

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Full Council
Date: 17 October 2023
Reporting officer: Head of Democratic Services
Subject: Live Streaming Council Meetings

Purpose and summary of report:

1. To provide Full Council with an overview of a project to refurbish the Council Chamber with new audio-visual (AV) equipment that would allow Council meetings to be live streamed and held in a hybrid manner.
2. To seek Full Council agreement to proceed with the project and for an in-year amendment to the 2023-24 capital programme to reflect the project expenditure.

Recommendations:

That Full Council agrees:

1. the procurement of products and services be supported to enable the live streaming of Council and Committee meetings and the associated improvements in the audio-visual facilities in the Council Chamber as set out in section three of the report.
2. the AV Equipment Project for the Council Chamber proceeds, and authority be delegated to the Director (Corporate Services), in consultation with the Leader of the Council, Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services to conduct the procurement process, award a contract and enter into the necessary associated legal agreements on behalf of the Council.
3. an amount of £150,000 is added to the approved capital programme for 2023/24 for the purpose of procuring AV equipment for the Council Chamber.

Key Implications:	
Item	Implications
Legal	The Council is not obliged to live stream its formal meetings, but it is increasingly considered best practice to do so. Regulations issued in 2014 require authorities to make available reasonable facilities for members of the public to report on meetings using any communication method, including film, photography, audio recording and social media.

Finance and Value for Money	The associated costs for the project are detailed in section four of the report.
Corporate Plan	The project links to Corporate Plan objective 1 – People (carbon neutral) and objective 3 – Progress (digital innovation).
Climate Change	Completion of the project would allow some non-statutory meetings to be held virtually, reducing the need for participants and the public to travel by private or public transport.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The live webcasting (or ‘streaming’) of Council meetings is now common practice in local authorities across the UK including the majority of Councils in Kent (see Point 2.1 below). However, Gravesham Council does not currently stream any of its public meetings.
- 1.2 Since 2020, there has been an increased expectation from the public and press that meetings are streamed online, improving residents access to the decision-making process, thereby providing for more informed and engaged local debate, and enhanced transparency.
- 1.3 The Council does hold hybrid meetings (where some participants join remotely) in the Council Chamber for non-statutory committees and events, but the current facilities in place for these are retrofitted. The equipment used is meant for smaller rooms and there continues to be persistent audio issues, stemming from the aging delegate microphones.
- 1.4 All the aforementioned would be resolved by investment into the current audio and visual equipment in the Council Chamber.

2. Neighbouring Authorities

- 2.1 The majority of neighbouring Councils in Kent stream meetings through platforms such as YouTube and Microsoft Teams:

Local Authority	Live Streaming
Ashford	Meetings are live streamed and recorded through Microsoft Teams, link accessible through the council website.
Canterbury	Meetings are live streamed, but audio only. The link to listen to the meeting is accessible through the council website.
Dartford	No live streamed or recorded meetings.
Dover	Meetings are live streamed via YouTube; the Council retains the recordings for 30 days from the date of the meeting.
Folkestone & Hythe	Meetings are live streamed through a web portal on their website and then stored in a webcast section of their website.
Gravesham	No live streamed or recorded meetings.
Maidstone	Meetings are live streamed and stored using YouTube; the link is accessible through the website.
Medway	
Sevenoaks	
Swale	
Thanet	
Tonbridge & Malling	

- 2.2 Overall, 10 Kent local authorities' live stream and record their meetings with Dartford and Gravesham being the only local authorities not to do so.

3. Solution

- 3.1 Three market leading AV equipment suppliers with local government experience were approached to discuss the Council's audio-visual facilities in the Council Chamber. Following these discussions, all suppliers provided quotes to achieve the best audio-visual solution for Gravesham, considering what the Council hoped to achieve with the improvements.
- 3.2 All three suppliers recommended the following equipment for the Council Chamber:
- 3.2.1 Complete replacement of the current conferencing system, speakers and all microphones. The current microphones aren't fit for purpose; the new microphones will be louder and allow the speaker to be heard clearly whilst sitting further away from the microphone. Each Member will have their own microphone and the mics have the option to be upgraded with additional features in the future if required.
 - 3.2.2 The new microphone system would improve current functionality and remain accessible to all.
 - 3.2.3 High specification wall-mounted cameras with camera tracking; when a speaker turns on their microphone, the camera allocated to that microphone would automatically turn towards and capture the speaker. The speaker's name and title could be displayed on the live stream via the meeting management system.
 - 3.2.4 Large fixed or roving TV monitors that would integrate with the other equipment in the Council Chamber to ensure all Members would be able to clearly view and communicate with any Members/officers attending virtually. If roving monitors were installed, they could be used in separate meeting rooms as additional screens for Member/officer meetings.
 - 3.2.5 Small monitors would be integrated into the top dais to ensure that Members sitting there would be able to view presentations/teams without moving.
 - 3.2.6 Installation of a meeting management system to control the equipment in the Council Chamber and assist officers in efficiently running each meeting.
 - 3.2.7 A custom-made cupboard to store all equipment/wires and allow for easy access by officers.
 - 3.2.8 The existing projector and motorised projector screen will be retained, which provides a small saving.
 - 3.2.9 A small annual maintenance cost for the equipment would be met from existing budgets; the expected life of the products is at least 10 years and as the equipment is portable it could be moved to another building if required.

