

COUNCIL

DATE	27 th July 2023
REPORT OF	Monitoring Officer
SUBJECT	Broadcasting of Meetings
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Open and transparent governance arrangements contribute directly to the achievement of the Council's strategic aims.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an evaluation on the practicality and cost of the live broadcasting of full Council meetings, as requested by Council at its meeting on 28th July 2022. The report was initially considered by Council on 16th March 2023 and consequently referred to scrutiny for more detailed examination with a view to the panel's findings and recommendations being reported to Council as soon as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That, in line with the recommendation of the Communities Scrutiny Panel, the introduction of an audio-visual system for the Council Chamber, Grimsby Town Hall initially, on the basis of one microphone per two members, be the preferred option to be taken forward by Cabinet, subject to the internal governance process as set out at paragraph 1.10 of this report.

REASONS FOR DECISION

This matter is reported to Council as a result of a resolution at its meeting on 28th July 2022 to receive an evaluation report. Council is now asked for a view on how it wishes to proceed.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1 At its meeting on 28th July 2022, full Council considered a motion proposed by Councillor Patrick and seconded by Councillor Mickleburgh calling for all full Council meetings to be filmed and made available to the public, with the intention of making all official council meetings available in a similar fashion within the near future. This motion was subsequently amended and it was agreed by Council that an evaluation report would 'be prepared and brought back to Full Council for consideration, as soon as reasonably practicable, on the practicality and cost of filming full Council meetings, especially considering the Grade II listed status of Grimsby Town Hall and the use of Cleethorpes Town Hall for some council meetings.
- 1.2 Following on from this decision, soft-market testing was undertaken with a number of potential suppliers of audio-visual systems. This included reference to portability of equipment between meeting rooms and venues, the

impact of listed building status and a preference for compatibility with Microsoft Teams.

- 1.3 Given the technological improvement of wireless systems in recent years, it was felt, by all suppliers contacted, that listed building consent would not be a particular issue and some of the suppliers had experience of implementing audio-visual systems in council chambers within such buildings.
- 1.4 The ability to broadcast from different meeting rooms and venues does, however, present a challenge. While the suppliers claim that their equipment is mobile, this would place an onus on council staff to move it around, re-set it up properly and avoid damage to equipment. On that basis, it was recommended that each meeting room be set up individually. However, that would come with a significant cost implication. Estimated costs for an audio-visual solution to fit out solely the Council Chamber in Grimsby Town Hall ranged from £67k to £102k. The lower cost relates to an option to share microphone units rather than each Elected Member having an individual unit. If we are looking to extend this to other rooms, such as the Assembly Room or Cleethorpes Town Hall then the cost would increase by £40k to £60k for each room. An alternative would be to restrict the number of meeting rooms to be used for Council meetings, for example holding all meetings in a suitably equipped Council Chamber in Grimsby Town Hall.
- 1.5 A further consideration is that the implementation of an audio-visual system would potentially have resource implications given the need for an additional officer to attend to manage the broadcasting facility. This could possibly be managed within existing resources if broadcasting was limited to full Council meetings but any extension to include all formal meetings of the council would need properly resourcing.
- 1.6 It should be noted that the current sound system in Grimsby Town Hall is no longer fit for purpose as a number of microphone units are in a state of disrepair, so it is advised that a new audio system would be required as a matter of some urgency unless Members felt comfortable with either sharing existing units or no longer having an audio system, as was the case prior to the current system being installed in 2006. The estimated costs highlighted above include the cost of replacing the audio system as the current system would not be compatible with the broadcasting facility. The bulk of the cost (at least 80%) would be related to the replacement of the audio system.
- 1.7 At its meeting on 16th March 2023, Council further considered this matter and resolved that it be referred to the Executive and Scrutiny Liaison Board to assign the matter to an appropriate scrutiny panel for more detailed examination with a view to the panel's findings and recommendations being reported to Council as soon as possible. The Executive and Scrutiny Liaison Board subsequently referred the matter to the Communities Scrutiny Panel.
- 1.8 The Communities Scrutiny Panel considered this matter at its meeting on 6th July 2023. The panel received additional benchmarking information highlighting the current position across the country with regard to

broadcasting of meetings and noted that there was currently a 75/25% split in favour of local authorities that were broadcasting in some form.

