by Democratic Services to find local authorities who made audio files of public meetings available to the public. The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Council and Tendring District Council both provide audio files of meetings for the public to listen to.

At both authorities Councillors share one microphone between two, rather than one between three as is the case in Morecambe Council Chamber. To upgrade the system in Morecambe Council Chamber to one microphone between two would require the purchase of nine additional microphone units and two charging blocks at a total estimated cost of £6,800.

2.3 Members of the Committee discussed the possibility of providing a low cost solution, without the purchase of additional microphones, simply to provide Members and officers with access to an audio tape of Council meetings, should they wish to refer to it. This would be a trial with equipment costs of approximately £500 and the tapes would not be made available for the public on the Council's website.

2.4 The Committee resolved:

"Recognising support for the recent motion in council in a recorded vote, this committee requests 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."

### **3.0 Options**

3.1 Council is asked to consider the Committee's request. The support shown in the recorded vote at the Council meeting on 13 May 2013 was for a motion to make recordings available for the public and Council is asked to consider this new request for recording equipment to be purchased and officer time to be spent on making and maintaining a library of audio files of Council meetings solely for the use of Members and officers.

3.2 It should be noted that, if audio recording equipment is purchased, it could only be used with the microphone system installed in Morecambe Council Chamber. It would not be possible to transport the microphone and taping system to other Council meeting rooms to record Committee meetings because there is a fixed unit in the Chamber that is required to operate the system. A basic installation which would allow officers to record sound from the existing microphones would cost in the region of £500.

3.3 A further point to note would be whether or not the Council wishes to record the debate on confidential or exempt items for which the press and public are excluded. If recordings of these discussions exist, they would be subject to freedom of information requests in the same way as written information held by the Council. The Council may be required to disclose the content, depending on the public interest test.

3.4 The requests of the Committee regarding speakers declaring their names before speaking and also using a microphone could be dealt with by introducing two new Council Procedure Rules to the Constitution, to apply to meetings of the full Council only.

3.5 The written minutes of the meeting would still be the formal record of the decisions taken.

### **4.0 Staffing considerations**

4.1 If audio recording equipment were purchased, the operation of the equipment at meetings and the storage of and access to the audio files after the meetings would have staffing implications for Democratic Services.

4.2 At meetings of the full Council the Officer who assists the Democratic Services Manager would be able to operate the recording device. This would

be sited in the fixed box at the back of the Chamber.

4.3 It is anticipated that the files would be stored on computer equipment in Democratic Services offices and access could be arranged by appointment for Members to listen to the files in a meeting room at Lancaster Town Hall. Access and storage arrangements would need to be very strictly controlled if the decision was taken to include recordings of discussions in private on confidential or exempt items.

4.4 It should be noted that Councillors would not be able to ask for particular extracts from meetings or debates, as Democratic Services do not have the staffing resources to search through hours of audio files for segments of discussion. The full audio file of a meeting would be provided to Members to listen to. If, during the trial it is apparent that Members would like Democratic Services to search and locate debates on the recordings, support to Members could be reviewed and reduced in some other area to accommodate this new service.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

5.1 Council is asked to consider the requests made by the Council Business Committee regarding the recording of council meetings.

### **CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT (including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)**

None directly arising from this report.

### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

As referred to in the report at 3.3. Under the Freedom of Information Act, to withhold information under most exemptions in the Act, the Council must show not only that the information is exempt but also that the public interest in keeping it confidential outweighs the public interest in disclosure. This means that exempt information may have to be disclosed on public interest grounds.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The estimate for installing a basic recording system suitable for use with the existing microphones in the Council chamber is approximately £500 and can be met from savings within the Members Democratic Representation budget in 2013/14. It isn't possible to predict how much staff time would be taken up operating the equipment and storing files, etc, but the staffing element could be monitored and costed during the trial.

### **OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

**Human Resources:** None

**ICT:** There may be storage implications dependent on size of the audio files; this would need assessing during the pilot. If recordings were made including recordings of discussions in private on confidential or exempt items then there would be officer time involved in ensuring that such recordings were stored securely and destroyed in line with any agreed retention arrangements.

**Property:** None

**Open Spaces:** None

**SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

Attention is drawn to the s151 Officer's comments on the attached report, including those on VFM and the need for cost/benefit analysis. There appears to be a fundamental change in this latest proposal, in that the recording of meetings on an experimental basis would be solely for Member and Officer purposes, rather than for the public. Whilst the direct costs of this latest proposal are clear, there would also be Officer time involved and furthermore, given that meetings are already minuted, it is unclear what benefits, if any, the proposal would bring. Council is advised to consider these points in its decision-making.

**MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS**

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

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

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