

ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

ON 22 MARCH 2021

SUBJECT: Report on Options to Progress Webcast Improvement Project

REPORT AUTHOR: Karl Roberts – Director Place
DATE: 25 January 2021
EXTN: 37760

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Following previous reports, this report provides options to cabinet for progressing the Webcast Improvement Project with associated costs and address the technical requirements to host hybrid meetings and extend the contract for the operation of our webcasting facility.

RECOMMENDATION:

Cabinet is asked to make the following recommendations to Full Council:

- 1) Determine what upgrades to the webcasting system are necessary from those items listed in Table A and approve a supplementary estimate for that amount for the one-off projects cost for the webcasting hardware installation. The amount that this equates to for a Band D property in terms of equivalent Council Tax will be reported to Full Council.
- 2) Note the proposed action to purchase the hardware required to facilitate hybrid meetings.
- 3) Subject to the approval of recommendation (1) to approve the additional on-going revenue costs for annual maintenance and broadband subscription of £21k per annum to be included in the budget for 2021/22.
- 4) Cabinet resolves to extend the contract with the current provider of webcasting facilities for a further 12 months until June 2022.

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 As Members will be aware the Minutes from 21 September 2020 Cabinet meeting were eventually considered at Full Council on the 26 November. Following a debate on whether a supplementary estimate of £65k should be approved the Leader of the Council agreed to withdraw the item. The relevant passages for the Minutes are set out below.

“There was much debate on this item. Many Councillors confirmed that they could not support the cost of £65k for this project at this time and in view of the financial situation that the Council found itself in as a result of the Pandemic. There were other more vital priorities to address which was to continue in supporting residents and businesses in the area. It was also felt that the technical issues experienced in the past could be overcome. What was required was a more flexible approach to the webcasting of meetings and that a hybrid

option should be investigated to provide flexible resilience allowing some Councillors to be present in the Council Chamber and others attending virtually and in view of the fact that it was likely that virtual meetings would continue for some time.

Others spoke in support of the recommendations confirming that the upgrades were required to allow the Council to continue webcasting some of the Council meetings once normality returned – this being a physical presence again in the Council Chamber, especially as the public had become used to being able to watch all meetings live.

Following a lengthy debate, and in view of the fact that it could be some time before meetings could resume in the Council Chamber, it was felt that this project should be looked at again in line with what other guidance might be available in terms of hybrid and virtual meetings. Requests were also made to receive the viewing figures of meetings since lockdown and if these could be compared to viewing figures from the year before as this would then indicate how vital this service was to the viewing public.

Having again made points that this was not the right time to be spending money on anything other than services that were vital to the public, the proposer, Councillor Dr Walsh, confirmed that he was happy to withdraw this item and he asked Officers to reconsider the proposals and to find the most technically up to date solution for further consideration by a future meeting of Cabinet.

1.2 This report seeks to fulfil this requirement.

2. PROPOSAL(S):

2.1 Cabinet may recall that the proposal to spend £65K was based upon a soft market testing exercise, from which a full and comprehensive performance specification had been written, setting out expected functions and features of an upgraded, reliable, fully integrated, fit-for-purpose, and future proof webcasting, presentation, and conferencing system. Soft market testing had allowed the project group to engage with suppliers and ensure that the specification is realistic and thorough. In line with the specification previously presented to Cabinet, the project group have been asked to present the following costed (including contingency) options to Cabinet.

2.2 Therefore, what Officers have done (see table below) is break down the £65K cost into its constituent parts so that Cabinet can decide what investment (if any) should be made in modifying the existing arrangements.

Item	Cost	Benefit	Risk
3x HD pan/tilt/zoom cameras	8000	To eradicate 'creep' of existing cameras caused by worn belt drives, and to improve broadcast quality from SD to HD	Continue using existing cameras which are life expired and suffering from belt slip, causing them to lose position. Existing cameras are SD format.
Projector and screen upgrades	18000	To improve clarity (brightness) and colour	Continue using existing projector and accept the

– New laser projector and screen		rendering of the projected image in the Council Chamber. A laser projector will not require ongoing bulb replacements or filter cleaning, and has a projected life of 20,000hrs.	limitations in terms of brightness/clarity/colour.
Replacement screens at outlying desks	7000	To provide a more compact and higher quality solution for screens mounted at outlying desks.	Existing outlying screens are old and bulky, taking up a lot of desk space and providing low quality images.
Webcast capabilities upgrade	15000	Full dual feed (cameras and presentation) broadcast, Modern Gov synchronisation, meeting transcripts, broadcast bookmarking of agenda items.	Continue using existing broadcast solution, with limited capabilities:- no Modern Gov integration, no meeting transcripts, broadcasts not bookmarked. Note: Dual feed presentation can be achieved with existing equipment.
Install	13000	N/A	N/A
Cabling & sundries	4000	N/A	N/A

Items/features not included in the £65k option previously considered, and therefore not in the table above;

- Replacement wireless microphones for Committee Rooms
- Advance Microphone Control System (ACCS) – hardware and software for improved meeting management
- Extron Controller upgrade – required for hybrid meetings and improved room configurations (see 2.8-2.15)
- Committee Room webcam(s)
- Hearing Loop – the existing hearing loop (Chamber only) is a low-tech solution which causes significant ‘bleed’ and broadcasts beyond the Chamber (unsuitable for exempt discussions and the like)

2.3 Cabinet are invited to advise which elements (if any) should be taken forward.

2.4 There are number of key matters that Cabinet need to have regard to making their decisions.

2.5 Firstly, as reported in the previous report only the following meetings would be webcast (once meetings return to the Civic Centre) and all of these would be in the Council Chamber (Full Council & Planning Committee). All other Committee meetings would not be webcast.

