

Decision maker:	Director for economy, communities and corporate
Decision date:	19 February, 2018
Title of report:	Adoption of audio casting and recording of public meetings
Report by:	Democratic services manager

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose and summary

Herefordshire Council has successfully trialled the use of 'audio streaming and recording' - a service that allows live audio-casting of public meetings over the internet and creates recordings for later playback. Following that trial this report seeks to gain approval to formally adopt Audio Minutes as the successful contractor into the suite of democratic services offered by the council.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- (a) Audio Minutes be appointed to supply Herefordshire Council's public meeting audio casting and recording services at a cost of £3,900 per annum starting in February 2018 to March 2020;**
- (b) a tablet and mobile microphone be purchased at a cost of not more than £500; and**
- (c) the new standardised minute taking guide (issued in appendix a) for public meetings be adopted and phased in over a period of not more than 6 months to allow for full implementation of audio casting.**

Alternative options

1. **Do nothing:** Herefordshire Council maintains the current minimum legal standards of providing a public record of meetings and decisions. This is not recommended. Herefordshire Council has a stated objective to ensure that those making decisions and delivering services are accountable for them. To support effective accountability the council is committed to ensuring stakeholders are able to understand and respond as the council plans and carries out its activities in a transparent manner. While Herefordshire Council is compliant in this regard, we can enhance our ways of working with new technologies to reach new audiences.
2. **Do something different:** Video streaming and recordings have been considered. This option has been rejected at the current time due to the high costs, compared to audio options, and the need for consistent fast broadband coverage to ensure a reliable service across the county.

Key considerations

3. Following consultation with political group leaders, since May 2017, Herefordshire Council has been trialling the use of Audio Minutes, a service that allows live audio casting and recordings of public meetings. The trial's principal purpose was to assess the compatibility of audio streaming and recording software with Herefordshire Councils Wi-Fi and existing microphone and public announcement (PA) systems.
4. During this trial, audio streaming and recording has been used at the following public meetings during the months of June to November 2017:
 - Cabinet,
 - Full Council
 - General Scrutiny
 - Planning and regulatory
 - Licensing Sub-committee
5. The results from the free trial have shown that both audio streaming and recording have worked effectively. It has successfully recorded all meetings with audible clarity being achieved. All of the recordings have been stored on Herefordshire Council's secure intranet. Audio streaming and recording has integrated well with Herefordshire Council's existing microphone, PA and Wi-Fi systems/technologies.
6. The trial has also shown that audio streaming and recording has integrated well with our modern.gov operating systems. During the testing, officers have been able to demonstrate that it requires minimal set up time and no additional officer support once the audio streaming recording device is in operation.
7. Learning points as the trial has progressed have been considered. While recordings in the main chamber have been of good quality, recordings are greatly enhanced by members speaking clearly in to their microphones. Chairmen are briefed ahead of meetings to ensure that attending members are asked to speak clearly into their microphones.

Recordings in committee room 1 have been less successful, this is principally due to the lack of micro-phone equipment in this room.

8. In conjunction with the trial of Audio Minutes, the democratic services team have reviewed our current practices on minute taking. While it is not envisaged that audio recordings/streaming will replace the written minute (there is a legal requirement for all local authorities to produce a note for public inspection after public meetings have taken place) it is possible to consider adaptations to our current minute writing practices. To that end, new guidance (appendix a) on drafting meeting notes for all of Herefordshire Council's non-decision taking public committees and full Council will be adopted if Audio Minutes is introduced. This adoption will happen on a phased basis at the request of political group leaders, over a period of 6 months if audio streaming/recording is adopted.
9. For our public decision-taking meetings, namely Cabinet, Planning and Regulatory and the Licensing Sub-committee we will also aim to move toward a more standardised approach to our minute taking. Whereby the written record will simply capture the decision taken and a summary of the reasons given upon which the decision is based but the audio minutes will provide a full audio cast of the meeting.
10. If Audio Minutes is adopted as part of our suite of democratic services, internal and external communication messages will be generated. A communications plan has been produced. Internally, member briefings will be provided to formally announce the uptake of Audio Minutes, for instance through the ward member update. Training will also be provided to members to outline how the new system will work and briefing of chairmen and committee members will include new guidance use of Audio Minutes.

Community impact

11. It is expected that this service would have a positive community wide impact. By adopting Audio Minutes as a new service we are introducing new ways to open the political debates, evidence and decision making processes undertaken by the council. It provides a further, highly detailed, public record of our meetings which can be made available electronically in a number of formats compatible with mobile and desk based information communication technologies and devices.
12. Our code of corporate governance means that as an authority we ensure that we are open and embrace comprehensive stakeholder engagement. Herefordshire Council is run for the public good and therefore should encourage openness in its activities. Clear trusted channels of communication and consultation should be used to engage effectively with all groups of stakeholders. It was a principle underpinning the review of the constitution that the council welcomes public engagement and makes accountability real and one of the actions recommended by the member working group was to consider introduction of webcasting. Audio casting is a more cost effective way of securing similar outcomes.
13. This approach aligns with a commitment in Herefordshire Council's corporate plan for 2016 to 2020 where a stated aim is to engage and influence others at a local level as possible (includes enhancing local democracy, partnership working, locality working, customer engagement, lobbying).

