

Arun District Council

REPORT TO:	Policy and Finance Committee – 7 March 2024
SUBJECT:	The Webcasting of Meetings – Future Options
LEAD OFFICER:	Daniel Bainbridge – Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer Jane Fulton – Committee Services Manager /James Saunders – ICT Operations Manager
LEAD MEMBER:	Councillor Stanley – Chair of Policy & Finance
WARDS:	All
CORPORATE PRIORITY / POLICY CONTEXT / CORPORATE VISION: The webcasting of meetings supports the following themes in the Council’s Vision, a better future for 2022-2026: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improving the wellbeing of Arun• Supporting the environment to support us• Fulfilling Arun’s economic potential	
DIRECTORATE POLICY CONTEXT: This report is produced by a group of Officers working with the Group Head of Law & Governance to provide options for Members to consider in looking at the ongoing use and the future of webcasting and associated costs.	
FINANCIAL SUMMARY: Following a soft market testing exercise, a full and comprehensive list of options has been drawn up for the Committee to consider and to confirm which out of those options should be progressed. All additional costs are reflected in each of the options set out within the report.	

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. The webcasting of meetings is an important part of enabling open and transparent decision-making and increasing the public’s access to the democratic process. The Council has been webcasting its formal public meetings since 2018.
- 1.2. The Council currently webcasts live all its Full Council and Committee meetings using an audio-visual system that was purchased and installed in 2014. The age of the equipment has severely affected its reliability and performance for some time now. The age of the equipment is also making it increasingly difficult for the current provider and manufacturer to support the ageing parts of the system.
- 1.3. The Council is now looking at the different options that are available to it in continuing to provide a webcasting service. Each of the options explored are set out in this report.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. Set out within the report is a range of options that are available to the Council in terms of updating its ageing webcasting equipment. It is the view of the Officer Group working on this project that the following options are approved:
 - (a) Option 1 – to upgrade the current video matrix, touch screens and audio-visual distribution.
 - (b) Option 2 – to include Option 1, plus the replacement of the 14 screens on desks in the Council Chamber; and
 - (c) Options 1, 2 at a total cost of £61,500 and Option 6 – which is approval to procure the current webcasting and maintenance contract for another year from July 2024.
- 2.2 If Options 1 and 2 are approved, it will be necessary to make a recommendation to Full Council for this project to be added to the capital programme.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 3.1. The Committee is asked to note the current update provided in relation to its webcasting equipment in the Council Chamber and is asked to approve Options 1, 2 and 6 set out within the report, with Options 1 and 2 being added to the Council's capital programme.

4. DETAIL AND HISTORY

- 4.1. Members should be aware that previous reports were brought to Cabinet in 2019 and 2020 making recommendations to Council on 26 November 2020 to approve a supplementary estimate of £65k to upgrade equipment in the Council Chamber. This included the replacement of the projector; however, this was not supported by Council, nor was it seen to be a priority and the proposals were withdrawn. The links to those reports have been provided as background papers to this report.
- 4.2. Developments in technology since 2019, coupled with the Covid-19 Pandemic which forced the Council to operate (initially) virtual only meetings and (later) hybrid meetings, the expectation and need to provide hybrid options has increased both amongst Officers and Members but also from the public.
- 4.3. There are parts of the audio-visual suite that now require urgent upgrading to allow the Council to adapt to the ever-changing council meeting requirements and to ensure effective webcasting. Some elements of the current audio-visual hardware are not viable and need to be upgraded and are no longer supported by the original manufacturer. These are:
 - (a) Touch screens controlling the Audio Visual Suite. A new programme cannot be written/edited to show the recent Hybrid Linking with the Chamber system.

