

REPORT TO Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 23 March 2017

Report of: Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support

Title: Public Engagement in the Democratic Process and Webcasting of Council meetings

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report sets out a response to the Notice of Motion which was passed by Council in February 2016 regarding encouraging greater public engagement in the democratic process and webcasting of Council meetings.

2. Recommendations:

2.1. That the current arrangements for the holding of all public meetings of the City Council be maintained.

2.2 That a simple trial for broadcasting some of the Council meetings be undertaken with a view to the levels of take up and feedback being reported to a future meeting of this Committee

2.3 That no opportunity be given for the public to question the Council leader at the commencement of full Council meetings

2.4 That the Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support, work closely with the Director of Communications & Marketing to maximise publicity of the decision making process, including items on committee agenda as and when they arise.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 As detailed in the report

4. What are the resource implications including non financial resources.

4.1 A small budget would be required to undertake the initial broadcasting suggestion – this could be accommodated within existing budgets. Similarly, there would be a staffing requirement to undertake the filming. This again could be met initially from within existing budgets.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

5.1 There are no additional financial implications contained in this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

6.1 None identified

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

- 7.1 The Monitoring Officer considers that webcasting could promote openness and transparency in Local Government and therefore should be supported.

8. Report details:

- 8.1 At the Council meeting held on 23 February 2016, the Council considered and approved the following motion

"This Council recognises the need to encourage the widest possible public involvement with its meetings and therefore resolves to:-

- a) Support Council Committee meetings and Full Council meetings being held out of the Civic Centre and Guildhall on a rolling basis, giving a greater opportunity for Exeter residents to engage with the Council's decision-making processes;*
- b) Support web broadcasts of Full Council and all Council Committee meetings (where such meetings are held in The Guildhall and Civic Centre);*
- c) Support a Question Time to the Council Leader at the commencement of Full Council Meetings. This may or may not include questions written in advance.*

The Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support is asked to draw together a report on the above proposals, with a report on the practicalities of implementation to be brought to the appropriate Scrutiny Committee at the earliest opportunity."

- 8.6 Consideration of this matter has been split down into the three separate elements of the motion.

Meetings being held elsewhere

- 8.7 At present, all of the Council's official meetings take place in the meeting rooms at the Civic Centre, with meetings of the Council being held at the Guildhall.
- 8.8 The meeting rooms at the Civic Centre have been designed so that they can hold all of the formal meetings of the Council, with capacity for 100 members of the public to attend and witness proceedings.
- 8.9 This is, in normal circumstances, sufficient. However, there have been a few occasions, where, due to the subject matter being considered, it has not been possible to accommodate all who wished to attend the meeting. This is primarily at Planning Committee.
- 8.10 This was also the case with a Council meeting, when the planning application for the proposed leisure centre complex was considered. As stated above, Council meetings are held at the Guildhall, where the capacity is much smaller at only 100 in total. On this occasion, the capacity issue, together with the contentious nature of the subject matter, meant that not all of the interested parties could be accommodated at the meeting, with a number (estimated to be between 20-30) being kept outside the building. This level of interest in matters is rare, and mainly surrounds planning matters.
- 8.11 The rooms at the Civic Centre, are fitted out with microphones and display screens which assist the running of the meeting, and ensure that those members of the public who physically attend the meetings, can hear and see the proceedings.

- 8.12 The Civic Centre (and Guildhall) are pretty much in the heart of the City, with plenty of availability of public parking and public transport links.
- 8.13 Whilst the concept of holding meetings elsewhere in the City is not unrealistic, the following matters would have to be taken into account:-
- Finding suitable accommodation elsewhere (including the availability of all necessary equipment), including accessibility requirements;
 - Transportation of necessary equipment which may not be available at the venue (e.g. microphones);
 - Ensuring the appropriate public notice is given of the different location;
 - The costs associated with the hiring of the venues;
 - Staff time and costs in administering the booking of suitable venues, and ensuring their set up in time for the meetings themselves;
 - The availability of accommodation elsewhere up to 18 months ahead of the meeting itself – there is no guarantee that the accommodation booked, would be suitable for the meeting required by the time the meeting came to take place.
- 8.14 There has been no call to move away from meetings held at the Civic Centre (or Guildhall) apart from on occasions when capacity issues for public attendance have been considered. These are rare in number.
- 8.15 As stated above, due to the necessity to ensure accommodation is available well in advance of the meeting date, rooms at the Civic Centre are booked about 18 months in advance. Whilst this can, of course, also be done for alternative accommodation, there is no guarantee that by the time the meeting comes around, that venue remains suitable. For example, we may hire a room in one part of the City which, by the time the meeting comes round, is the complete opposite side of the City to the matter being considered, as well as being too small to accommodate the potential number of public attending.
- 8.16 For these various reasons, it is suggested that the current practice of holding meetings in the Civic Centre (and Guildhall) continue.

Broadcasting of meetings

- 8.17 The Council does not currently broadcast its meetings.
- 8.18 It is accepted that this is becoming more and more popular amongst councils, and is a way in ensuring that those who are interested in the meetings, yet are unable to attend the meeting, can keep up to date with the decisions being made, either in a live or archived capacity.
- 8.19 Recent events in the City, such as the Cathedral Yard fire, show the appetite amongst the public to keep up to date with such events, and the Council met that interest by live broadcasts, albeit of a very simple nature.
- 8.20 It is not felt that there is a similar level of interest in Council meetings, although it is accepted that some form of broadcasting would open up accessibility to the democratic process, and it is therefore considered appropriate to consider a way in which this can be achieved.

