

Broadcasting Committee Meetings

Report of the Democracy and Governance Portfolio Holder

Recommended:

- 1. That the work undertaken by the Member and Community Development Group to investigate the implications of broadcasting the Council's Democratic meetings as set out in the report be noted.**
- 2. That the majority recommendation of the Member Community Development Group that the Council does not proceed with broadcasting of democratic meetings at this time due to the implications as set out in the report be approved; and that further consideration of the practical and financial implications of broadcasting the Council's democratic meetings be reviewed in 2 years' time.**

SUMMARY:

- Following a motion agreed at Council on 7 September 2022, work has been undertaken to consider options available to broadcast the Council's schedule of Democratic meetings live to the public.
- The report sets out details of options available to Council for broadcasting and their associated implications.

1 Introduction

1.1 At its meeting on 7 September 2022 Council resolved that:

'This Council agrees to investigate ways by which it can improve democracy and accountability by live streaming and recording all Council meetings that are held in public. It further asks that the cross-party Member and Community Development Group (MCDG) look into the practical and financial implications of doing so and report back its findings without delay.'

1.2 The MCDG, which comprises cross-party membership, considered the principles and requirements for a broadcasting system for the democratic meetings of the Council.

1.3 The following principles for broadcasting democratic meetings were supported by the MCDG.

1.4 A broadcasting system:

- Should include both audio and visual capabilities.
- Include the ability to share and broadcast visual presentations.
- Should allow footage to remain online for later viewing by the public.

- 1.5 Work was undertaken to consider what systems were available and how these would meet the requirements of the Council's schedule of democratic meetings which are held across a range of venues.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Council has not previously visually broadcast its democratic meetings to the public. Whilst all democratic meetings are open to members of the public to attend (where items of business are not exempt) there has been no facility in place for members of the public to access meetings without attending them in person.
- 2.2 Following the introduction of temporary legislation; The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 4 April 2020 the Council operated its committee meetings virtually via Microsoft Teams.
- 2.3 During the pandemic, temporary legislation was put in place to allow the democratic meetings to take place virtually. During this time, a live audio only stream of committee meetings was available to allow members of the public to listen to meetings taking place where they were otherwise unable to do so due to social distancing restrictions. This allowed the Council to fulfil its legal obligations in relation to public access to democratic meetings. The audio was only available as a live stream and not available following the end of the meeting.
- 2.4 With the end of the temporary legislation on 7 May 2021 and the end of the requirement for social distancing on 19 July 2021, there was no longer a legal obligation or need to broadcast meetings as members of the public were able to attend meetings in person and therefore the audio stream ended.
- 2.5 Broadcasting of democratic meetings across local authorities is commonplace with local authorities using a range of systems which allow members of the public to watch meetings 'live' online and subsequently watch them as saved recordings.
- 2.6 Whilst the Council's meetings are accessible and always open to the public, (apart from when legal exemptions apply), broadcasting democratic meetings is seen to further increase accessibility and promote openness and transparency in decision making.
- 2.7 Of the 10 other district authorities in Hampshire, 6 currently broadcast their democratic meetings. Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council all broadcast democratic meetings.
- 2.8 Test Valley Council has a number of unique circumstances that need to be taken into account when considering any broadcasting system.
- 2.9 The Council holds its democratic meetings (an average of around 60 meetings a year) across a range of venues both in the north and south of the borough rather than in a single fixed chamber. This makes it easier for members of the public to attend meetings in person but makes broadcasting much more expensive than in many other comparable authorities.

- 2.10 Some of the meeting venues are flexible spaces open for community use outside of council meetings and therefore any system would need to be able to accommodate the range of venues and have flexibility around other uses of the space.

3 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 3.1 The openness and accessibility of the Council's democratic meetings and decision-making processes are a core principle underpinning the way in which the Council operates in meeting its legal obligations and providing democratic accountability for decision taken to support corporate objectives and priorities.

4 Consultations/Communications

- 4.1 The MCDG have been consulted in developing the principles for a broadcasting system and have been involved in discussion around the options developed for consideration.
- 4.2 In considering the options set out in the report there were a range of views expressed by the MCDG. Whilst all members of the group were supportive of the principle of broadcasting meetings to further increase openness and transparency of decision making, it was considered by some, that the associated financial implications, given the Council's current meeting schedule and associated venues, meant that it was not, at the current time, financially viable to implement a broadcasting system.
- 4.3 It was suggested that the position could be reviewed at a future date, potentially in two years' time, to see if changes in technology and potential changes to meeting venues would mean that the cost and other implications associated with installing a broadcasting system were more viable.
- 4.4 Officers from across Council services including democratic services, property and asset management and IT have been involved with discussions and initial site visits with suppliers to understand possible requirements and implications of broadcasting systems.