- 1.9 The panel considered a number of options, including a suggestion that a public consultation be undertaken on the proposals. There was concern about the cost of providing a new system and whether it was the right time to invest in such a system given the cost of living crisis and other challenges faced by the council. However, other panel members considered that an audio-visual system would allow opportunities for residents to engage in local decision making when it was convenient for them, providing more flexibility. There was a consensus that the acoustics throughout the meeting rooms in Grimsby Town Hall needed to be improved. Mindful of the estimated cost and noting that the cost of replacing the audio system alone in the Council Chamber would be approximately 80% of the overall cost of providing an audio-visual system allowing the broadcasting of meetings from that room, the panel recommended that an audio-visual system be introduced on the basis of one microphone per two members for the Council Chamber alone initially, with any enabling technical decisions to be determined by officers. The panel added that it would be advantageous to ensure that any new system supported people with hearing impediments.
- 1.10 A view is now sought from Council on how it would like to proceed on this matter. Should Council be minded to pursue this matter then it is advised that internal processes for a bid through the council's capital programme be pursued.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The broadcasting of Council meetings would contribute to the transparency of the council's governance arrangements and increase accessibility.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

There are a number of options available for Council:

- i) Do nothing. Continued use of existing audio system in the Council Chamber in Grimsby Town Hall, noting that malfunction of microphone units may lead to the need to share microphones or to not use the audio system at all. This would involve no additional cost to the Council.
- ii) Replace the audio system only. A quote was obtained from one of the suppliers for the cost of replacing the audio system only and this worked out at approximately 80% of the cost.
- iii) Provide an audio-visual solution to also allow the broadcast of meetings. Within this there would be options around the number of meeting rooms to be provided with this facility, for example, in line with the recommendation of the Communities Scrutiny Panel that an audio-visual solution be provided initially for the Council Chamber in Grimsby Town Hall only.

4. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

It is anticipated that the broadcasting of meetings would increase public accessibility to meetings of the Council, although there is limited evidence available to conclusively confirm this. The broadcast of remote meetings under The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 during the Covid pandemic did see a slight increase in the number of people viewing our meetings in comparison to previous attendance figures in person but this was difficult to quantify as it was not always possible to distinguish between officers and members of the public observing.

Members would also need to consider the current financial climate and whether the broadcasting of meetings would provide sufficient value for money to be taken forward.

There are other considerations around the broadcasting of members of the public that would need to be considered. The current thinking in respect of members of the public is that their express consent would be needed for them to be broadcast. This could have a particular impact in respect of public speaking at committees.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Estimated costs for the various options are set out below:

Option	Initial Capital Outlay £000	Annual Revenue £000	Annual Capital Financing £000	TOTAL 10 year cost £000
Do Nothing	0	0	0	0
Audio System (replacing microphone units only) - Council Chamber, Grimsby Town Hall	84	1	13	140
Audio Visual - Council Chamber, Grimsby Town Hall	99	1	15	160
- Council Chamber, Grimsby Town Hall (one microphone unit per two Elected Members)	72	1	11	120
- Grimsby Town Hall (larger rooms – Assembly, Banqueting)	55	1	8	90
- Grimsby Town Hall (smaller rooms – Crosland, Bremerhaven)	14	1	2	30

- Grimsby Town Hall (all rooms – Council Chamber, Assembly, Banqueting, Crosland, Bremerhaven)	237	50	35	850
- Cleethorpes Town Hall*	39	1	6	70

* - prices quoted for Cleethorpes Town Hall are dependent on use and portability of microphone units from the Council Chamber, Grimsby Town Hall

6. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct implications for children and young people arising from the proposal in this report.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct climate change and environmental implications arising from the proposal in this report. Being able to view meetings online may reduce the number of people having to travel to meetings in person.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications of the various options are laid out in the financial considerations section above. Any decision to invest in new equipment would need to be considered within the context of the Council's wider Medium Term Financial Plan and Capital investment Programme. Based upon a 10 year life span, it is estimated that investment would cost between £10-£30k per annum.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct legal implications arising, save, that subject to the expressed desire of Council, any proposal will be independently assessed by usual internal governance mechanisms with resultant recommendations likely being brought to the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets.

Subsequent implications may include procurement issues and compliance with Council policies and Public Contracts Regulations.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct HR implications

11. WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards are affected.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

13. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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