

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Council 26th August 2004
AUTHOR/S: Finance and Resources Director

RECORDING OF MEETINGS

Purpose

1. To consider whether discussions at meetings should be recorded electronically.

Effect on Corporate Objectives

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| 2. | Quality, Accessible Services | Recording of debates could help full information on decision making more accessible |
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Background

3. On a notice of motion from Councillor R Page, Council on 26th February 2004 agreed that the legal, financial and practical implications of recording meetings should be investigated and a report made to Council (Minute 13.1).
4. A communiqué was sent round to the Democratic Services sections of the local authorities in the Eastern region. Of those that responded only Peterborough Unitary Authority recorded their meetings. None of the officers who responded had any positive comments to make about recording meetings, which appears to be an unusual practice. The only exception to this was the installation of web-cams that broadcast meetings live onto the Internet. Cambridgeshire County Council, Essex County Council, Brentwood Borough Council all either have web-cams or have submitted orders for such a service to the company UKCouncil.
5. It should be noted that Section 100 of the 1972 Local Government Act states that Councils are not obliged to record meetings. Standing Order 21.4 prohibits the recording of meetings without a resolution. Councillors will need to consider if they wish to amend Standing Orders to allow just official Council recording and not public recording, or allow public and Council recording.

Considerations

Alterations in Practice

6. If meetings are to be recorded then certain established practices will have to alter.

Identifying Speakers

7. All speakers will need to state their name or job title clearly at the beginning of a contribution and indicate whether they have a particular reason for making the contribution (e.g. local member).

In Confidential Session

8. The recording machine would need to be switched off when the meetings go into private session and this would cause a short interruption to the meeting.

Security

Criteria for Member Access

9. Members will need to consider who will have access to these recordings and who will respond to related member requests. Members may prefer to access the records themselves. Democratic Services could keep two copies of all recordings. One copy to be lent out to a member on request, the other to always remain on site, accessible from the computers in the portfolio holders' room, to ensure recordings are available on demand. Alternatively, Democratic Services could be responsible for processing all requests regarding these records. There could be resource implications if there were a large number of requests. It would be advisable to have a trial period of whichever option Members decide on.

Criteria for Public Access

10. This report recommends that for practical reasons, members of the public are not permitted access to this information, with the exception that during a planning appeal, appellants would have to be allowed access to the same records as the Council. It would be difficult for the public to either receive or download these records electronically due to the size of the files, which would probably be over 100 megabytes for each meeting. E-mails sent from the Council are currently restricted to be no more than 1 megabyte. It is possible that only the most current recording of each public meeting be kept on the Internet. The Council does not have the resources to allow a member of the public to access this information at the Council offices. The time it takes to transcribe even a short passage in recorded minutes would make it impossible for current staff to comply with requests from the public. It is possible to allow members of the public to pay for the minutes to be transcribed by a professional company, although this option for most people would be prohibitively expensive. Peterborough Unitary Authority does not transcribe their recordings for the public, except for appeals which are available to both parties.

Providing Transcriptions

11. This report recommends that officers should be required to transcribe no more than short passages from recorded meetings. Peterborough Unitary Authority warn that it takes an officer about a day to transcribe an hour of meeting. Due to time taken finding the relevant point in the recording, it takes an officer about half an hour to transcribe a specific point made by a member. If members envisage making regular requests, then serious consideration should be given to appointing extra staff.
12. Members will need to decide who should have access to these recordings. If access is to be restricted then a criteria will be required and maintained by designated officers. Council may wish to consider allowing the public to hire a private company to transcribe the records of the relevant meeting. The charges vary, but one company charges £120 an hour (of their time). Another charges £100 for every 7,200 words.

Storage

13. Although neither disks or CDs take up a large amount of room, space is not limitless. Councillors will need to decide how long these records should be kept. Alternatively the records could be sent to the County archives.

Practicalities

14. Council will need to decide which meetings will be recorded. The officer suggestion is that it should be restricted to only public meetings that are held in the Council Chamber.

Quality of Recording

15. Members will need to speak clearly into their microphones to ensure that their voice is properly recorded.

Options

16. A company called Tyco installed the microphones in the Council Chamber and have been approached regarding the possibility of installing some form of recording device that would be linked to the microphones. The option of using a tape recording system has been rejected as it would be more expensive and more limited than other alternatives. The Tyco engineer indicated that the most suitable option is the use of an MP3 player that could be attached to the microphone system. The engineer stated that the cost would be between £500 to £1,000 and he was prepared to give a free demonstration.

Web-Casting

17. The other option is web-casting and UKCouncil, who implemented the County Council system, appear to be the leaders in this field. This would record sound and pictures and would allow residents and officers to view meetings in progress or search through the archives for previous meetings, without having to attend any meetings. This is the most ambitious option and would enhance the Council's e-government strategy.
18. By broadcasting in real time the Council would have no control over the records kept and quotes could easily be taken out of context.

Resources Required for Web-Casting

19. The system requires an officer to operate the camera during the meeting and the system would need to be set up and taken down before and after each public meeting. The officer(s) responsible for this would need to be IT literate and be able to recognise members, but would also be required to spend hours in a meeting operating the system.
20. UKCouncil state that they would be able to provide 25 hours a month web-casting time for an annual cost of £21,600. More information regarding web-casting and its additional benefits are included in appendix 1. The quality of the recordings can be assessed by visiting UKCouncil's web-site on: www.ukcouncil.net

Financial Implications

21. The cost of implementing a sound recording system would be a one-off cost of between £500 to £1,000. The cost of implementing a web-casting system would be an annual cost of £21,600, if done by UKCouncil. Members should note that a budget would have to be identified.

Legal Implications

22. The courts and the Standards Board for England can require release of recordings. Appellants would be allowed access to the recorded tapes of files of the relevant public meetings. This could lead to more cautious advice from officers.

Staffing Implications

23. There would be no staffing implications providing that any requests for a full transcription of a meeting are contracted out to a commercial company and requests for specific quotes from individual members are kept to a minimum.
24. Additional officers would be required to comply with frequent requests for transcripts of meetings. This could be avoided if a sensible criteria was agreed that ensured that only occasional requests for transcripts were received.
25. The installation of a web-casting system would require an extra officer to be present at each meeting to operate this system.

Risk Management Implications

26. Recording meetings could aid appeals against decisions made by the Council. There is the risk that comments that had little influence on the meeting could be taken out of context.

Consultations

27. Tyco and UKCouncil have been consulted, as have the local authorities in the eastern region.

Conclusions/Summary

28. The main benefit of recording meetings would be the improvement in record keeping. Unfortunately no recording system exists that will easily allow the recorded word to be accessed quickly without an increase in officer hours. The cost needs to be considered as there is no specific budget, with money available, for the implementation of a recording system. Recording meetings could restrict officers from providing unambiguous advice and restrict members from expressing clear opinions due to the concern that their comments could be quoted out of context in subsequent appeals.

Recommendations

29. Council need to decide whether to continue to pursue this issue in light of the disadvantages highlighted in this report.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: A Business Cast for Web-Casting (a document from UKCouncil)
Web-Casting Frequently Asked Questions (a document from UKCouncil)
Focus (May 2004 edition) Article: "Democracy Online"

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