

AGENDA ITEM 6

POLICY, FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

27 JANUARY 2015

REPORT OF HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

RECORDING COUNCIL MEETINGS – FEEDBACK ON TRIAL

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide feedback on the Committee's decisions of 16 April 2014 as follows :-
- a) a six month trial of audio recordings be taken of Full Council meetings and these be uploaded to the website within 48 hours of the meeting and at the end of the trial, feedback on quality and public interest be reported to the next available Policy, Finance and Administration Committee;
 - b) a Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings and other documentation be developed for reference in future and for training.

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.**
- 2.2 **Subject to 2.1 above, the Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings (Appendix A) and the Hints and Tips document (Appendix B) be referred to the Full Council for incorporating into the Constitution as guidance for Members and the Head of Communications have delegated authority to update this guidance in accordance with local arrangements and best practice as required.**

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 At the request of the Full Council at its meeting on 11 December 2013, the Committee considered a range of options in support of openness and transparency including video, webcasting and audio recording of Council, Committee and Sub Committee meetings. Following consideration of several options at its meeting on 16 April 2014, the Committee agreed to a six month trial of audio recording Full Council meetings using existing software and equipment. This indicated that there were no additional costs to the Council.
- 3.2 The trial started at the first ordinary meeting of the Full Council Meeting following the Annual Meeting on 16 July 2014 and an audio recording was made of this meeting which was available on the Council's internal network and by download to a CD. However the audio files were created in a WAV format instead of the agreed MP3 format and this meant that the audio files were too large for uploading to IDOX (the committee storage filing system which publishes to the website). There was learning from this experience and the audio equipment manual was consulted and the recording equipment reset to ensure the MP3 format was used for future recordings.

3.3 As the IDOX system will only accept files of 10mb in size even when in the MP3 format, an audio file will only be able to cover approximately 15 minutes of meeting content to be within this limit. This has meant an additional administrative process has to be followed to format the audio recording file into smaller units of less than 10mb for the website. This is done using 2 pieces of free downloadable software called Audacity and Lame. This also means that the public listening experience for one meeting is over several files. To help with this, each file is numbered to show the sequence of files to enable the meeting to be followed. When listening from one file to the next, there is no loss in the meeting content.

3.4 For various reasons including accessing the Civic Rooms to download the recording the day after the meeting and the need to check the recording, meeting the 48 hour deadline to publish the recording to the website has not always been possible. Therefore should Members continue with this initiative, it is proposed that this timeframe be extended to 5 working days.

3.5 Since the July Full Council meeting, the following meetings have been audio recorded and the files are currently available on the Council's website :-

- 18 September 2014 – Extraordinary Council Meeting
- 15 October 2014 – Full Council Meeting
- 16 December 2014 – Full Council Meeting

3.6 With regard to public interest in the audio recordings available on the website, it is currently not possible to collect this data from the IDOX area of the website. However following the meetings, there has been contact with Democracy staff regarding the audio recordings by the local press and some Councillors. No public comments have been received regarding the recordings and there are no logged calls to Customer Services concerning this information.

Future collection of public interest in Committee papers and audio files on the IDOX system is being looked into.

3.7 It is anticipated that the level of public interest may be low and this could be due to Melton's Full Council meetings being held during the early evening to maximise opportunities for the public to attend. As there is no website data for the recordings, it is unclear whether there is an appetite to listen to audio recordings of Council meetings. However, the online availability of audio recorded Council Meetings contributes towards ensuring the Council operates in as open and transparent manner as possible.

Should Members wish to continue with the service, then there are opportunities to use social media to promote the audio facility and this could have an impact on public interest.

3.8 The Council's IDOX network has the capacity to store and publish up to 7 audio files of up to 10mb per meeting for up to 25 meetings per year. With regard to download from the website, there is capacity for 5 audio files to be downloaded at once. Any more and performance of other web services would be affected. To increase capacity for another 5 audio files at a time to be downloaded would cost between £7,000– 10,000. Due to no public feedback being available and it being assumed that download of Full Council audio files is low, it is doubtful that to continue to provide audio recordings of Full Council meetings would create any website

repercussions.

3.9 A Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings (Appendix A) and a Hints and Tips document (Appendix B) have been produced and circulated to Councillors with the aim of providing guidance to Members at recorded meetings. It is intended that these documents will form part of the Council's Constitution and the New Councillor Induction Pack and be updated as to best practice by the Head of Communications as and when required.

3.10 A training session was held for Members on 'Presentation skills in a filmed environment' on 1 October 2014 and this provided practical tips to Councillors for speaking at meetings which are being recorded by the Council. It is noted that there is new legislation which allows the public to film and record public meetings as well as use social media.

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.

5.0 FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The existing audio and microphone equipment and staffing arrangements are able to manage this audio service. The main additional tasks relate to uploading the recording to the website following the meeting.

5.3 To increase capacity for another 5 audio files at a time to be downloaded from the website would cost between £7,000 – 10,000.

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 Should audio recording of Council meetings continue, the Constitution be updated with a Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings as detailed in paragraphs 3.9 and 2.2.

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.

9.2 Recordings of quasi-judicial proceedings such as Planning and Licensing & Regulatory Committees and the consequences of having a 'recording' of proceedings should a decision be questioned by a member of the public. Recordings do not make a meeting any more 'public' than it already is, but it does provide a transcript which could allow for a greater level of challenge.

9.6 There is no legal risk should the Council wish to not audio record its decision-making meetings.

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 monitoring of public usage of the audio files available on the Council's website during the trial period.

12.0 WARDS AFFECTED

12.1 All indirectly.

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Appendices: A – Protocol for Audio Recording of Meetings
B – Hints and Tips Document

Background Papers: Council Minute C50/13
PFA Minute P90/13

Reference: Cttees, Council & Sub-Cttees/PFA/2014-15/270115/Recording Council meetings –
Feedback on trial