Equality duty

14. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
15. The Equality Act 2010 established a positive obligation on local authorities to promote equality and to reduce discrimination in relation to any of the nine 'protected characteristics' (age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation). In particular, the council must have 'due regard' to the public sector equality duty when taking any decisions on service changes. This decision will help ensure that council meetings are accessible as possible and could support the local authority in fulfilling its public sector equality duty. It may also encourage those from minority groups to engage more with the political process.

Resource implications

13. There have been no financial implications in taking forward the trial of Audio Minutes. Audio Minutes have provided the necessary equipment free of charge until the trial is completed. The Android tablet used has also had no cost implications as it has been on loan from our children's services team.
14. Moving forward, if the council is to adopt audio streaming and recording options, there will be a financial implication. The council has, on average around seven public meetings per month over the course of the municipal year. Those meetings last, on average, between two to three hours. Using this information it is possible to predict that over the course of an average municipal year we may expect up to 250 hours of audio streaming and recording to take place.
15. Audio Minutes provide three packages for councils to consider. The package we are recommending is the 'Supported' version – at £325 p/m (or £3,900 per year). This option provides live streaming and archiving, up to 1,000 simultaneous listeners, on-line recording archive (500 hours) and continuous back-up, detailed analytics on numbers and types of listeners and a monthly maintenance support contract with a service level agreement. This is a set fee paid annually or monthly.
16. Other market testing of similar audio streaming and recording software has been undertaken. Public-I and Auditel, two leading national suppliers of audio and video streaming and recording services, provide equivalent services to a range of public and private sector clients and similar levels of integration with Modern.gov
17. The prices offered by two alternative suppliers were compared against the Audio Minutes price (noted in 15 above). It would cost £2000 more to go with an alternative solution. Audio Minutes therefore provides the best value for money option for the council to consider.

18. If Herefordshire Council is to proceed with Audio Minutes it would be able to do so within the Modern.gov contract. Current contractual arrangements allow the draw down of additional modules, such as video or audio streaming services. Audio Minutes is a module supported by Modern.gov. There are no additional charges that Modern.gov would apply to the council in pursuing this option.
19. It is recommended that, if the decision to proceed with Audio Minutes as the preferred supplier is agreed, we opt to draw down this service via the Modern.gov. In doing so, we synchronise the duration of our commitment to Audio Minutes with any future contractual review arrangements of the Modern.gov contract. The council is due to review its contract with Modern.gov in 2019. The current contractual arrangements run through to March 2020.

Legal implications

20. There is no legal requirement for meetings that are open to the public to be orally recorded. However wherever recording technology is deployed at a meeting, it is important that the council clearly notifies attendees that the meeting will be recorded, the reasons for the recording and where the recording will be stored and can be accessed. This assists the council in meeting various legal obligations including under the Data Protection Act 1998, the General Data Protection Regulation and the Human Rights Act 1998 in relation to rights and expectations as to privacy, the processing of personal data and the right to a fair hearing. In practical terms this can be addressed through a general statement on the council's website and supplemented with a short statement published or otherwise made available at individual meetings.
21. The council's contract with Modern.gov was procured in 2015 and enables the council to draw down additional services supported by the Modern.gov (appendix b refers). Payment to Audio Minutes would be through modern.gov, who then pass this payment on to the Audio Minutes Company at no extra cost.

Risk management

22.

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
<p>Risk 1: Introducing Audio Minutes may discourage open and robust political debate between members.</p> <p>Risk 2: This project may be seen as an unnecessary expense in a time of budgetary constraint and reductions in key front line services</p>	<p>Mitigation 1: All members will be notified at the start of public meetings that their contributions are being recorded.</p> <p>Mitigation 2: Member training will be provided on the use of Audio Minutes highlighting good and poor practice.</p> <p>Mitigation 3: The costs of adopting Audio Minutes is relatively modest when compared to the expected value this service will deliver to enhancing our democratic processes for members and members of the public.</p> <p>Mitigation 4: Extensive testing during the trial of Audio Minutes has shown that the</p>

Risk 3: The technology proves to be unreliable. technology is reliable and is supported by an extensive Audio Minutes IT support team.

23. These risks will be monitored at a service level and recorded via the Economy, Communities and Corporate Directorate performance and risk reporting mechanisms

Consultees

24. Political group leaders were consulted ahead of the Audio Minutes trial to seek their agreement to the trial going ahead. No objections were noted. In September group leaders considered the results of the trial. Following questions raised by group leaders it was noted that:
- a. Audio casts would not be edited;
 - b. The audio minutes system would not negate the requirement for a democratic services officer to be in attendance but would reduce the time taken to produce written minutes;
 - c. Members would be briefed and the opportunity for a briefing on/training for implementation should be considered; the chairman of each meeting would advise that meetings are being recorded and to inform the meeting attendees accordingly.
 - d. Challenges to the written minutes should be raised in advance of the next meeting in accordance with the committee rules within the constitution
 - e. The council would continue to meet its equality duties and should there be requests for the audio cast to be made available in an alternative format these would follow the usual process.
 - f. The communications team would promote the online availability of audio minutes.
25. Assurances were offered on each of the points a to f above. Group leaders expressed support for option 3 of the finance options presented in 11, above.

Appendices

Appendix A: Minute guidance.

Appendix B: Audio Minutes Module.

Background papers

None identified.