

Report to Cabinet

Subject: Recording of Meetings Update

Date: 27 July 2017

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Wards Affected

All

Purpose

To update Cabinet on the trial of recording audio of Council and Planning Committee meetings and to recommend a way forward.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision.

1. Background

- 1.1 The trial of audio recording started in response to the issue being raised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Following the introduction of the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee had expressed concern about the potential for members of the public to record meetings and then edit the content out of context. In response to the concerns raised, a report was taken back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2015 detailing options relating to the recording of meeting. In summary the report gave three options: Recording meetings for the Council's own use, Video recording and broadcasting of meetings or Audio recording and broadcasting of meetings. The report confirmed that, to Officers' knowledge, there had been no reported instances of members of the public recording meetings and editing them out of context.
- 1.2 Scrutiny Councillors discussed the options available and decided to recommend to Cabinet that a system of audio recording and broadcasting of meetings should be trialled. At the Cabinet meeting held in September 2015 it was decided to endorse the recommendations of Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to begin a six month trial of "audiominutes" software as a means to broadcast meetings of the Planning Committee

- and Full Council for live and subsequent playback. This option was chosen to make Council and Planning Committee meetings more accessible to a greater number of citizens and provide a definitive record of those meetings. At the time, audiominutes was chosen because of its cost effectiveness and the ease of making one publically available copy of the recording instantly available for playback. The content could be removed and edited via the system relatively simply.
- 1.3 Cabinet requested that a further report be brought back following the trial to consider whether audio webcasting should continue. The trial commenced in January 2016 and since then 15 meetings have been broadcast on the Council's website with varying degrees of success. Due to technical problems, the trial took longer than six months and the last recorded meeting took place in November. An attempt was made to record the Council meeting of 31 January, however this did not work due to technical issues.
 - 1.4 On the occasions that the microphone system and software worked correctly the sound quality had been good. Officers found that the system was easy to use and that it was fairly simple to navigate online to the appropriate recording.
 - 1.5 In view of the fact that the system had been in trial mode, no proactive publicity or promotion of the audio webcasting had taken place aside from the inclusion of an Audio Webcasting Notice in relevant agenda papers and an announcement at the beginning of each meeting. During the trial period, there were a small number of users of the live and "listen again" facilities. Most of the listens were to one particularly contentious meeting of Planning Committee. These figures do include an unspecified number of internal network users.
 - 1.6 At the request of Senior Leadership Team and in order to understand if there was demand for audio recording, a small scale survey amongst residents was undertaken through the Council's social media channels where residents were asked if they would value or use such a facility. Disappointingly, no feedback either positive or negative was received.
 - 1.7 A report was taken to the May meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee where it was recommended that the recording of meetings should not continue and that a working group should be established to consider options available to promote the openness of the Council. At the meeting members of the Committee commented that:
 - A lack of advertising may have had an influence on the low number of people who had listened to the recordings, and this may not have been a fair trial

- This method of recording had never worked properly due to technical problems and that unless the technical issues could be resolved there would be no reason to continue with the trial
- They considered that the trial was first introduced as a mechanism to protect them from malicious recording, rather than a means to increase transparency of the work of the Council
- Other options to increase interest and transparency should be considered, in particular the use of new forms of technology.

2. Proposal

2.1 Due to a number of factors officers are recommending that the Council does not audio record meetings in the future. The reasons for this are:

- There is very little evidence of any demand for this service from the public;
- There have been no reported instances of members of the public recording meetings and editing them out of context;
- The costs for the service have increased significantly since the trial began, resulting in the service becoming unaffordable within the agreed budget. The service is non-statutory and the Council must prioritise existing resources towards services that we have a duty to deliver and are valued by residents. This point becomes more acute against the backdrop of the service efficiencies currently being drawn up by departments; and
- At the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2017, Members recommended that the trial should not continue and that other options for promoting the openness of the Council, should be explored by a scrutiny working group.

3. Alternative Options

3.1 To record and broadcast meetings.

This is not proposed for the reasons set out above. The costs cannot be accommodated within existing budgets and a request for additional budget would need to be made.

3.2 Recording meetings for the Council's own use.

Pros – There would be only limited cost in setting up the equipment needed to record the meetings, which should be managed from existing budgets. The Council and Members would have the benefit of a definitive record of meeting events, hopefully allaying fears expressed about potential ‘malicious recordings’.

Cons – A system of recording meetings to deposit into storage would do nothing to comply with the spirit of openness and transparency agenda. Public access to the meetings would not be enhanced in any way. The officer time taken to administer the recording, storage and access to the finished recordings would not be insignificant. A process would need to be put in place to give public access to such recordings, which would be releasable under the Freedom of Information Act. If a recording proved popular significant resources and officer time would be needed to copy and distribute the hard copy recordings.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 Since the trial began, the costs for the service have increased from £25 per meeting plus a monthly hosting fee of £50 to £100 per meeting plus the same hosting fee. Continuation of the audiominutes service would cost around £2300 annually. This cannot be accommodated within existing budgets. Alternative options discussed above may also require additional budget that is not currently available.

5. Appendices

None.

6. Background Papers

None identified.

7. Recommendation

THAT:

- (a) A permanent system for recording meetings of the Council and Planning Committee is not introduced.

Reasons for Recommendations

- There is little evidence of demand from the public.
- There have been no reported incidences of malicious recording.
- The cost of the use of “audiominutes” software has increased and cannot

be accommodated within existing budgets.

- In accordance with the recommendations of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.