

POLICY, FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

7 JULY 2015

REPORT OF HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

RECORDING COUNCIL MEETINGS – WAY FORWARD

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 As requested by the January meeting of the Committee, to provide further feedback on the audio recording of Council Meetings.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **To consider and decide whether to continue with audio recording of Full Council Meetings and uploading these audio files to the Council's website by 5 working days following the meeting.**

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 At its meeting on 27 January 2015, the Policy, Finance and Administration Committee resolved that :-
- 2.1) The continuation of the recording of Full Council Meetings and uploading these audio files to the Council's website by 5 working days following the meeting be approved with a further review in 6 months.
- 2.2) The Head of Communications be given delegated authority to update the Protocol for Audio Recordings of Meetings (Appendix A) and the Hints and Tips document in accordance with local arrangements and best practice as required. That the Protocol be referred to Full Council for incorporating into the Constitution as guidance for Members be approved.
- 3.2 It is confirmed that the Protocol for Audio Recordings of Meetings and the Hints and Tips documents (Appendices A and B of the January report attached) were approved by Full Council on 22 April 2015 and incorporated into the Council's Constitution.
- 3.3 The background to the recording of Council meetings is included within the January report which is attached. At the January PFA meeting, Members were clear that they did not wish to allocate a budget to video record or webcast Council and Committee meetings as this was costly but wished to continue with the audio recording of Full Council meetings only as the costs from this service could be met from within existing resources.
- 3.4 The trial continued following the January PFA decision and the following Full Council meetings were recorded and the recordings placed on the website. It may help to point out that substantial administrative support is needed to make the recordings available on the website and this account is included in the table for each meeting and explained more fully below.

Meeting Date	Type of Meeting	Met 5 working days deadline	Total administrative time to make audio recording publicly available
4 February 2015	Full Council	Yes	2 hours, 30 minutes
25 February 2015	Full Council	Yes	3 hours
22 April 2015	Full Council	Yes	7 hours
21 May 2015	Annual Meeting	Yes	2 hours, 15 minutes

The extended trial period has shown that the 5 working days deadline for making the audio recording available on the website is achievable with the commitment and prioritisation of this task by the staff involved.

The main tasks for this work relate to actions after the meeting and include downloading the recording from the audio equipment which can involve up to 5 individual files for a 1 hour meeting that are initially too large for the website, compressing each file to be less than 10mb to ensure it is a suitable size for the website, editing the recording as required and uploading each compressed file and renaming the files onto the IDOX system to be available on the website. Due to the audio recording equipment and the IDOX (Committee website provider) not being easily compatible for the purpose of audio recordings on the website, this is a relatively awkward process and is also explained in the January report.

These tasks are administratively time-heavy and although they are being managed within existing resources, there is an impact on other work during these times. Both the Communications Admin staff and Democracy and Involvement Officer are involved in ensuring the recording is publicly available on the website and this work can conflict with other important deadlines such as payroll and Mayoral events.

At times there is a need to edit the recordings to ensure that Member asides or voices are not heard in the background to save any future embarrassment. This too can be time-consuming and can require each of the files of the recording to be reviewed. This could be helped by good practice in switching the microphone on only when a Member wishes to speak in the meeting and then switching immediately off. This guidance is available in the documents approved at Full Council for this purpose and should Members choose to continue with the service, it may be helpful for these to be redistributed to Members.

- 3.5 As mentioned previously it is not possible to collect public interest data in the recordings. Therefore it remains unclear as to the public appetite to listen to audio recordings of Council meetings.

It has been noted that the recordings have been used by a Councillor to check speeches, make a transcript and use that information for other purposes.

The local press has also shown an interest in the recordings and possibly used them to assist their reporting of the meeting.

- 3.6 It could be considered that since the public are legally permitted to record Council or Committee meetings using social media or other means there is less pressure on the Council to provide recordings of meetings.