5 Options and Option Appraisal

5.1 Option 1 – to install broadcasting equipment in current meeting venues used for democratic meetings.

- 5.1.1 Democratic meetings are usually held in Conference Room 1, Beech Hurst, The Guildhall, Andover and in the Main Hall and Annexe of Crosfield Hall Romsey.

- 5.2 In considering the options available for a broadcasting system that meet with the principles set out by the MCDG, officers liaised with a number of suppliers to understand what systems were available and how these could operate in the Council's meeting venues.

- 5.3 Typically, there are two main types of system available to provide a broadcasting solution, these being a portable solution which can be moved between venues and a fixed solution which is installed in the meeting space on a permanent basis.
- 5.4 Following initial site visits and discussion, suppliers did not recommend the consideration of a portable solution to meet the Council's needs.
- 5.5 A portable solution was likely to require a significant amount of resource from officers in relation to set up and understanding the technical aspects of the system. Additional time and knowledge would be needed to set up a portable system ahead of each meeting. A portable solution would require set up of tables, chairs and broadcasting equipment in the exact same fixed positions. Due to the amount and size of equipment, several officers and a van would be required to transport equipment to meeting venues. It was advised that regular travel, set up and take down of equipment could result in damage.
- 5.6 Given the issues as advised above, the potential solutions set out in this report only consider a fixed solution at meeting locations.
- 5.7 All the potential solutions outlined provide the technology and software to control and deliver live streaming in real time to a platform of the Council's choosing. It should be noted that the potential solutions outlined in the report are based on initial site visits and discussion with providers. The report sets out an overview of options and likely financial and other resources implications. Further details, resource requirements and other implications would be considered as part of the procurement process.
- 5.8 Given the expected value, a procurement exercise would be required in line with the Council's Contract Standing Orders.
- 5.9 The solutions would be likely to include, in varying capacity, three or four cameras in each room that are able to connect to the current audio equipment and are triggered by live audio to then pan to or zoom in on the current speaker.
- 5.10 Broadcasting would be likely to require officer resource to start, stop and pause meetings from a control device during the meeting. Meeting agendas, topics and councillor names can be programmed to be displayed to the public during the live streams.
- 5.11 The Council's committee management system, Modern.Gov, can integrate with the main webcasting providers, giving the ability for meeting webcasts to be made available directly on the relevant meeting web pages.
- 5.12 Each room would require pre-set table and seating layouts however several layouts can be saved to the system and can vary from room to room.
- 5.13 The following paragraphs set out an overview of solutions and likely costs for the installation of a broadcasting system in current meeting venues. The options are set out for installation in all four current locations and installation at a reduced number of venues.

- 5.14 All potential suppliers indicated that the solutions installed could be used to provide hybrid meeting facilities. Whilst democratic meetings cannot be currently held in a hybrid way due to legislative requirements, it is recommended that the procurement of any solution include the requirements for use of the system for hybrid meetings. This would enable non-democratic meetings to make use of this technology and ensure the system is future proofed as far as it can be so that should legislation change and allow democratic meetings to operate in a hybrid manner, it is able to do so. An additional financial amount of £10,000 has been included for this provision based on estimates from suppliers.
- 5.15 Whilst on site visits, the suppliers and Council IT officers recommended that Crosfield Hall and the Guildhall would require improvements to the current internet capabilities to maintain a high-quality stream without interruption, this would require additional ongoing cost which would be confirmed once a procurement exercise has been undertaken and the solution requirements are known.
- 5.16 *Installation of a system in all four current meeting venues*
- 5.16.1 The following sets out information about systems that could be supplied to provide a full audio and visual broadcasting system across all four of the Council's current democratic meeting sites This would allow for democratic meetings to be broadcast from a flexible range of venues both in the north and the south of the borough and would have minimal impact on the current ordinary calendar of meetings and the way meetings are currently undertaken.
- 5.16.2 The solutions available vary across suppliers in terms of the equipment provided for broadcasting however all systems would allow for pan, zoom and tilt of cameras, allow a view of the meeting as a whole as well as close up visuals individuals speaking.
- 5.16.3 Depending on the supplier, the physical equipment provided may be on a lease basis which would require re-procurement of new equipment at the end of the lease period or a purchase basis which would mean the Council would own the physical equipment and would only have to renew the support and maintenance and webcasting contract.
- 5.16.4 Across the suppliers, the average cost for providing a broadcasting system for a four-year period across all four meeting venues that would meet the need of all the Council's democratic meetings ranged from approximately £170,000 to £260,000.
- 5.16.5 It should be noted that this information is indicative and does not provide finalised costings. A full tender process would be before a solution could be selected and final costs known.
- 5.17 *Installation of a system in two current meeting venues*
- 5.17.1 This would allow for democratic meetings to be broadcast from a single venue in both the north and the south of the borough.