- (b) Existing HDMI video matrix has no additional inputs/outputs to allow for electronic voting to be displayed. The installation of the hybrid equipment, which was seen as a priority following the Covid-19 Pandemic, removed the capacity to allow electronic voting to be displayed.
- (c) The projector was confirmed as broken on 15 January 2024. A specialist company confirmed that the projector was beyond repair and a new projector was ordered, met from existing budgets, on 8 February 2024. The new projector was installed on 19 February 2024 [tbc]. This decision was taken to ensure that meetings could continue to be run using the hybrid system.
- (d) The 14 Screens around the chamber are 16 years old, are low quality and have scrolling horizontal lines across them making them increasingly unfit for purpose.

5. OPTIONS FOR THE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER

5.1. The list of options for the Committee to consider are set out below:

Option 1	£k
Upgrade current video matrix, touch screens and audio visual distribution	
Replace the ACCS PC and upgrade to Windows 11	Total cost £51k
Considered as urgent [Red]	
Risk if Option not pursued - once outdated equipment fails – it would not be possible to continue with the webcasting of meetings.	

- 5.2 An updated audio-visual distribution system would provide the Council with a stable control system preventing reoccurrence of the issues experienced in the past year in not being able to webcast meetings live due to ageing equipment. The replacement matrix and touch screens would provide easier ability to control the system.
- 5.3 The existing video matrix, which was installed over 10 years ago, is no longer supported by the manufacturer and has no additional video inputs and cannot be supported by another provider. A new Extron Video Matrix would allow for an improved connection and higher resolution 4k image to be shared around the audio-visual network. A new touch screen panel would be provided to allow the Council to switch seamlessly between what is viewed in the Chamber as well as what is viewed on the live webcast.

5.4 Currently, the webcasting system is controlled from the rear of the Chamber, which requires a member of staff to access that area to support the technical side of the meeting such as starting, pausing and stopping the broadcast of the meeting. In recent months, this support has extended to attempting to resolve significant technical issue as they arise during meetings. With the planned upgrades, Officers would be looking to extend the control of the webcast system to the dais desk, which will be incorporated with the same screen as the microphone control system, providing the ability to control the webcast system from two locations.

Option 2	£k
To include Option 1 – plus replacement of 14 screens on desks in Council Chamber	
Considered as Urgent	Total cost £10k
Risk if Option not pursued – This equipment cannot be replaced like for like due to its age. Non replacement of the equipment would be a health and safety risk due to eye discomfort and strain, headaches and fatigue caused by blurry screens and disturbed vision	

5.5 The desk mounted screens were installed prior to the 2014 upgrade and still use analogue connections to show the video feed. As part of the visual upgrade, it is recommended that the 14 screens are replaced with new HDMI 13 inch monitor screens [still one per person] which will improve on the viewing experience of the Members/Officers seated there.

5.6 The new 13 inch screens will provide a clearer and brighter image for those sitting in those locations. They will also benefit from clearer sight lines in the Chamber as the screen size would be the same size as an iPad Pro screen.

Option 3	£k
Audio visual distribution system across the Chamber and all Committee Rooms to allow the webcasting of meetings in the Blue, Pink and Green Committee Rooms	
Not urgent	Total cost £24k

5.7 This option would provide an upgrade to the three committee rooms allowing the Council to host hybrid meetings in these rooms, independently from the Chamber and the ability to also webcast from those locations.

Option 4	£k
Replacement of conference microphones system in the Council Chamber	
Not urgent	Total cost £50 to £100k – variance if not using existing supplier

- 5.8 Although the current microphone system is in good working order and has been incredibly stable over the past 10 years, the system is subject to interference. These would be replaced with a 100% interference free microphone system.

Option 5	£k
Potential to host remote Council meetings around the district as “on the road” council meetings £2.750 (per Meeting)	
Not urgent [unless Options 1 and 2 are not supported and the current hardware fails]	Total cost £2.7k per meeting

- 5.9 Full conference event equipment, comprising of microphones, electronic voting, hybrid calls, camera tracking and broadcasting of meetings in any location. Accompanying the conference system would be large screen visuals and speakers for amplifying presentations and live speakers. Road Shows are fully managed by an engineer who can be present and run the conference event for the duration of meeting.

