

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

Subject: Webcasting and use of mobile phones and electronic communication devices

Committee: Council

Date: 25 June 2012

Cabinet Member:

CMT Member: Assistant Director for Democracy and Governance

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Ref:

Key Decision: N/A

Part: I

Purpose of the report:

The purpose of the report is to implement the Council's wish to achieve more openness and transparency and embrace current and emerging methods of communication in the operation of the council. The specific measures to achieve this are:

- To open up Council meetings and encourage open government through the webcasting of meetings held in the Council Chamber.
 - To encourage and embed the use of social media by amending the restriction on the use of mobile phones and electronic devices (for text messaging or electronic communication) in meetings.
 - To improve the conduct of meetings by deleting the requirement for permission to be given for a phone to be left on but switched to silent, during meetings.
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Corporate Plan 2011 – 2014:

This report reflects the ethos of open and transparent decision making as described in the emerging revised corporate plan.

Implications for Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

Including finance, human, IT and land

The annual revenue cost of webcasting is estimated at £20,000 per year, an exact figure is currently being investigated with a supplier. This cost will be found from existing budgets across all three Directorates.

In addition the cost of capital investment required to update the audio/visual system in the council chamber is also being investigated and will be the subject of a further report to Cabinet.

Other Implications: e.g. Community Safety, Health and Safety, Risk Management and Equality, Diversity and Community Cohesion:

Webcasting increases public access to the Councils democratic process for members of the public who for example, work during the times which meetings take place, cannot access the council house due to a disability or cannot find the time to attend meetings for other reasons such as care commitments. Webcasting makes meetings more inclusive across all communities within Plymouth.

Access to the public gallery in the Council Chamber is by means of a steep stair case which can prove problematic to elderly members of the public or those with mobility problems.

Recommendations & Reasons for recommended action:

It is recommended:

1. Council agree the webcasting of meetings in the Council Chamber, initially as a pilot for one year.
2. Council permit the use of mobile phones/electronic communication devices at meetings in silent mode, unless the person presiding at the meeting rules (with reasons) that the use of such devices is not conducive to the proper running of the meeting. Further, that all calls or voice messages must be made or taken outside the meeting room.

Alternative options considered and reasons for recommended action:

In respect of recommendation 1.

The initial pilot phase will be limited to the Council Chamber but subject to the result of the pilot phase, webcasting could be expanded at an additional cost to committee rooms and hence other meetings.

In respect of recommendation 2.

The Council could maintain the restriction on the use of text messages and electronic communications. However this is restricting access to this ubiquitous form of communication unnecessarily. The present need to ask permission to keep a phone on but silent is also considered cumbersome and time consuming.

Background papers:

Plymouth City Council Constitution

Webcasting Coventry City Council Meetings – Evaluation of Year Long Pilot, Coventry City Council Cabinet 1 September 2011

Minute 52 of City Council meeting of the 11 October 2010

Tender for webcasting of council meetings and events – Brighton and Hove City Council 2011

Practice Guidance: The use of live text-based forms of communication (including Twitter) from court for the purposes of fair and accurate reporting. Lord Judge, the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales (14 December 2011)

Sign off:

Fin mc12 13.00 2		Leg		HR		Corp Prop		IT		Strat Proc	
Originating SMT Member Timothy Howes, Solicitor											
Have you consulted the Cabinet Member(s) named on the report? Yes / No											

A. Opening up Council meetings and encouraging open government through the webcasting of meetings held in the Council Chamber

The Council wants to encourage open government and get more people involved in the decision-making process. That includes opening up those meetings held in the council chamber through webcasting, which is the live or recorded transmission of video over the internet.

In excess of some 75 councils have in the past or are currently webcasting meetings.

Initially it is proposed that the council webcast meetings held in the chamber which would involve the Full Council and Planning meetings. This will involve around 75 – 80 hours of live streaming and archived content.

If Council agrees the principle of webcasting meetings, then the intention is to undertake a one year pilot and detailed costs will be obtained. Initial estimates suggest that the revenue costs would be £20,000.

