

CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 26 MARCH 2024

COUNCIL NOTICE OF MOTION: ONLINE RECORDING OF PUBLIC MEETINGS

Summary

1. Following a Notice of Motion to Council on 11 January 2024, it was agreed that the Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication would provide a Report to the next available Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel about the availability of online recording of public meetings.
2. The CMR for Corporate Services and Communication and the Strategic Director of Commercial and Change have been invited to attend the meeting in order to respond to any queries the Panel may have.

Background

3. Prior to September 2023, many public Council meetings were held in the Council Chamber, where it was possible to webcast the meeting live on the internet and for the recording available to the public after the meeting had concluded. The Council Chamber was the only meeting room in County Hall with the appropriate Audio Visual (AV) equipment. The meetings which were webcast included:
 - Council
 - Cabinet
 - Planning and Regulatory
 - West Mercia Police and Crime Panel
 - Overview and Scrutiny
 - Health and Wellbeing Board
4. As a result of the risks associated with RAAC (Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete), the upper floor of County Hall, which includes the Council Chamber, has been closed since 8 September 2023 and remains so for the foreseeable future.
5. Meetings of Council, West Mercia Police and Crime Panel and the Health and Wellbeing Board have been held at alternative venues around the County to ensure a recording is available.
6. Within the Council Chamber at County Hall, there is a full hosted and integrated AV recording system that enables meetings to be recorded and/or broadcast live via the web and Public-I¹ (the Council's partner for live streamed public events).

¹ Public-I is the leading provider of live streaming, remote and hybrid meetings, AV solutions and live streamed events for local government.

7. Following the discovery of RAAC² at County Hall, the Council Chamber is currently inaccessible and therefore other meeting locations have been sought to provide an alternative location to continue to host Council meetings.
8. Full Council meetings are currently hosted on a rotating basis by our District partners at Bromsgrove District Council, Wychavon District Council and Wyre Forest District Council.
9. Smaller Council meetings continue to be available to be held at County Hall in the Lakeview Room or other Microsoft Teams meetings rooms available.
10. Although there is no legal requirement for Council meetings to be webcast live, the Council has historically enabled this through the AV services available in the Council Chamber. The legal requirement for public access is still met by allowing public access to any meetings held via a public gallery/seating in the meeting rooms.

Notice of Motion

11. The agreed substantive motion (detailed at Appendix 1) was:

“This Council believes that scrutiny is essential to democracy in the cabinet system of local or national government. We note that since the closure of the upper floors of County Hall due to risks from RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) in September 2023, there has been no webcast of either Cabinet or scrutiny committees available to the public. Council therefore requests the Cabinet Member with responsibility brings a report to scrutiny to consider how we can provide access to online recordings of all public council meetings within our buildings.”

Current Position

12. The Council has been given access to local District Council partner sites to use their meeting rooms and associated AV services.
13. Depending on the site location used, this currently offers different technical solutions to meet the requirement to broadcast/webcast Council meetings.
14. Bromsgrove District Council offers an AV recording solution that enables Council meetings to be recorded and uploaded to the web/Public-I after the event. It is not currently possible to live broadcast from this venue.
15. Wychavon District Council offers an AV broadcast and recording solution that enables Council meetings to be broadcast live to the Council’s YouTube channel, or to be recorded and uploaded as required.

² Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) is a lightweight, 'bubbly' form of concrete commonly used in construction between the 1950s and mid-1990s. It is predominantly found as precast panels in roofs, commonly found in flat roofs, and occasionally in floors and walls.

16. Wyre Forest District Council offers a Public-I linked AV broadcast and recording solution that enables council meetings to be broadcast live through the Council's Public-I system, or to be recorded and uploaded as required.

Options

17. The options currently available to the Council are:

Option 1

18. Meetings held at County Hall currently use the Council's Microsoft Teams Rooms online meetings solution, which is available in most meetings rooms at County Hall including the Lakeview Room and already enables all meetings to be recorded.
19. Recordings from Teams meetings can be uploaded to the Council's website/YouTube channel after the event to enable post-meeting viewing by the public.

Option 2

20. If the Council want to broadcast live meetings from Teams, it can do this now through the Teams meeting service called Live Events/Town Hall. This is a different type of online meeting style within Teams which is designed for large meeting events where presenters/producers of the event present the meeting to a wider audience.
21. Live Events/Town Hall Teams meetings can be made available to the public via a meeting link available online. Opening the meeting to the public will enable them to join the meeting via the link either on their own local Teams client or a web browser version. The experience for the public would be very different to viewing a normal online webcast though.

Option 3

22. Microsoft Teams meetings can also be broadcast live through the use of additional middleware, which is a piece of software that links two services together and would help link Teams meetings online to a secondary broadcasting service and so support broadcasting to the Council's YouTube channel.
23. Open broadcasting middleware can be bought at no additional cost [Open Broadcaster Software | OBS \(obsproject.com\)](#) but will require set up and management before it is available.

Current Limitations and Potential Solutions for Consideration

24. Council meetings being held at various partner sites creates a different experience and technical solution at each site. This requires some pre-planning to ensure staff on site know how to use the different equipment and broadcast or record the meetings as required.

25. Due to the AV technology used at Bromsgrove DC, it is not currently possible to live broadcast these meetings and therefore the meetings are recorded and uploaded post-meeting for public viewing.
26. Microsoft Teams meeting room equipment at County Hall is not designed for large meeting settings. The set up is currently through a single camera, microphone and sound bar, and because of this, meetings of more than 10-12 people can suffer from sound and vision distortion due to the lack of additional AV facilities.

Potential Solutions for Consideration

27. Full Council meetings could be held at a single host venue to ensure there is consistency in the approach and technology used, and this would also make it easier to manage for staff as they would only need to use one system and webcasting system.
28. For meetings hosted in the Lakeview room, further consideration could be given to the investment in additional Microsoft Teams AV equipment, such as additional cameras and/or microphones, to further improve the current online meeting AV experience.

Risks and Issues

29. Assuming we continue to be unable to access the Council Chamber and its AV facilities for Council meetings, any proposed improvement to the temporary services for broadcasting Council meetings live are possible but do come with some risks to consider.
30. Any additional new AV equipment purchased to enhance the current AV quality of the sound and picture for MS Teams recordings will come at additional cost.
31. To broadcast Council meetings live via either Live Events/Town Hall style meetings (Option 2) or the use of a middleware solution (option 3) will require some investment in officer training and time, as while both options can enable MS Teams meetings to be broadcast live, they are both adding additional complexity into how to achieve this.
32. Live events/Town Hall Teams meetings come with additional complexity in meeting management and etiquette due to the additional roles staff need to take on and meeting management required to produce these type of Teams live events, with additional training and ongoing support for staff required.
33. A middleware solution will add significant complexity in learning how to use and manage the additional software to link existing services together and how to enable broadcasting via YouTube and the training and ongoing support for this by staff.

Human Resource Implications

34. Additional training would be required for some Legal and Democratic staff to support the greater use and complexity of enabling live webcasting/broadcasting

of Microsoft Teams hosted meetings.

Purpose of the Meeting

35. The Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

- Consider the information provided and options available for online recording of public meetings;
- agree comments to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication to inform the approach to be implemented;
- determine whether any further information is required.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Online Recording of Public Meetings (Notice of Motion to Council on 11 January 2024) [Notices of Motion to Council on 11 January 2024](#)

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agendas and Minutes of Council on 11 January 2024 [Weblink to Agenda and Minutes for Council on 11 January 2024](#)

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)