- 3.3 The changes proposed to be made to the AV equipment in the Chamber would allow Council meetings to be live streamed to the website via a streaming platform such as Microsoft Teams Live Events or YouTube.
- 3.4 A link would be added to the website on each agenda, and a member of the public would be able to click on the link which would take them to the live stream of the Council meeting.
- 3.5 In other Authorities it is commonplace at the start of every live streamed meeting for the Chair would read out a statement. This advises attendees and viewers that the meeting would be live streamed and recorded, as well as setting out the procedure rules. It also advises the public that if they stayed for the duration of the meeting, they may appear in the live stream, and they had given their consent to be recorded. The cameras would only focus on attendees of the meeting, but the public may get caught in the live stream as Members spoke, however none of the cameras would be located inside the public gallery. In other meetings such as Planning Committee, members of the public that were registered as public speakers would be part of the live streamed meeting.
- 3.6 The room layout for each live steamed meeting would be fixed to enable the cameras to correctly track each microphone and accurately capture each Member speaking; the rooms layouts would be reviewed, and minor changes made.
- 3.7 Live streaming meetings would promote increased public engagement and make the decision-making process more transparent; some meetings generate a lot of public interest, but the Council Chamber capacity is limited; by providing a live steam more members of the public would be able to view the meeting.
- 3.8 All live streamed Council meetings recordings would be stored; those videos could be accessed by the public via the Council's website. These recordings would be retained on the website for a minimum of 12 months in line with industry standards.
- 3.9 Under the current law, statutory Council meetings such as Council, Planning Committee and Licensing Committee etc are not permitted to be held virtually and Members must attend in-person, however non-statutory meetings such as Cabinet Committees, could be held completely virtually or as a hybrid meeting (with some attendees remotely joining and others in the chamber).
- 3.10 Under current legislation, virtual attendance to Council meetings does not count towards a Members official attendance record; a Member must attend a Council meeting at least once every six months
- 3.11 If the law was changed in the future to allow statutory meetings to be held virtually, such as they were temporarily during the pandemic, then Gravesham would be ready to implement virtual meetings if desired, following completion of this project.
- 3.12 These improvements to the Council Chamber would also make the space more commercially attractive to hirers, thereby generating revenue for the council.
- 3.13 Training on how to use the new microphones would be circulated to Members prior to the implementation of any new system.

4. Financials

- 4.1 Subject to a full procurement exercise, the capital cost of the proposals set out above is estimated at circa £150,000.
- 4.2 The proposed funds would need to be added to the in-year Capital Programme.
- 4.3 It is proposed that funding for the proposal is provided from the Corporate Priorities Reserve. Funding for ongoing support and maintenance costs will be met from existing budgets.

5. Tender Process

- 5.1 Following Full Council approval of the project, a procurement exercise would be undertaken in line with the legal and constitutional requirements of the Council.

6. Timescale

- 6.1 Following approval by Full Council, the procurement exercise would be undertaken as soon as possible; the work in the Council Chamber would only be undertaken when the Committee timetable wasn't busy, and the room could easily be booked out for several weeks.

7. Appendices

- 7.1 There are no appendices.

8. Background Documents

- 8.1 There are no background documents.

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Secondary Implications	
Risk Assessment	N/A
Data Protection Impact Assessment	<i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i>
	<p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of personal data or special category data or criminal offence data? A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website via the above links.</p> <p>No</p>
	<p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice?</p> <p>N/A</p>
	<p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at gdpr@medway.gov.uk.</p> <p>N/A</p>
Equality Impact Assessment	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer.</p> <p>No</p>
	<p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer.</p> <p>Yes; those people who wish to attend meetings but may not be able to due to injury/illness will be able to join some meetings virtually.</p>
	<i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i>
Crime and Disorder	N/A
Digital and website implications	<p>The digital Team will need to embed the links of live stream meetings into the website.</p> <p>Live streaming meetings will improve the public image of the website as they will be able to watch meetings through the embedded links.</p>
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	N/A