Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of Executive Director (Legal and Democratic Services)
To

Cabinet

On
16th January 2020

Report prepared by: Colin Gamble (Head of Democratic Services)

Notice of Motion – Transparent and Accessible Council

Cabinet
Cabinet Member: Councillor Gilbert
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To consider the Notice of Motion requesting that consideration be given to extending webcasting to the Council's scrutiny committees and enhancing the use of social media in conjunction with live recorded meetings.

2. Recommendations

2.1 That webcasting of meetings of the Cabinet and the three scrutiny committees (to be held in the Council chamber) be trialled during the June/July 2020 cycle of meetings.

2.2 That officers be requested to consider ways of enhancing the use of social media in conjunction with the webcasting arrangements.

3. Background

3.1 At the meeting of Council held on 17th December 2019, councillors received the following Notice of Motion submitted by Councillor Habermel and supported by eighteen other conservative councillors:

"This Council should remain transparent and accessible to all residents in Southend. With more people turning to the internet and social media to keep informed about the events in their local area.

At present only the Full Council meeting is streamed live on the council's website. This has meant that residents who are unable to attend important public meetings such as cabinet and the three scrutiny committees, whether due to mobility issues or prior commitments, are unable to scrutinise the decisions made at this level.

Therefore, this Council resolves to:

a) Host all public Place, People and Policy and Resource Scrutiny Committees in the full chamber where they should be recorded with the cameras to be streamed live and stored on the Council website.
b) To stream live all recorded meetings on social media platforms where possible.
c) To ensure live updates on the Council's social media page happens for every social media feed."

3.2   The webcasting of Council meetings was introduced following a decision taken on the matter by Cabinet on 6th November 2012 (minute 446, refers). At the same time authority was given to upgrade the audio system in the Council chamber.

3.3   The opportunity to introduce webcasting was timely as it was announced by the then Secretary of State that members of the public who wanted to report on Council meetings would be offered the same privileges enjoyed by the accredited press. By virtue of the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, residents were later permitted to film, photograph or audio record public meetings of local authorities.

3.4   The webcasting of the Council meetings has been in operation for seven years through a third party provider (Public-i Group). There are statistics available showing the viewing figures for those meetings. The figures for the period January 2018 to December 2019 are set out in the table in <u>Appendix 1</u> to this report.

3.5   It is clear from the statistics that there are peaks and troughs in the viewing of Council meetings. There is no direct evidence about why people watch certain meetings more than others but the indications are that meetings are viewed more times where there are items of significant public interest on the agenda.

3.6   Increasingly councils are webcasting their meetings to provide a means of engaging citizens who would not normally be able to attend meetings, but are interested in what is being discussed. In recognition that it is becoming common practice elsewhere, it is considered there is merit in trialling webcasting at meetings of the Cabinet and the three scrutiny committee. It is proposed that webcasting of meetings of those bodies be trialled in the June/July 2020 cycle of meetings. Following the exercise, an assessment will be undertaken to determine the outcome to guide the Council's future approach to webcasting. This assessment will include consideration of whether the Council chamber and the equipment in it is fit for purpose.

3.7   It is also proposed that officers investigate ways of enhancing the use of social media in conjunction with the webcasting arrangements. In particular, it is suggested that officers speak to the Public-i Group about how live webcasting could be embedded into the Council's Twitter and Facebook feeds, as opposed to promoting the link to the webcasting which is the current practice.

Embedding into the feeds would potentially improve engagement rates and allow two way conversations with local people.

4.   Other Options

4.1   Not to extend webcasting to Cabinet and the three Council scrutiny committees.

5.   Reasons for Recommendations

5.1   To further improve the transparency and accessibility of meetings of the Cabinet and scrutiny committees.

6.   Corporate Implications

6.1   Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

        This report is relevant to the 2050 'Active and Involved theme'. The webcasting of meetings enhances democratic engagement by opening up the Council's decision-making and scrutiny to a wider audience.

6.2   Financial Implications

        The Council has a contract with Public-i for the webcasting of meetings of the Council. Part of the annual cost is based on the number of hours of the webcasts. The agreed number of hours would need to be increased to 20 hours for the purposes of the trial at a cost of approximately £750. There is a further cost (£500) for additional security staff for the meetings to be held in the Council chamber.

6.3   Legal Implications

        There is no legal requirement for councils to webcast their meetings

6.4   People Implications

        None.

6.5   Property Implications

        None.

6.6   Consultation

        Not applicable

6.7   Equalities and Diversity Implications

        By improving accessibility and inclusion in the democratic process, there are direct advantages to those with protected characteristics

6.8   Risk Assessment

The leasing of equipment and the use of a managed service, using expert webcast providers is a tried and tested approach that has been adopted by many local authorities.

6.9   Value for Money

See comments under financial implications above.

6.10   Community Safety Implications

None.

6.11   Environmental Impact

None.

7.   Background Papers

None.

8.   Appendix 1

Webcasting of Council Meetings Jan 2018 - Dec 2019