An evaluation report into their year-long pilot of webcasting by Coventry City Council in 2011 described the benefits of webcasting as:

- Increased accessibility, openness and transparency, allowing those who cannot attend meetings to see the Council in operation
- Increased public understanding of how decisions are made and the importance Members place on strong and lively debate
- It meant people could hold their elected Councillors to account and see how their interests are being represented by their Councillors
- Raising the public profile of the Council
- Citizens can access content where and when they want, with 80% viewing archive rather than live-feeds

In addition, there are particular benefits for Plymouth City Council, including a saving in the time and cost of transcript production

The main customers for this project would be the public, including those who may be housebound and cannot attend meetings, those whose work or home lives mean it is difficult to come to meetings during the working day or in the evening and people or interest groups who want to see one section of a meeting because they have a particular concern or interest.

Whilst the public will access webcasting from a link on the Council's own website, the video is hosted and streamed from a specialist website with the necessary capacity to do so.

The pilot run at Coventry City Council showed that the numbers viewing the webcast began at a peak in when the pilot began, and reduced over time. However, there were peaks of usage at key meetings such as the budget meeting.

If the principle is agreed, then more work needs to be done on both specifying the webcasting processes and equipment and putting appropriate guidelines and protocols in place. Not least will be the need to take into account the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the need to ensure that those attending the meetings are aware that the proceedings will be webcast. We will need clarity on issues about copyright and who is able to use the video and in what ways, how long will meetings remain available to be viewed and how are they archived? There will be a need for members to be trained on how to deal with the cameras and sound recording, for example, will members need to say their name, ward and party (and even their 'Twitter tag') before speaking? Work will be required to learn from best practice from other authorities and from organisations like the LGA.

Other matters to be addressed will be the challenge about adding additional equipment in a listed building.

It will be essential that any webcasting service which is procured is aligned and integrated with the Mod.gov committee management software, this will allow for efficient editing and archiving of webcast material. This will also allow for the viewing of the relevant agenda item at the time of debate or when watching the recording later.

Whilst we are looking more closely at the running of meetings, now might be an opportune time to look at and to improve the present audio/visual equipment in the council chamber, including reviewing and upgrading:

- lighting
- the audio visual system
- electronic voting systems,
- hard of hearing systems,
- LCD touch screen on each 'delegates unit' for agenda / minutes, and speech timers

For the future, it is therefore suggested that a group of members could consider what audio/visual improvements to the council chamber could or should be made. The results of those considerations and the capital costs will be reported to Cabinet.

B. Encouraging and embedding use of social media by amending the restriction on the use of mobile phones (for voice or text messaging) in meetings

In October 2010, Council agreed that the Lord Mayor, Leader and Committee Chairs would be required to *insist that any device that is capable of transmitting and receiving voice and text messages must be turned off during all Plymouth City Council's formal meetings (Exceptionally, the Lord Mayor or a Committee Chair may allow the recording of speech and photography.)*

In the short time since the Council put the present restriction in place, the use of live electronic communication has become more ubiquitous. There have also been developments in other areas of public administration including the publication of guidance for the use of text-based forms of communication in law courts.

The guidance from the Lord Chief Justice to the courts provides a good starting point to review the present Council policy and is a good example for us to follow. The guidance says that in relation to the courts *'the proper use of an unobtrusive, hand-held, virtually silent piece of modern equipment for the purposes of simultaneous reporting of proceedings to the outside world as they unfold in court is generally unlikely to interfere with the proper administration of justice'*.

Using the above as good practice, I would recommend that the use of live electronic communication is permitted unless the Lord Mayor, Leader or Chair of the meeting rules (with reasons) that the use of such equipment would be detrimental to the proper running of the meeting.

C. Mobile phones in meetings

In relation to the use of mobile phones in meetings, again in October 2010 it was agreed to allow *'the Lord Mayor, Leader and Committee Chairs to exercise discretion for Members and other attendees who are "on call" for family, health or business reasons and allow their personal mobile phones to be switched to "silent". Any subsequent calls or messages must be made or taken outside the meeting room;'*

The need to ask permission of the Chair of the meeting has been shown in practice to be cumbersome and time consuming. It is therefore suggested that instead, it is agreed that all mobile phones should be switched to silent during meetings. In accordance with the present policy, any voice calls or voice messages must still be made or taken outside the meeting room.

As an incentive, the Leader has suggested that an informal 'fine' of £1 payable to the Lord Mayor's charity should be imposed for every phone that goes off audibly in a council meeting.