

Rother District Council

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 8 February 2021

Title: Installation of a hybrid meeting system for the Council Chamber

Report of: Head of Service – Acquisitions Transformation and Regeneration

Cabinet Member: Councillor Oliver

Ward(s): All

Purpose of Report: To recommend that necessary technology be installed into the Council Chamber so that all Council Meetings can continue to be webcast and enabled for hybrid meetings should legislation permit

Decision Type: Key

Officer

Recommendation(s): It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) all Council Meetings continue to be webcasted once they resume being held in the Council Chamber;
- 2) video conferencing be integrated into the Council Chamber to allow for hybrid meetings (subject to the extension of applicable legislation);
- 3) a budget of £70,000 (to be allocated from earmarked reserves) be approved to procure the equipment and licencing for a three-year period; and
- 4) the Head of Service be granted delegated authority to enter into contracts as necessary for the completion of this project.

Introduction

1. Prior to March 2020, all Council and Committee meetings were held in the Council Chamber or Committee Room and all meeting participants and observers were required to attend in person. Audio recordings of each meeting were taken and uploaded to Rother's YouTube channel the following working day. Links to the recordings were also placed onto Rother's website where they remained available to listen to thereafter.
2. As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government have temporarily removed the need for Council meetings to be held in person¹, as such all Council meetings have been held remotely using Microsoft Teams. The

¹ The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 No.392

first meeting took place on the 18 May 2020 and since then, a full schedule of Council meetings have been held remotely using Microsoft Teams. The meetings are live streamed to Rother's YouTube channel and links to the recordings are placed onto Rother's website where they remain available to watch thereafter. This legislation is currently due to expire in May 2021.

3. Consideration must now be given to how Council meetings will be managed longer term, including continuation of the provision for members of the public to observe Council meetings online once they resume in the Council Chamber. Subject to the extension of the applicable legislation, this can be expanded further to allow for remote participation from Members, staff and members of the public entitled to speak.

Analysis / Details of the proposals

4. In 2018, Rother purchased microphones and an AV system for its Council Chamber. The proposal is to now expand on the investment in this equipment by purchasing hardware, software and support that meets the following needs:
 - Cameras so that video of meetings held in the Council Chamber can be captured in addition to audio.
 - Webcasting encoder so that meetings held in the Council Chamber can be streamed live.
 - Ability to integrate video Conferencing for 'hybrid meetings'.
 - Servicing and maintenance agreement on the new equipment.
 - Streaming licence, 120 hours of webcasting per year and storage of each meeting for 12 months.
 - Integration with Modern.Gov to minimise the administrative burden on organising Council meetings.
 - Support, training and upgrades.
5. A three-year contract is proposed in the first instance and will require a budget of £70,000 to meet equipment and licencing costs for this period. This cost will be met through earmarked reserves
6. These services will ensure residents of Rother will continue to be afforded real-time access to Council meetings without having to travel into the Town Hall. As the pandemic continues, this will help Rother adhere to any and all social distancing regulations by limiting the number of people present in the Council Chamber. It will also deliver on a key objective within the Council's emerging Corporate plan:

"To improve access to Council meetings, open the Council to the public ensuring increased transparency, meaningful consultation and better visibility by end 2023."

7. During the pandemic there have been significantly higher viewing figures of Council meetings, suggesting that the public and staff have been more engaged

finding it more attractive to watch video of meetings than listen to audio. (Appendix A)

8. If legislation to permit remote participation at Council meetings is extended or granted in perpetuity, video conferencing can also be integrated into the Council Chamber. This will create opportunities for ‘hybrid meetings’ with some Members, staff and public speakers attending in person, and others attending remotely.

Options

9. The Transformation Team have assessed whether they can develop this functionality in house. This is unfortunately not practicable and therefore an external supplier would be required.
10. Should the Council choose not to progress with the introduction of a new system, then live broadcasting and video recording will cease once meetings return to a physical, rather than fully virtual, setting.

Conclusion

11. Delivery of this system provides the greatest opportunity to deliver transparency and accessibility in relation to the observing of Council Committee meetings. If legislation permitting remote participation at Council meetings is extended or granted in perpetuity, then this system will allow for hybrid meetings and offers Members, staff and other participants the option to participate in meetings either in person or remotely.
12. Cabinet is recommended to consider the implications, impacts and benefits of such a system and approve the necessary budgets to complete the project.

Financial Implications

13. Should we look to continue delivering this service in the longer term, a continued licensing and maintenance cost will be incurred.

Human Resources Implications

14. Operating this system will likely mean that additional staff will be required to facilitate committee meetings, which may lead to a change in working hours or duties for some members of staff.

Environmental

15. Offering opportunities for residents and Members to watch and participate in meetings online negates journeys to the Town Hall and reduces travel across the district. This contributes to our commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.

Equalities and Diversity

16. Improves equality of access by catering to a wider range of needs and preferences for viewing Council Meetings.

Other Implications	Applies?	Other Implications	Applies?
Human Rights	Yes/No	Equalities and Diversity	Yes
Crime and Disorder	Yes/No	Consultation	Yes/No
Environmental	Yes	Access to Information	Yes/No
Sustainability	Yes/No	Exempt from publication	Yes/No
Risk Management	Yes/No		

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Appendices:	A Viewing figures for RDC committee meetings
Relevant Previous Minutes:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Reference Documents:	N/A