Option 6	£k
Approval to reprocore webcasting and maintenance contract.	Total cost – expected – no more than existing contract cost of £18k subject to procurement work with Hampshire County Council and the results of framework procurement
Considered as urgent – existing contract expires in July 2024	

- 5.10 Reprocore the webcasting contract that expires in July 2024. To not reprocore a contract will mean that the Council will not be able to webcast any meetings and would prevent the Council from delivering the intended level of service to Councillors, members of the public and the press.
- 5.11 It is the recommendation of the ICT Operations Manager and Committee Services that members approve Options 1, 2 and 6.

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1. A Member Briefing session was held on 4 March 2024 to explain to Members the intricacies and operational/practical requirements of this complex equipment.

7. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

- 7.1. To review the report and accept the Officer recommendations; or
- 7.2. To propose an alternative option. One alternative would be to cease webcasting the Council's meetings as it is not a statutory requirement to do so, but this is considered a retrograde step in terms of the transparency of and public access to the Council's meetings and is not a trend that is being seen across local government, where public access has steadily increased over the past two decades.

8. COMMENTS BY THE GROUP HEAD OF FINANCE/SECTION 151 OFFICER

- 8.1. If Members approve Options 1 and 2, the total capital costs will be £61,500 and the project will need to be added to the current capital programme. This could be funded from borrowing or capital receipts and Officers will assess the most financially advantageous way of achieving this. For this report, Members should assume that the costs will be funded from borrowing.
- 8.2. The running costs associated with this project are explained in Paragraph 5.9 and provision exists within the 2024/25 revenue budget.
- 8.3. If the project costs are funded from borrowing, this will incur financing costs of about £3,900 per annum. This would be an additional cost to the 2024/25 budget, but it is expected that Officers will be able to identify in year funding for this.

9. RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- 9.1. If the Committee confirms that it does not wish to pursue any of the options outlined in Paragraph 5.1 of the report, failure to upgrade will mean that at some point in the future the existing webcasting equipment will fail, and the webcasting of meetings would have to stop.

10. COMMENTS OF THE GROUP HEAD OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE & MONITORING OFFICER

- 10.1 There is no legal requirement for the Council to webcast its meetings, only for it to enable public access to its meetings under the Local Government Act 1972 and subsequent legislation, unless specific exemptions apply which means that a meeting or specific item at a meeting should be considered in private.
- 10.2 However, webcasting means that members of the public are not required to attend the Civic Centre to view the Council's meetings and it also enables those members of the public who might otherwise be unable to view meetings (for reasons of cost, mobility, geographical distance and so on) to do so.

11. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

- 11.1. Not applicable.

12. HEALTH & SAFETY IMPACT

12.1. Not applicable.

13. PROPERTY & ESTATES IMPACT

13.1. Not applicable.

14. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) / SOCIAL VALUE

14.1. The provision of audio visual equipment, the provision of monitors for Members in the Council Chamber and the provision of webcasting are part of the Council's approach to equality and diversity. These allow all Members (and the public) to participate equally without disadvantage regardless of age or disability.

15. CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT/SOCIAL VALUE

15.1. Not applicable.

16. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

16.1. Not applicable.

17. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT

17.1. Not applicable.

18. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION / DATA PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

18.1. Not applicable.

CONTACT OFFICER:

Name: Daniel Bainbridge

Job Title: Group Head of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

Contact Number: 01903 737607

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Cabinet – 22 June 2020 – the report, minutes and Decision Notice can be accessed using the links below:

[Report to Cabinet](#)

[Minutes](#)

[Decision Notice](#)

Report to Cabinet – 21 September 2020 - the report, minutes and Decision Notice can be accessed using the links below:

[Report to Cabinet](#)

[Minutes](#) – there was a recommendation to Full Council

[Decision Notice](#)

To view the minutes from Full Council on 26 November 2020 – please use the link below to access the minutes – see Minute 350 – Cabinet – 21 September 2020

[Minutes](#)