5.17.2 This will reduce the flexibility of democratic meeting spaces however it still allows for more than one meeting space to be equipped with the ability to broadcast and is a lower cost option.

5.17.3 Based on discussions and site visits and surveys from potential suppliers the draft proposals set out below include indicative costs for two options:

- CR1, Beech Hurst and the Main Hall, Crosfield Hall
and
- The Guildhall Andover and the Main Hall, Crosfield Hall.

5.17.4 Across the suppliers, the average cost for providing a broadcasting system for a four-year period for Conference Room 1, Beech Hurst and the Main Hall, Crosfield Hall that would meet the need of all the Council's democratic meetings ranged from approximately £128,000 to £134,000.

5.17.5 Across the suppliers, the average cost for providing a broadcasting system for a four-year period for The Guildhall, Andover and the Main Hall, Crosfield Hall that would meet the need of all the Council's democratic meetings ranged from approximately £129,000 to £133,000.

5.18 Option 2 – to install an audio only solution in all 4 current meeting venues.

5.19 During the pandemic, a temporary solution was put in place to allow the audio only 'live' stream of democratic meetings.

5.20 The installation of audio streaming does not allow for the full audio/visual experience for members of the public as identified as part of the principles for broadcasting however it does provide a cost effect solution that allows members of the public to listen to democratic meetings in 'real time'.

5.21 The system limits the ability of those accessing the meeting via the audio recording to fully understand what may be taking place in the room. They would not have access to or be able to see any PowerPoint presentations given at the meeting and may find it difficult to know who is speaking.

5.22 Whilst detailed investigation has not taken place for this option due to it not providing a wholly accessible solution, a typical solution is likely to cost in the region of £5,000 per annum which would include unlimited live streaming and archived playback.

5.23 Option 3 – to not broadcast the Council's democratic meetings.

5.23.1 The Council does not currently broadcast any of its democratic meetings and there have been no public requests for meetings to be broadcast.

5.23.2 Given the requirements for a system to be available across a range of flexible spaces rather than a single fixed chamber and the associated financial and practical implications of doing so, as set out in the report, it was suggested by some members of the MCDG that the financial costs were such that it would not be appropriate to put in place a broadcasting system at this time.

- 5.23.3 Given the Council's regeneration plans, which may mean that the current spaces used for democratic meetings could change in the medium-term, the ability to broadcast meetings could be incorporated into the regeneration programme of work as appropriate projects come forward. The requirement to allow for broadcasting of democratic meetings would be incorporated into the design requirements of any new community venues or council facilities in Andover and Romsey
- 5.23.4 As the timescales for regeneration projects coming forward is unknown, it was suggested by some members of the MCDG that proposals for broadcasting be reviewed in two years' time.
- 5.23.5 Whilst this option does mean that broadcasting of democratic meetings is not likely to take place in the short term, it does allow for future review of the options available and the potential for future meeting locations to be designed to accommodate democratic meetings, with appropriate hardware and software capabilities for broadcasting to take place.

6 Risk Management

- 6.1 The report provides options for the broadcasting of the Council's democratic meetings. Should Council decide to proceed with procurement of a broadcasting system an evaluation of risks would be undertaken ahead of procurement. No significant risks have been identified at this time.

7 Resource Implications

- 7.1 Should Council decide to proceed with the procurement of an audio and visual broadcasting system, this would result in a capital requirement estimated to be between £128,000 and £260,000.
- 7.2 Should Council decide not to proceed with broadcasting at this time, there are no resource implications.
- 7.3 Should Council decide to proceed with an audio broadcasting system, there would be a revenue budget pressure of around £5,000, subject to procurement.

8 Legal Implications

- 8.1 There is no legal requirement to broadcast the Council's democratic meetings and therefore there are no legal implications associated with the options set out in the report.

9 Equality Issues

- 9.1 There are no equality issues triggered associated with the options set out in the report.

10 Other Issues

- 10.1 Community Safety – none.

- 10.2 Environmental Health Issues – none.
- 10.3 Sustainability and Addressing a Changing Climate.
- 10.4 Property Issues.
- 10.5 Wards/Communities Affected – all.

11 Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

- 11.1 The report considers the options available to the Council in respect of broadcasting democratic meetings.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None	File Ref:	N/A
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Report to:	Council	Date:	29 February 2024