

COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Recording of Council Meetings

27 June 2013

Referral from Council

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider a request from the Council for this Committee to consider making recordings of council meetings publicly available on the Council web site.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATION

- (1) That the Committee consider the information in this report regarding audio taping and webcasting of Council meetings.**
- (2) That, if the Committee is minded to take forward Options 2 or 3 or 4 in this report, that detailed costings be considered during the next budget and planning process for 2014/15.**

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Council Chamber at Morecambe Town Hall has recently been fitted with a new microphone system which has been used successfully for meetings held on 17 April and 13 May 2013.
- 1.2 Following the introduction of the microphones, a motion was considered by Council on 13 May to consider adding digital recording equipment to make recordings of council meetings publicly available on the Council's website. Council resolved to ask this Committee to consider this matter and to also consider "the costs and practicalities of webcasting Council meetings as soon as possible."
- 1.3 This report sets out the likely costs and practicalities of both options for Committee Members to consider.

2.0 Proposal

- 2.1 A briefing note which accompanied the motion to Council set out some background information about audio taping of meetings. To tape the meetings would incur costs for the additional equipment and its installation as well as ongoing staffing costs for operating the equipment at meetings and for editing, uploading and maintaining access to the files on the Council's website. The likely costs are discussed in 2.3 below.
- 2.2 The briefing note also set out current practice amongst other local authorities in Lancashire for comparative purposes. None of the eleven authorities who responded record their meetings as audio files for the public to listen to. Four of

the authorities webcast their meetings. The reason why meetings are webcast and not audio taped is because it is difficult, sometimes impossible, for the listener to know who is speaking on an audio tape without the visual clues. If audio taping were to be put in place, Members may need to consider adding a Council Procedure Rule for audio taped meetings which requires each speaker to state their name each time they start to speak for the benefit of those listening to a digital recording.

2.3 Since the briefing note was prepared for Council, the Democratic Services Manager has researched further and found two local authorities who make audio files available for the public on their website. The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and Tendring District Council. The ratio of microphones to Councillors to successfully record the meetings is one per Councillor, or one between two. Currently, the City Council has one microphone between three Councillors so this would need upgrading. This means that, in addition to the equipment and installation costs quoted in the briefing note as being in the region of £500, nine additional microphone units and two charging blocks would need to be purchased. The microphones are £600 per unit and the charging blocks are £450 each, making a total cost of approximately £6,800.

2.3 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 £15,000 per annum which would include a total package comprising:

- leased hardware (including maintenance and upgrades)
- software licence
- full project & account management
- helpdesk support (including live monitoring of every council meeting)
- full hosting of all content

An exact figure could only be given if a site survey was undertaken. 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 provide a webcast solution at a cheaper cost, the quality would be poor and unlikely to meet public expectations of new technology. The system could, for example, be limited to one camera at a fixed point in the room but this would still make it difficult to identify speakers and they would not be identified with a subtitle, as they are in high standard webcasts. A cheaper system would also limit the number of people who could view it at any one time (from 1-2 people to around 15 maximum) and the resolution of the picture would be weak. Initial outlay on a system such as this would be a minimum of £5,000 and further investment on improving the ratio of microphones to Councillors would probably be necessary. However, the quality would not be comparable with the webcast solution used by Lancashire or Leicester Councils.

2.4 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.

2.5 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. Whilst there are portable webcast and portable camera solutions available, these would be costlier.

3.0 New Government Guidance

- 3.1 Government guidance for the public was issued this month by the Department for Communities and Local Government "Your council's cabinet – going to its meetings, seeing how it works". The document complements the meetings regulations brought in last September (the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This guidance makes it clear that councils should allow members of the public to film council proceedings if they want to and that councils should provide reasonable facilities for any member of the public to report on meetings using, for example, blogs, twitter, facebook and YouTube.
- 3.2 It is clear from the regulations and guidance that the Government's emphasis is on the Council assisting the public themselves to become more actively involved in commenting on and broadcasting the decision making process, rather than insisting that Councils should all move towards webcasting their own meetings.

4.0 Costs/Benefits

- 4.1 The issue of recording of meetings was raised by a motion to Council worded:

"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."

The motion did not specify the reasons for providing this new discretionary service to the public to support the purchase of new equipment and other costs involved. Debate on the motion centred around the perceived benefits to the public to allow them to feel more engaged in local politics and the motion was passed including a friendly amendment for this Committee to also consider webcasting.

- 4.2 Members should note that Democratic Services have not received any requests from the public to access recordings of meetings and have no evidence to support any demand for listening to recordings of meetings or to watch webcasts of meetings. Viewing figures for webcast council meetings are typically quite low and officers would recommend more research be carried out to determine the number of 'hits' that other authorities receive for their webcasts to help assess any possible benefit which might offset the cost. Kingston Council measures the usage to see how many 'hits' each audio taped meeting receives. They advise that the Council meetings are seldom listened to, the Planning Committee files are the ones which receive most interest.
- 4.3 Members are also advised that there are many other, low cost, ways to engage the public with the local decision-making process, including making it easier for the public to record and film meetings, and the Committee may wish officers to bring a report presenting some of these options to a future meeting.

