

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS

PROFORMA

Cabinet Meeting18th October 2018

1. Title of Item/Report

Openness of Local Government Bodies - Audio Recording of Council / Committee Meetings

2. Record of the Decision

Consideration was given to a report on the use of audio recording of all Council and committee meetings which was introduced in January 2016.

The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 assisted any members of the press and public who want to know about, view or report the work of local government bodies. The “press” was defined in the widest terms – including traditional print media, filming crews, hyper-local journalists and bloggers. The national rules had increased the rights to film, audio-record, take photographs, and use social media such as tweeting and blogging to report the proceedings of all such meetings that were open to the public.

Stockton had indeed benefited from a proactive local media presence at the majority of public meetings with the introduction of Local Democracy Reporters, who regularly report on local democracy issues.

It was acknowledged that in a modern, digital world where the use of modern communication methods such as filming, tweeting and blogging should be embraced for enhancing the openness and transparency of local government bodies. In accordance with these regulations all Councils had to allow any member of the public to take photographs, film and audio-record the proceedings, and report on all public meetings. In addition the Council was required to provide reasonable facilities to facilitate reporting for any member of the public who may wish to do so.

It was noted that the national rules similarly did not prevent Councillors from tweeting and blogging at meetings, which they should be allowed to do provided it was not disruptive and did not detract from the proper conduct of the meeting. Whilst Councillors were expected to comply with their body’s code of conduct, this should not prevent Councillors from tweeting or blogging when appropriate.

These regulations supported a strong, 21st century, local democracy where local government was genuinely accountable to the local people.

Stockton introduced the use of audio recording of all Council / Committee meetings in January 2016. The sole purpose for introducing the smartpens was to assist Governance Officers in the production of timely accurate minutes. Recordings were used to ensure the key points of the decision making process were effectively and accurately captured.

The smartpen had since been used at Council, Committee and other meetings with an announcement made by the Chair at the start of each meeting stating the reason why the recording was being made; e.g. to assist the Governance Officer at a later stage in compiling the minutes of the meeting.

It was acknowledged that the smartpens were introduced solely for the purpose of minute taking and that it was never the intention that the pens would act as recordings per se. However, in the time since the introduction of the smartpens, the availability of the audio recording had led to requests being made to obtain a copy of the recording, which had subsequently been provided on each occasion.

This had had a direct impact on the work of Governance Officers diverting resource away from the efficient and effective production of minutes to the consider requests for copies of recordings.

Requests can be received from different sources, in different ways and initially were discussed with the Council's Information Governance Team to understand the best way to deal with the request following which receipt of the enquiry was acknowledged. A decision was then subsequently made, often in consultation with the relevant service department, as to whether it was valid to provide the information requested. Should the request be regarded as valid, officers would respond to the enquiry, during which time consultation and approval of the release of the recording was obtained from the relevant Director and the reply sent out. In addition in some circumstances officers would need to advise the relevant committee members and officers of the release of the recording.

In the case of each of the audio recordings of Committee meetings provided to date, it had sometimes been necessary due to the size of memory of the recording, to provide a copy of the recording on disk rather than provide by e-mail. This had necessitated input from officers in Communications who had the appropriate software to convert the recording to disk. In all cases this inevitably diverts resource away from

the preparation of the minutes.

It was recommended that the Council continues to support local democracy by continuing to provide reasonable facilities for members of the press and public who wish to continue to record public meetings.

Governance officers would continue to prepare minutes of all meetings that reflected the proceedings and the decision making process in an accurate and timely way as possible.

In conclusion it was felt that as a consequence of people requesting copies of the Councils audio recordings, resources required within the governance team for minute preparation had been diverted. Therefore given that the recordings had been used in a way contrary to the use intended i.e. to support the performance of Governance Officers in the preparation of accurate and timely minutes, and that press, public and Councillors were able to make their own recordings, Cabinet agreed to discontinue the use of audio recording all Council / Committee meetings.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The recording of public meetings be supported and continues to be permitted (excluding exempt information).
2. A minute taking service continues to be provided and the use of smartpens be discontinued.

3. Reasons for the Decision

To respond to the emergence of requests for copies of the audio recording taken at meetings.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None.

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

None.

6. Details of any Dispensations

N/A

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

Midnight, 26 October 2018

Proper Officer
22 October 2018