- 8.21 Many other authorities who broadcast their meetings have purpose built committee rooms which are only used for committee style meetings. This enables them to set up the rooms in a permanent basis, with all the necessary equipment being similarly permanently installed.
- 8.22 That is not the case with the rooms used for committee meetings by the City Council. The committee rooms at the Civic Centre are not permanently set up in the committee style and format, as they are used for many other types of meetings, which often require a different seating arrangement.
- 8.23 This is even more the case with the Guildhall, which is used for a multitude of purposes, and is only set up in the Council meeting format for Council meetings which are held every 8-10 weeks. It is also a Grade 1 listed building.
- 8.24 This means that the Council would not be able to install equipment such as fixed position microphones or cameras without either making changes to the rooms and the equipment within them, or substantially changing the use of the rooms themselves.
- 8.25 It is therefore suggested that a simple and portable system (such as Facebook Live or similar) be trialled for all public committee meetings over a 6 month period. Such a trial would allow consideration of:-
- The ease in which the set-up of the equipment can be undertaken;
 - The take up of, and feedback from, those watching the broadcasts either on a live or archived basis;
 - The costs involved in purchasing the necessary equipment, as well as staff costs associated with operating the camera(s) throughout the meeting.

Question time to the Leader of the Council at Council meetings

- 8.26 There is currently no opportunity for questions by members of the public to be asked of the Leader of the Council at full Council meetings or indeed any meeting.
- 8.27 Members are reminded that at the Council meeting on 24 February 2015, a similar motion to that of February 2016, was considered as follows:-

Councillor Holland, seconded by Councillor Baldwin, moved a Notice of Motion in the following terms:-

Exeter City Council resolved to:-

Explore the viability of allowing members of the public to ask questions of this Council at its commencement of Full Council Meetings. This may or may not include questions written in advance. In addition, to consider that the same facility to be afforded at Executive Meetings which may only be restricted to "agenda items".

In presenting the Notice of Motion, Councillor Holland stated that this motion sought to engage with the public and encourage them to come along to Council meetings. The public should be able to table questions to Full Council, having submitted them in advance by mid-day on the Friday prior to Full Council, the question and answer part of the agenda should last no longer than 30 minutes. He had bench marked public speaking against other local authorities such as Devon County Council, East Devon District Council, Rotherham, West Yorkshire and Newcastle under Lyme. He asked that the Council support this motion to enable the public to ask questions at Council.

During discussion the following points were raised:-

- *public speaking was already in place at Exeter Board and the Council's Planning and Scrutiny Committees*
- *the Council does engage with its residents an example being the budget consultation in the Express and Echo – which had received over 5,000 responses*
- *some Members felt that it would be the same few people raising questions and would be used for promoting political views*
- *Councillors were elected to represent their residents and the majority of the public were too busy to attend Council meetings.*

Councillor Baldwin, in seconding the motion, stated that the public engagement at Exeter Board, Planning Committee and Scrutiny Committees worked well and that, as long as questions at Council did not dominate meetings, there should be a mechanism in place to allow questions from the public.

Whilst the majority of Members opposed the motion, other Members felt that there was a need to enable the public to ask questions at Council.

The Motion was put to the vote and lost.

- 8.28 It is felt that little has changed since the Council's consideration of this matter in 2015.
- 8.29 However, members may be interested to know that since that date, the Council has recorded the following numbers of public speakers at its meetings:-
- Planning – a total of 105 (averaging 4 per meeting) – all of whom were speaking either in favour or opposition of a particular planning application
 - Corporate Services Scrutiny (formerly Resources) – a total of 2
 - People Scrutiny (formerly Community) – a total of 3
 - Place Scrutiny (formerly Economy) – a total of 6
 - Licensing Committee – a total of 10 (all of whom were the applicants for the licences under consideration)
 - Council – 9. Public speaking is not normally permitted but was on the occasion of the consideration of the planning application concerning the proposed leisure complex.
- 8.30 These numbers show that, with the exception of planning applications, there is little appetite from members of the public to address formal council meetings despite there being appropriate mechanisms for so doing.
- 8.31 It is therefore suggested that no additional provision be made for public questions at Council meetings.

Greater publicity

- 8.32 With the exception of the more contentious matters (particularly planning applications), attendance by members of the public and press at council meetings, and that of its committees, is minimal, and in some respects non-existent.
- 8.33 Whilst all agenda and supporting papers (with the exception of those relating to Part 2 items) are published on the Council's internet in accordance with statutory requirements, little interest is shown in much of the decision making process undertaken by the various committees.

8.34 It is therefore suggested that the Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support works closely with the recently appointed Director of Communications & Marketing to maximise publicity, where applicable, of the matters to be considered and the decisions to be taken.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

9.1 The ability for members of the public to be engaged in the democratic process, is a key element of everything within the Council's corporate plan. The suggested trial of broadcasting the Council's meetings will extend the ability of members of the public to be engaged, even if they are unable to physically attend the meetings.

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

10.1 There are no risks associated with the proposals.

11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

11.1 None

12. Are there any other options?

12.1 Yes – as detailed above in the report.

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:-

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