



Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Subject: Recording of Meetings

Date: 20 July 2015

Author: Service Manager, Elections and Members' Services.

1. Purpose of the Report

To provide information to Members on options available for recording meetings of council committees following a request by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 were brought in by the Secretary of State with the intention of clarifying the position regarding Councils broadcasting and recording committee meetings. In essence, the regulations make it clear that unless the business of the meeting is confidential in nature members of the public should be allowed to record proceedings as they wish. The regulations actively encourage councils to make facilities available to assist the public in making their own recordings of Council meetings with the aim of increasing the transparency of the decision making process.
- 2.2 At the previous meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members had expressed some concerns that members of the public could potentially make their own recordings of council meetings and then edit the content for re-broadcast, leading to concerns of comments being taken out of context. Members, therefore, asked officers to investigate the option of the Council making its own recordings of meetings which could be made available to the public as an official record of proceedings. Members also requested information on whether there had been any documented incidents where 'mischievous' or 'malicious' recordings had been published.
- 2.4 There are a wide range of possible ways for committee meetings to be recorded ranging from a simple voice recording being made to fully automated video webcasting. In gathering together a list of options for the committee to consider a wide range of possibilities were examined.

3. Findings and Conclusions

- 3.1 No evidence was found of any incidents of members of the public using recordings of local authority that they had made 'maliciously'. If such problems have occurred they have not been reported.

Options available to broadcast/record meetings

- 3.2 As stated above, a number of methods for recording the business at Council meetings exist and three viable options are explored in turn below:

Option 1 – Recording meetings for the Council's use.

It would be feasible to make an audio recording of any meeting taking place in the Council Chamber by using a simple recorder connected to the audio system already installed. This would enable the Council to have a definitive copy of everything that was said at the meeting in a relatively inexpensive way.

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 – The officer time taken to administrate the recording, storage and access to the finished recordings would be significant. Access and supply of the recordings would also be a major consideration (for example, who is entitled to a copy? Should a charge be made?). This method also does nothing to comply with the spirit of the 2014 regulations – public access to the meetings would not be enhanced in any way.

Option 2 – Video Webcasting meetings

The Council Chamber could be adapted to enable meetings to be fully recorded through the installation of a series of cameras. The audio and video could then be streamed live over the internet and integrated into the Council's committee management system to enable the public to watch meeting proceedings live at home with the accompanying agenda documents on the screen. The videos would then be archived and available to watch online after the meeting.

Pros – Would make meetings of the Council more accessible to a greater number of citizens. The webcasting may help the public to engage more

with the decision making process of their local council. This option would, similar to the previous option, provide a definitive record of the meeting.

Cons – The set up and ongoing cost of such a system would be prohibitive, realistically costing around £10 – 15k per year. The Council currently has no budget to deliver video webcasting. The operation and maintenance of such a system would also require staff time which is currently not available.

Option 3 – Voice Webcasting meetings

Similar to Option 2 above the Council could consider webcasting just the audio content of its meetings. This would achieve the same outcomes as the video webcasting but only the audio of the meeting would be recorded and broadcast.

Pros – As outlined above. This option provides an affordable solution because no equipment needs to be purchased and the audio can be streamed directly from the existing microphone system via a tablet computer to the internet. There would be no set up cost for the system and the council would be on a “pay as you go” arrangement to broadcast each meeting. The current cost for this service is relatively modest and it is anticipated that costs could be met from existing budgets. The system would require minimal intervention to operate therefore additional staff time would not be required. The meetings would be available online for one year.

Cons – The system is fairly new to the market and additional budget would be required for any technical support. There are various options available which would need to be assessed.

3.3 In making any recommendations to the executive there are a number of issues worthy of consideration such as:

Cost – the budgetary position of the Council is, like most other public sector organisations, ever shrinking.

Uptake – would the public be interested in viewing/listening to meetings? Attendance is generally quite low at public meetings of the Council and this is a consideration when committing budget to such schemes.

Purpose – what is the reason to record meetings? Is it to promote engagement in the democratic process or is it merely an attempt to safeguard against ‘malicious’ recording?

Effect on participation – would a member of the public who wished to present a petition or speak at Planning Committee choose not to participate if they were to be recorded? Could recording of meetings stifle debate?

Which meetings to be recorded – the above options pre-suppose that only meetings held in the Council Chamber will be recorded.

- 3.4 A 'test run' of the voice recording system was carried out at the Planning Committee meeting held on Wednesday 1 July. This recording will be available for members to inspect at the meeting and will give a chance to view the interface that would be deployed for the public website.
- 3.5 For the reasons outlined above officers would recommend the voice recording of meetings as the most cost effective and operationally effective method to record committee meetings. The committee is, therefore, invited to discuss the issues raised in this report and to make, if appropriate, any recommendations to the executive.

4. Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications arising from this report because any decision on how to proceed would need to be made by the executive.

5. Recommendations

This Committee is recommended to:

- 1) Consider the issue of recording committee meetings, in light of the points raised by this report, and the available options to achieve this; and
- 2) Make recommendations to the executive if the Committee is supportive of introducing a system to record meetings of the Council.

6. Appendices

None.

7. Background Papers

None identified.