

**Report to: Cabinet**

**Subject: Recording of Meetings**

**Date: 3 May 2018**

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### **Wards Affected**

All

### **Purpose**

To inform members of Cabinet of the decision made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in response to the request to consider the audio recording of meetings.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1** A trial of audio recording started January 2016 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.
- 2.2** The Scrutiny Committee 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 "audio minutes" 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.

- 2.3** 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 2016. An attempt was made to record the Council meeting of 31 January 2017, however this did not work due to technical issues.
- 2.4** 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.
- 2.5** 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.
- 2.6** 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.
- 2.7** A report was taken to the May 2017 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. The Committee recommended that the Council does not record audio meetings because:
- There was 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 of 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 and we have a duty to deliver and are valued by residents; and
- That other options for promoting the openness of the Council should be explored by a scrutiny working group.

**2.8** Cabinet was updated on the trial of audio recordings in July 2017 and requested that the proposed scrutiny working group which would be considering options to promote the openness of the Council considers the recording of meetings and as part of that work consults all Members for their views.

**2.9** At the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee members were informed that due to a lack of interest in the proposed review to consider options available to promote openness of the Council would not proceed. However, the outstanding issue regarding the recording of meetings would be brought back to the March Committee for further discussion. To assist with this discussion all members of the Council were invited to submit their views to the Committee.

**2.10** Separate to the scrutiny process and as further background information to assist the Committee's deliberations, a motion to full council was submitted by the Conservative Group asking Council to asking that "In future, all meetings of the Council to which the public are entitled to attend should be recorded and provision be made for such in the Council 2018/19 budget." The motion as submitted was not agreed and instead an amended motion was approved as follows: (that Council) 1. Notes that Cabinet has specifically asked the Scrutiny Working Group set up to explore options for promoting the openness of the Council to consider recording of meetings and as part of that work to consult all Members; 2. Requests that the Scrutiny Working Group specifically considers whether, in future, all meetings of the Council to which the public are entitled to attend should be recorded and provision be made for such in the Council 2018/19 budget; and 3. Urges all Members of council to engage in this cross-party process in order that their views can be taken into account when Scrutiny Committee makes a recommendation to Cabinet on this issue.

### **3 Options considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

### **3.1 To record and broadcast meetings**

The cost of this service has increased significantly since the trial began, resulting in the service becoming unaffordable within agreed budget. The service is non-statutory and the Council must determine whether resources should be directed towards this new service in the current financial climate. Should a decision be made to use this system a request for additional budget would need to be made.

Currently there is a fee of £100 per meeting plus a hosting fee of £50.00 per month. Should a decision to record Planning Committee and Council be agreed this would cost around £2,400 annually. Should Members decide that additional meetings need recording then a fee of £325 per month equating to £3,900 per year would include unlimited meetings. If this is the preferred option all meetings would have to be held in the Council Chamber where microphones are already in place. Alternatively additional costs would be incurred to install sound systems in other meeting rooms to support the audio recording system. If this is Members' preferred option enquires will be made to establish the costs installing systems in the Chappell Room and Committee Room.

### **3.2 Recording of meetings for the Council's own use.**

It is anticipated that there would only be limited cost and technical work in setting up the equipment needed to record the meetings which could be managed from existing budget. The Council and Members would have a definitive record of meeting events, hopefully allaying fears expressed about potential 'malicious recordings'.

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. Officer time taken to administer the recordings, 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 to Information Act. If a recording proved popular resources and officer time would be needed to copy and distribute the hard copy recordings.

