

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to:	Council
Date of Meeting:	20 June 2023
Subject:	Webcasting of Council Meetings
Report of:	Executive Director: Resources
Head of Service/Director:	Executive Director: Resources
Lead Member:	Lead Member for Corporate Governance
Number of Appendices:	None

Executive Summary:

To consider a proposal for the webcasting of Council meetings. The proposal to introduce the use of technology that would allow a greater transparency of council meetings was first considered by full Council in December 2022. At that time, Council did not feel it was able to support the proposal and therefore the recommendations made were not approved.

With over six months now passing from the decision made by Council and with significant potential benefits of utilising webcasting technology, the proposal is again presented to Council for consideration.

Recommendation:

To APPROVE the introduction of the webcasting of meetings of the Council.

Financial Implications:

It is expected that the Council will be best served by entering into a leasing arrangement for the equipment. To meet this requirement, a relatively small one off set up cost would be needed together with an annual licence fee. The anticipated financial resource needed to meet this commitment, based on evidence gained from the procurement exercise undertaken in 2022 and market intelligence on latest prices, can be met from existing reserves and ongoing budgets set aside to deliver webcasting. Similarly, if an option to purchase the solution is pursued, funding exists to meet the expected costs.

Legal Implications:

There are a number of potential legal considerations relevant to the webcasting of Council meetings including data protection, defamation, copyright and employment. It will be necessary to prepare and put in place protocols to deal with these matters.

If the services were procured on the basis that this would be a three-year contract with the option to extend for a further two years. The services will then need to be reprocured in order to continue to demonstrate best value.

Environmental and Sustainability Implications:

The public will be able to view meetings from their own home avoiding the need to travel.

Resource Implications (including impact on equalities):

It is likely that there will be a minimal impact on existing resources primarily Democratic Services, ICT and Property to support the system.

Webcasting can benefit people with disabilities and other sections of the community who may be unable to attend meetings but who, through this facility, may be able to access the proceedings.

Safeguarding Implications:

None as a direct consequence of this report.

Impact on the Customer:

Webcasting meetings can contribute to promoting local democracy and increasing community engagement by enhancing public awareness of the democratic process.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government temporarily removed the need for Council meetings to be held in person and all Council meetings were held remotely using Zoom. During that period, meetings were more easily accessed by local residents, at its peak 89 people viewed an application being debated by the Planning Committee which is well in excess of the number that could be accommodated at the Council Offices. The legislation allowing for meetings to be held remotely ended in May 2021 since which time enquiries have been received from members of the public concerning the ability to watch meetings online which the Council is currently unable to accommodate.
- 1.2** An increasing number of local authorities are now webcasting their formal Committee meetings, enabling access to the Council's proceedings by residents and others who would otherwise not attend meetings. Of the 290 District Councils in England 203 webcast their meetings. In Gloucestershire, only one other authority does not webcast its meetings and that authority is in the process of taking forward plans to introduce webcasting.
- 1.3** As part of the government's commitment to openness and transparency in decision-making, the rights of individuals were enhanced through The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 which gives the public and press the right to film or use any type of social media to report any public meetings of the Council. Webcasting is seen as a significant step in extending the openness and transparency agenda.
- 1.4** In light of the above, it was reported to Transform Working Group in May 2022 that a project on introducing the webcasting of Council meetings had commenced. This project concluded with a report to Council in December 2022 recommending the introduction of webcasting. However, following much debate, the recommendation was not approved and the Council continues to hold its meetings without the benefit of webcasting.

1.5 Given that over six months has elapsed from the original decision, the Council is now able to reconsider the proposal.

2.0 WEBCASTING SOLUTION

2.1 The introduction of a webcasting solution will enable the Council to broadcast a live event, such as a Council or Committee meeting, over the internet to an audience in real time. It will be a valuable tool for the Council to communicate and engage with the community and reach a wider audience than would be possible with traditional meetings.

2.2 The acquired solution will be expected to be able to link in with our existing microphone system and, together with the addition of a number of cameras in Severn, provide a complete and modern solution. It is expected that viewers will be able to enjoy the benefits of watching public meetings from any location, enhanced by features such as subtitles, displaying the name of the speaker and viewing the live agenda.

2.3 As well as broadcasting the event live, a recording of the meeting will be taken and retained by the authority and be available to the public to watch at any point in the future. A retention policy will need to be developed to sit alongside this.

2.4 Detailed tender and specification documents have previously been drafted by Officers for the earlier procurement exercise in 2022. The tender documents can easily and quickly be readied for a new tender exercise, should Council approve the recommendation in this report. In brief, the specification included:

- The broadcasting of all the Council's formal meetings
- The system should integrate with Modern.gov, used by Democratic Services for the management of meeting documents, and the audio system used in the Severn.
- A solution that is fully secure.
- Video integration with an easily accessible platform.
- A system that is intuitive and is easy to use and view.
- Training for users and ICT staff.
- Ongoing maintenance.
- Ability to run and stream hybrid meetings.

2.5 The specification would require the provision of cameras to track the microphones so that when the microphone is activated, the camera focusses on the speaker and the screen displays their name. Integration with Modern.gov allows for the agenda item and subject to be displayed on the screen, viewers can refer to the corresponding report or presentation whilst watching the video for that item and they can also click on agenda items and skip to the relevant part of the video to watch.

2.6 Should the Council agree to introduce a webcasting solution, officers can move quickly to commence a procurement exercise given the documentation already in place. It is expected that it would take around 2 months to publish the tender, receive responses, evaluate and award. The tenders received will indicate a likely lead time for the delivery, installation and testing of the system.

2.7 There will also need to be a comprehensive programme of training to ensure users and those being broadcast understand the technology and the meeting etiquette required to support a live streamed event. This is an essential part of the deployment of the system to ensure the first broadcast showcases the best of how the Borough Council operates. Information from suppliers suggests that a period of 6 months, from contract award to the first live broadcast, would be required. This would suggest a go live for the Council of February 2024 but it would be hoped that this can be brought forward following discussion with the appointed supplier.

3.0 CONSULTATION

3.1 At the start of the process in 2022, Members and Officers were surveyed on the possible introduction of webcasting which included expectations and concerns. Of the responses received, comments were largely positive and supportive of the introduction of webcasting.

4.0 ASSOCIATED RISKS

4.1 Funding of webcasting in future years could be difficult particularly as the Council's budget comes under further severe pressure. During the contract period, the Council will need to assess the success of webcasting, level of public interest, engagement etc. to determine its priority within the budget. There are also potential savings to be considered in the future should legislation change to allow public meetings to take place with hybrid arrangements thus reducing travel costs.

4.2 The webcasting of meetings is a facility provided by the majority of Councils as it enhances public access and promotes transparency and open and accountable decision-making. Not having the facility may be perceived negatively by the public.

4.3 Purchasing the equipment, in preference to leasing, presents a greater risk of service disruption as the Council would need to rely on manufacturer's warranty to deal with any equipment breakages. A maintenance contract covering a three year period would increase the cost of the purchase option significantly.

4.4 Individual Officers may be concerned about their image being filmed for publication across social media channels. Protocols will be put in place to address concerns and the specification requires allowance for anonymity of Officers/public speakers not to be shown on camera but identified on screen by post or title.

5.0 MONITORING

5.1 All streams will be monitored both in-house and by the chosen provider with regular data being gathered on engagement levels reached.

6.0 RELEVANT COUNCIL PLAN PRIORITIES/COUNCIL POLICIES/STRATEGIES

6.1 Transparent, open and accountable decision-making underpins all of the Council's priorities, policies and strategies.

Background Papers: None
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Appendices: None