5.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

- 5.1 There are a number of options for the Committee to consider overleaf.

	Option 1: Not to tape Council meetings	Option 2: To purchase audio recording equipment and make recordings available on the Council's website. Equipment cost approximately £6,800 (for consideration as part of the budget).	Option 3: To purchase a low cost, low quality, webcast solution. Equipment cost approximately £5,000 (for consideration as part of the budget).	Option 4: To pay an annual fee for webcasting equipment and service in the region of £15K per annum (for consideration as part of the budget).
Advantages	<p>Saves the cost of purchasing additional equipment and officer time in maintaining and uploading the library of files for the website.</p> <p>Would not inhibit any Members who did not feel confident about their contributions being recorded 'verbatim'. (This was a concern expressed during debate at Council).</p> <p>Would not lead to any confusion about the decisions made at meetings. These are recorded in the minutes and would be difficult to find amongst long debates on audio tape or webcast.</p> <p>Would not lead to any confusion about who said what – audio taping would be difficult to follow unless each speaker gave their name before starting to speak.</p>	<p>Members of the public who would like to attend council meetings but can't make daytime meetings could listen to the debate at their convenience.</p>	<p>Low cost.</p>	<p>Members of the public who would like to attend council meetings but can't make daytime meetings could watch the debate at their convenience.</p> <p>The content is hosted on the provider's site and maintained by them. It would be accessed easily from a link on the Council's website.</p> <p>Speakers name is shown in a subtitle on the webcast so it is clear who is speaking.</p>

Disadvantages	Members of the public who would like to attend council meetings but can't make daytime meetings would have no way of listening to the debate at their convenience.	<p>Costs of purchasing additional equipment and officer time in maintaining and uploading a library of files for the website.</p> <p>The public will not know who is speaking unless Members give their names each time they talk, which may inhibit lively debate.</p> <p>May be confusing if the public are listening to hear decisions as an audio recording does not have clearly set out decisions, unlike minutes.</p> <p>Members will have to use a microphone at all times to make their contribution heard on the digital recording.</p>	<p>Cost of purchasing additional equipment and officer time in maintaining and uploading a library of files for the website.</p> <p>Quality issues. Unlikely to meet public expectations of a local authority 'webcast' when compared with other authorities.</p> <p>Difficult for the public to know who is speaking because the name of the Councillor wouldn't be subtitled.</p>	High costs year after year.
Risks	None identified.	<p>Risk that Members may feel inhibited during debate because their opinions will be recorded 'verbatim'.</p> <p>Demand for this service is unproven and other councils offering this service report low usage by the public. Without a robust analysis of the benefits, there is a risk that the expenditure would not be justified.</p>	<p>As Option 2 and</p> <p>That the Council appears unprofessional because the webcasts are unavailable due to the number of users viewing, or the picture quality is very poor.</p>	As Option 2 and

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 Members are asked to consider the information in this report, in particular whether the costs of providing a new service at a point where the Council is faced with having to make major budget and resource savings in future years is outweighed by public demand to listen to, or watch, meetings of the council.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

None.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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

Webcasting meetings allows a section of the public who cannot get to day time meetings because, for example, they work during the day or are care-givers, to view a meeting they cannot see in person. However, it excludes those people who do not have access to the Internet.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications as a result of this report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications are set out in the report but are only estimates ranging from one off costs of £5,000 to £15,000 per annum. Should the Committee wish to pursue option 2 or 3 or 4, more detailed costings would be needed in order to be able to inform the budget setting process in 2014/15.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources:

Officer time would be required to operate, maintain, edit, upload the files for options 2, 3 and 4.

Information Services:

Limited ICT staff resources would be required in respect of options 2 or 4 with regard to planning and implementation of a system. It is anticipated that for the low cost solution, option 3, ICT staff resources would be required for longer ongoing support.

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, particularly video ones, can be very large.

Property: None.

Open Spaces: None.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

If Members are minded to put forward any of the options 2, 3 or 4 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.

Based on information available 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.

The need to be clear about expected benefits, as well as costs, is crucial for any referral into the next budget and planning process. Cost/benefit analysis should inform prioritisation of budget proposals, in context of what is affordable.

This is especially important given the expectation that the Council will have to reduce the overall range and quality of services it currently provides, in order to balance its budget. Based on its financial outlook, at present the Council simply cannot afford to introduce new or enhanced discretionary services. This will not change until the Council has developed, approved and started to implement ideas for saving money.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

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

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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