### **3.3 Not to record meetings**

The final option available would be to maintain the status quo and not record any meetings of the Council as previously recommended by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

4 The wider membership of the Council was asked for their opinions on the reinstatement of a system to record meetings and disappointingly there has been very little response. Of the responses received so far there is no clear agreement on if recordings should be made, about which committees should be included, and if they should be available to the public or just kept for the Council's own use. Comments received included:

- I do feel it would benefit if full Council meetings were recorded. This would be for clarity of comments, help with minute taking and for the public/councillors to review if necessary.
- I don't agree with audio recording meetings because of benefits do not warrant the cost it would incur.
- There might be a case for recording the meetings of the Planning Committee as a means of protecting the Council when planning decisions are challenged. It would make sense to keep the recordings for eight months after which they should be destroyed. There would be no need to make these recordings available on the website. I suppose the cost of recording and preserving the planning meetings and the outside chance of a FOI request but I wouldn't have thought the overall cost of this would be too high. With regard to Council meetings and other committee meetings I don't think there would be a need for recording these meetings – as you say there is certainly no public demand for such information
- The desire on my part to have meetings recorded is not just about openness ( important though that is ) but also would address the following issues:-
  - 1) There is no consistency at the moment in the way we record minutes between different committees with some being very detailed and some so brief they are difficult to understand.
  - 2) Verbal advice given by officers to committees/council is not recorded.
  - 3) Assurances and commitments given to members on which members rely when voting is not recorded.
  - 4) Actions agreed which are not part of resolutions are often not recorded.
  - 5) If members of the public can record meetings then we should

have our own copy to refer to in the event of disputes.

6) We have had examples of complaints against members based on recollections of what was said which can result in time and money being wasted.

5 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee was requested to consider the options available for the audio recording of meetings and in doing so decide:

- I. If committee meetings should be recorded, and if so
- II. whether this should be recording for the Council's own use or for broadcasting to the public, and
- III. which committees they consider should be included

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussed the merits of recording meetings. The current microphone system used in the Council Chamber was discussed and it was agreed as being ineffective and not fit for purpose. Members felt strongly that until the current system in the Chamber is upgraded, and replaced with one which clearly amplifies discussion, there was little point in implementing a system for the audio recording and broadcasting of committee meetings.

It was agreed that when a clear amplification system is available that, in the interest of openness and transparency, all committee meetings, including full Council and those not covered by the exclusion of the press and public, should be recorded and broadcast. This would include not just meetings held in the Council Chamber but all committees including those held in different meeting rooms.

The Committee recommended to Cabinet that In the interest of openness and transparency, all meetings including full Council and those not covered by the exclusion of the press and public should be recorded and broadcast. However, this should only happen when there is a suitable sound system with microphones that clearly amplify discussion available.

#### Response to Scrutiny Committee Discussion

Whilst there have been previous problems with the audio system it has recently been serviced and tested and no faults have been found. The system is of good quality and not at the end of its useful life according to the manufacturer. The engineer has advised that problems with audio quality are most likely due to isolated faults or operator error.

An indicative cost to replace the system would be in excess of £30,000.

Another issue identified by the Scrutiny Committee was the concept of recording meetings held in other rooms of the civic centre. If audio

equipment was to be purchased for this purpose a “portable” option would need to be considered so that it can be moved between the Chappell and Committee Rooms. This again is estimated to be in excess of £30,000. The staff time involved in this option would also be significant and at this stage is not quantifiable. A less expensive option would be to re-locate all public committee meetings to the Council Chamber where an audio system is already installed.

Additional financial costs could also be incurred by the necessity to have additional officers attend some meetings to oversee the management of the recording system.

## **6. Financial Implications**

Information on estimated costs for each method of recording is set out above and is repeated for ease of reference below

To use the “Audio Minutes” system to record Council and Planning Meetings in the Council Chamber

Cost - £2,400 per year

To use the “Audio Minutes” system to record All public meeting in the Council Chamber

Cost - £3,900 per year

Cost to replace microphone system in Council Chamber

Indicative cost - £30,000

Cost to purchase additional equipment to enable recording to take place in the Chappell and Committee Rooms

Indicative cost - £30,000

There is no existing budget to provide any of the solutions detailed above. A budget bid would need to be made for additional resources if Cabinet was minded to support the introduction of a system to record meetings.

## **7. Appendices**

None.

## **8. Background Papers**

None identified.

## **9 RECOMMENDATION**

To consider the recommendation made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to considering the recommencement of a system to audio record committee meetings.

## **10 Reasons for Recommendations**

To enable Cabinet to make a decision on whether or not to support the recording of committee meetings following consideration of the issue by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.