

CABINET

Audio Recording of Council Meetings 16 January 2018

Report of the Chief Officer, Legal and Governance

| PURPOSE OF REPORT | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| To consider recommending to Council that an audio-minutes function be added to the current Committee Management software, to enable live audio streaming at Council meetings and audio files to be created and made publicly accessible on the Council's website. | | | | | |
| Key Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> | Non-Key Decision | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Referral from Officer | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Date of notice of forthcoming key decision | Not applicable. | | | | |
| This report is public | | | | | |

RECOMMENDATIONS OF COUNCILLOR EILEEN BLAMIRE

1) That Cabinet recommends to Council that an audio-minutes function be added to the current committee management software system, to enable

- live audio streaming of meetings, and:
- an audio archive of meetings to be created and made publicly available on the Council's website
- that it initially be on a trial basis, with any longer term arrangement being subject to the budget.
- Subject to the budget being approved, that the Democratic Services Manager be authorised to continue with the service after the trial period.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Members will be aware that, for some time, meetings of full Council have been audio recorded and the sound files have been uploaded and made available to Members and staff only on the 'for councillors' pages of the Council's intranet.

1.2 The recordings came about as a result of a Council resolution on 17 December 2014:-

That, on an experimental basis, sound recordings of Council meetings be prepared and made available to Members and Officers on request.

2.0 The Current System of Audio Recording

- 2.1 At present, recording relies on a data stick, which has to be manually plugged into the digital recorder by the Democratic Support Officer and, following the meeting, this is passed to ICT to upload to the intranet. Not every recording has been successful, as the USB stick has occasionally failed to record for various reasons. However, overall, the trial has worked well, the sound quality is adequate and the files provide a reliable record of words spoken, which can be useful to refer to, since minutes of a meeting are never intended to provide a verbatim account and are simply a record of decisions taken.
- 2.2 The current system is limited to meetings of full Council. There are no recordings taken of Cabinet or Committee meetings because the system is not portable.
- 2.3 The only way to find a particular speech or passage of dialogue at present is to listen and fast forward, etc. There is no facility to easily 'tag' individual agenda items, which makes the system cumbersome to use.

3.0 The Proposal

- 3.1 The proposed new system is an add-on to the existing Committee Management system, Modern.gov. It requires a tablet device or phone, it records straight from the microphones and will run on wi-fi in meeting rooms where that is available, or on a sim card where there is no wi-fi. The clerk at the meeting would operate the recording equipment.
- 3.2 The new system could be used to record any or all meetings of Council and/or Committees. It can be used with existing microphones in the Council Chamber or as a portable unit for smaller meeting rooms, offering more versatility.
- 3.3 The costs of the system are set out below:-
Annual license cost: £3,900. There is no set-up fee, a free trial is offered for three months and there is no limit on the duration or number of meetings covered.
One-off cost of a small portable recording kit £325
One-off cost of a suitable tablet to operate the unit (approx. £350)
- 3.4 In addition, the Company has offered to provide 12 months' free audio webcasting for towns or parish councils. The fee for second and subsequent years is £15 per month or £150 annually if paid in advance.
- 3.5 There are several benefits to recording meetings and making the recordings publicly available. These benefits include:
- Promoting the Council's duty of transparency.
 - Giving wider access to the public to listen to meetings in real time.
 - Keeping a verbatim, accessible record of meetings, which councillors,

officers and the public can refer to at a later date.

4.0 Details of Consultation

4.1 This report seeks the approval of Cabinet members before taking the matter any further for a Council decision; no other consultation has been undertaken.

5.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

| | Option 1: To add an audio-minutes function to the current committee management software system, to enable live audio streaming of meetings, and an audio archive of meetings to be created and made publicly available on the Council's website. | Option 2: To keep to the current arrangements. | Option 3: To cease audio recording altogether |
|---------------|---|---|---|
| Advantages | Increased openness and transparency; would allow the public to listen to meetings they may not be able to attend because of other commitments. Easy to use system, which would 'tag' each agenda item, making it easy to search. Portability; system could be used at both town halls and for all meetings. | No further spend required, unlike option 1. Allows Members and staff to access sound files of full council meetings (except for exempt items). | No further spend required, unlike option 1. |
| Disadvantages | Costs of purchasing the add-on equipment (see paragraph 3.3) | Would not allow members of the public to access the recordings. Missed opportunity to increase openness and transparency by restricting the recordings to internal listeners. It would be too time- | Loss of the facility to review spoken minutes would be a disadvantage when there is any dispute over words said, for example when a complaint has been raised or an allegation made. Retrograde step in terms of openness and transparency. |

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| | | <p>consuming to split the audio into agenda items; current system does not automatically 'tag' them unlike option 1.</p> <p>Not portable; can only be used in the Council Chamber at Morecambe Town Hall.</p> | |
| Risks | <p>Uncertain demand -. there is a three-month free trial period for the system and this may help with vfm assessment.</p> | <p>Reputational risk; councils are under increasing pressure to make their meetings more open and accessible to all.</p> | <p>Risk that disputes/complaints could escalate if there is no recording to refer to and resolve an issue.</p> |

6.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

6.1 The Officer preferred option is option 1, for the reasons set out above.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Cabinet is asked to make a recommendation to Council in support of option 1 above.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Corporate Plan priority of Community Leadership sets out the Council's aim to demonstrate good governance, openness and transparency.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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

None.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None identified. Whilst there is no legal requirement for a Council to record its meeting, the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 allow any member of the public attending the meeting to do so. Many councils have therefore decided to offer a webcast or audio stream service to the public.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The system required is an add-on to the current Modern.gov Committee Management software and the cost implications are set out in paragraph (3). The costs of the system are being considered as part of the budget setting process as a growth item. If this decision is approved, the three-month trial period would run from around February to April 2018. If the budget is approved, the paid period would start in the new financial year from around May 2018.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, such as Human Resources, Information Services, Property, Open Spaces:

None identified.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 officer has been consulted. Consideration of any longer-term arrangement as part of the budget will enable Members to consider the proposal in context of other competing pressures and value for money.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

As mentioned, there is no legal requirement to record meetings, but there is a duty on all councils of openness and transparency. The Local Government Transparency Code 2015 is statutory guidance to local authorities setting out information it must publish. Although it does not cover making recordings of meetings, it does require decision making to be as open and transparent as possible. The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 are also relevant as mentioned under "Legal Comments".

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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