- 2.6 There will be no webcasting from the remainder of the Civic Suite. Attempts continue to source new batteries for the remote microphones but to date these attempts have been unsuccessful. Therefore, there will be no microphones for Committee meetings not held in the Council Chamber.
- 2.7 Cabinet was updated on 9 December 2019 of the problems experienced in using more frequently the webcasting service. The last Civic Suite refurbishment was completed in 2015 having had numerous improvements made to the installed AV facilities, including the addition of the webcasting equipment. Alongside the installed systems, a service and maintenance agreement were entered into with the installer. From November 2018 onwards, webcasting has been used to a much greater extent highlighting deficiencies in the installed system and indicating a number of faults. These problems have prevented Officers from delivering the intended level of service to Councillors, members of the public and the press. Any decision not to proceed with the investment set out above generates the risk that meetings in the Council Chamber will be interrupted by similar faults.

Hybrid Meetings

- 2.8 In respect of holding hybrid meetings (with some Councillors in the Civic Centre and some attending virtually) a new IT solution is required to connect the online platform, with the chamber microphone system. This hybrid solution will allow for two-way communication from the Chamber camera & microphone system, to the Members at home using Teams/Zoom. This is achieved by installing a dedicated Windows PC and having a user account set up on Teams/Zoom on the PC. The operator would then split the HD camera feed from the chamber system and embeds the audio from the microphone system into an Extron HDMI – USB Capture device.
- 2.9 The USB output it is then connected to the new PC which will accept the USB as its camera feed, and when Teams/Zoom is launched, the program then shows the Chamber cameras as the video feed. Whenever the Council wishes to connect the two systems, the organiser of the online meetings simply invites the “Chamber Teams/Zoom” to the meeting.
- 2.10 The “Chamber Teams/Zoom” PC then needs to accept and join the meeting. Once the PC has accepted the meeting, nothing else is needed and the PC can be left for the duration of the meeting. When the Chamber microphones are activated, the online meeting will detect the “Chamber Teams/Zoom” PC is speaking and will display the video as if it was from a regular device using its built in webcam.
- 2.11 The output from the PC will be entered into an Extron 2-1 HDMI Switcher. The Extron USB capture device will also provide a loop through of the Chamber cameras and will be entered into the new switcher. Having both the original camera feed and the new Teams/Zoom feed entering a switcher, this will allow the Council to switch between Chamber video, or Chamber & Teams/Zoom video feed mixed.

- 2.12 The selected video feed, then (depending if the Council webcasts) would be passed through an amplifier to give one HDMI feed to the webcasting encoder and the second to the distribution system in the chamber to view on the visuals in the chamber.
- 2.13 An internet connection, with a minimum upload speed of around 5-10 Mbs is also required.
- 2.14 The cost of this equipment is up to £7000. Without this the Council cannot hold hybrid meetings. If Cabinet does not wish to incur this cost, then the Council will have to retain virtual meetings until meeting can again be held in the Civic Suite for all Councillors.
- 2.15 It is also important to note that at the time of writing the ability of the Council in law to hold virtual meetings expires on the 6 May. It is understood that primary legislation is required to allow virtual meetings to continue beyond that date. Members should note that there are also staffing implications with holding Hybrid meetings (similar to 2.17 below) because you need at least one committee person for each of the physical and virtual sides.

Webcasting Contract

- 2.16 Finally, because of the decision to refer this matter back to Officers for re-consideration it has not been possible to commence the procurement process for an operator of the webcasting due to the uncertainties highlighted above. Even if a decision is made at this Cabinet and endorsed by Full Council there would be insufficient time to undertake a comprehensive procurement process. Therefore, it is recommended that the current operator who has performed well with the virtual meetings be retained for a further 12 months to enable key decisions on the future of webcasting to be made and a comprehensive procurement process to be undertaken. The cost of this has been confirmed as £11,750 again.
- 2.17 The other main cost associated with webcasting are staff costs. Experience of operating webcasting successfully requires more than one person to administer the process. A lot of work is required in terms of setting up meetings and then ensuring they operate smoothly both technically and procedurally. To date the operation of virtual meeting has necessitated a combination of overtime and time in lieu for staff and significant amount of goodwill on behalf of the Committee staff. Should a decision be taken to broadcast Committee meetings to a wider audience then the increased staffing costs will need to be addressed.

3.0 OPTIONS:

- 3.1 To determine what actions are required.

4.0 CONSULTATION:

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		
Relevant District Ward Councillors		
Other groups/persons (please specify)		

5.0 ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail below)	YES	NO
Financial	✓	
Legal	✓	
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment	✓	
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		✓
Sustainability		✓
Asset Management/Property/Land		✓
Technology	✓	
Other (please explain)		✓

6.0 IMPLICATIONS:

6.1 The ongoing use of webcasting, any expansion to include Committee Rooms and the need for hybrid meeting solutions will have financial and staffing implications. In terms of Equality issues providing a webcast for all meetings would provide the broadest and best solution to those persons with protected characteristics. However, this needs to be balanced against the resources available to deliver this. In due course after the Pandemic it will be possible to hold meetings again in the Civic Centre. Greater use of the Council Chamber to facilitate some meetings is considered to be an appropriate solution in the circumstances.

7.0 REASON FOR THE DECISION:

7.1 This updated report is intended to fulfil the outcome from the previous consideration of this matter at Full Council - 26 November 2020

8.0 EFFECTIVE DATE OF THE DECISION: 12 May 2021 [Full Council]

9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Cabinet Report and Decision from 8 July 2019

Cabinet Report and Decision from 9 December 2019

Cabinet Report and Decision from 22 June 2020

Cabinet Report and Decision from 21 September 2020 & Full Council 26 November 2020