4.0 POLICY AND CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Strong Corporate Governance is important in order to ensure high standards of conduct are maintained. To improve the openness and transparency of Council meetings enables more local residents to hear their elected representatives and brings wider awareness of the Council's decision-making arrangements.
- 4.2 To provide audio recordings of Full Council meetings shows a commitment to the Council's decision-making and sharing this with the public meets the priority of being a 'Well Run Council'.

5.0 FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The existing audio and microphone equipment and staffing arrangements are able to manage the audio service however see paragraph 3.5 for the impact on current staff.
- 5.2 To increase capacity for another 5 audio files at a time to be downloaded from the website would be a one-off cost of between £7,000 – 10,000. This may only be required should the Council consider expanding the service to all Committees and the public becoming heavily engaged in downloading the recordings.

As there has been little public feedback or interest shown to date on this service, it is unlikely that this extra resource would be required should the Committee decide to continue to audio record Full Council Meetings.

6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS/POWERS

- 6.1 It should be noted that the Council is under no legal obligation to record or broadcast its meetings. It also should be noted that the approved minutes are the statutory record of the meeting and would have precedence of any audio/visual recording made.
- 6.2 Exclusion of the press and public will continue to be permitted under the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) where confidential or exempt matters are to be discussed. Coverage of such items will be in such a way that recordings are able to be stopped/restricted when these matters are discussed. From a practical point of view, it is suggested that all exempt items should be at the end of the agenda. This is then easier to manage not only from a recording point of view, but also less disruptive for the public and the press as they do not have to leave and re-enter the meeting.
- 6.3 There is a need to consider the increased risk of audio recordings being used as evidence against the benefits of greater public engagement which the technology delivers. If it is decided to proceed with publishing recordings then further advice may be needed.
- 6.4 A Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings as well as a Hints and Tips document for Members have been adopted by the Council and are available in the Council's Constitution.

7.0 COMMUNITY SAFETY

- 7.1 There are no specific community safety implications in this report.

8.0 EQUALITIES

- 8.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed. Digital access to recorded meetings relies on individuals having computer access. The proposal does not negate the availability of hard copy decision-making information if required.
- 8.2 Audio transmission of meetings is generally seen as improving equality and social inclusion as it provides the opportunity for anyone to listen at any location or time. It also makes information accessible to residents who are not confident with the written word. It improves the openness and transparency of the Council’s meetings and enables more local residents to hear their elected representatives making decisions that affect their lives.
- 8.3 Audio recording of meetings that are available on the Council’s website, helps those in remote areas, those who work shifts or are housebound to experience democracy in their own homes at a time to fit in with their personal commitments.

9.0 RISKS

- 9.1 The risks associated with audio recordings being available on the website are mainly reputational and arise from the conduct of the meeting or of individual Members.

L I K E L I H O O D	A	Very High				
	B	High				
	C	Significant				
	D	Low		1		
	E	Very Low				
	F	Almost Impossible				
			Negligible 1	Marginal 2	Critical 3	Catastrophic 4

IMPACT

Risk No	Risk Description
1	Council reputation on decision-making process and Member conduct

10.0 CLIMATE CHANGE

- 10.1 Providing electronic and digital access to the Council’s decision-making meetings

provides opportunities for saving on Council resources such as paper. However the greater savings are to the public in time, money and effort in reducing the need to travel to the Council Offices to attend a meeting and such savings add up to meet the Council's green targets.

11.0 CONSULTATION

11.1 There has been no consultation on this report and no public comments received on the service to date.

12.0 WARDS AFFECTED

12.1 All indirectly.

Contact Officer:	Sarah Evans, Senior Democracy Officer
Date:	June 2015
Appendices:	PFA Report – Recording Council Meetings – Feedback on Trial – 27 January 2015 A - Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings B – Hints and Tips Document
Background Papers:	Council Minute C50/13 PFA Minute P90/13 PFA Minute P52/14 – 27 January 2015
Reference:	Cttees, Council & Sub-Cttees/PFA/2015-16/070715/Recording Council meetings – Way forward