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| <b>Committee/Meeting:</b><br>Cabinet   | <b>Date:</b><br>7 September<br>2011 | <b>Classification:</b><br>Unrestricted                 | <b>Report No:</b><br>CAB 034/112 |
| <b>Report of:</b><br>Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services)                      |                                     | <b>Title:</b><br>Recording/Webcasting Council Meetings |                                  |
| <b>Originating officer(s)</b> John S. Williams,<br>Service Head, Democratic Services |                                     | <b>Wards Affected:</b> All                             |                                  |

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| <b>Lead Member</b>          | Deputy Mayor, Councillor Ohid Ahmed |
| <b>Community Plan Theme</b> | One Tower Hamlets                   |
| <b>Strategic Priority</b>   | Efficient and effective services    |

## 1. **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 the Council considered a motion concerning recording of future Council meetings and agreed to audio and video record each meeting of the Full Council and to make the recording available online within 48 hours (for the full Council resolution see paragraph 5.1 below)
- 1.2 The Council's resolution relates to an executive matter which has resource implications and it therefore stands in the form of a recommendation to the Executive.
- 1.3 This report identifies the action required to implement the Council's resolution and sets out a number of options for consideration and the resource implications of these.

## 2. **DECISIONS REQUIRED**

Cabinet is recommended to:-

- 2.1 Consider the four options identified in section 6 of the report in relation to future recording and/or webcasting of Council meetings and decide which of the options should be pursued; and
- 2.2 If option 1 (utilising the existing equipment to implement a basic, low quality service) is the preferred option, to agree that this shall commence immediately subject to the Monitoring Officer agreeing the necessary amendment to the Council's Constitution; or
- 2.3 If option 2 (upgrading of equipment) or option 3 (a full webcasting service) is the preferred option, to agree that the officers report back to the next meeting with a full proposal including the source of funding and tender process for the project.

### **3. REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS**

- 3.1 The decision above will address the resolution of the Council of 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 and, if option 1, 2 or 3 is agreed, will facilitate implementation of that resolution.

### **4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 4.1 The report sets out four possible options for consideration at section 6 below.

### **5. BACKGROUND – THE COUNCIL RESOLUTION**

- 5.1 On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 the Council agreed the following motion:-

#### **“RESOLVED**

#### **This Council notes that:**

It is able to audibly and visually record council meetings using current technical equipment available in the council chamber.

It is able to record business conducted at Full Council with little or no cost to the taxpayer.

#### **This council believes that:**

democracy and accountability are important concepts in order to gain public trust in the decision making in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

residents should be able to refer to and view council meetings through the use of audio visual equipment.

conduct of Members of the Council will be positively affected by the knowledge that footage is in the public domain.

#### **This Council resolves: -**

To audio and video record each meeting of the Full Council to enable reference for members of the public, Council Members and officers and to increase transparency and accountability

To amend the Tower Hamlets Council Constitution, Part 4, Rule 27.1 to read ‘No photography or video or audio recording of any kind by guests and members of the public may take place at any Council Meeting without the express permission of the Chair.’

To introduce to the Tower Hamlets Council Constitution, Part 4, Rule 27.2 to read 'The Council Chamber, whilst the public gallery is open and the Council is conducting its business at the Meeting of the Tower Hamlets Council, will be video and audio recorded by the Council and made available online within 48 hours'.

- 5.2 Because the Council's resolution calls on the authority to take action in relation to an executive matter, it has the status of a recommendation to the Executive (Mayor and Cabinet), for consideration in the light of any resource and other implications.

## **6. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 6.1 Four options are set out below in respect of the resolution of the Council. In determining which of these, if any, to pursue the Executive will wish to consider the extent to which they will deliver the two main benefits proposed by the Council motion i.e.:-

(a) To enhance transparency of the democratic decision-making process and to enable access to the Council proceedings by residents who would otherwise not attend the meetings; and

(b) To capture a full record of the Council proceedings for future reference in case of any subsequent requirement e.g. to assist in the investigation of a complaint or other enquiry.

### **Option 1 – use existing equipment**

- 6.2 The Council Chamber is already equipped with video cameras, microphones and a processing unit that can capture the proceedings. These have been used in the past to provide audio and video coverage of the proceedings to an overflow area when the public gallery is full, and it would be possible to utilise this equipment at future meetings to produce a video/audio record that could be posted on the Council's website.
- 6.3 However, the system is old and unreliable. The video output is in the form of a split screen of four sections, each fed by a fixed camera which does not follow the debate. The sound quality is poor and is dependent on Members remembering to switch on their microphones – any comments not made into an open microphone will not be recorded. The Council's existing AV contractors have confirmed that 'the better the content gathering package the better the experience for the user ... sound is even less forgiving and if not thought through and designed correctly will give you very poor results and make the experience for the user who is watching on their laptop ... impossible to follow.' In addition, the resulting record provides no indexing or search facility to assist a viewer who may wish to find a particular item or section of the debate rather than view the whole meeting.
- 6.4 There would be some minor resource implications arising from this option – in the main relating to computer consumables to record the meeting and staff

time to oversee this and transfer the file to the website. These could be contained within the existing Democratic Services budget, at least for recording of Council meetings only, subject to other tasks being re-prioritised as necessary.

### **Option 2 – upgrade existing equipment**

- 6.5 A second option would be to upgrade the existing equipment to provide a better quality and more complete record although still using ‘static’ camera(s) and posting a simple video/audio file for viewing on the internet without the addition of an index or search facility.
- 6.6 The Council’s existing contractors have suggested a number of ways in which the Council Chamber installation could be improved. These include the provision of new cameras, microphones and if required direct feed of PC Powerpoint material from the meeting.
- 6.7 These improvements would also have the benefit of improving the quality of sound for persons attending the meeting itself e.g. in the public gallery. However, there would be a one-off financial cost which is estimated at up to £75k for the highest quality option (supply and installation of equipment including ambient microphone pick up to cover the whole room, audio sound processors, three cameras on ‘pan tilt’ and zoom moving heads, a control console and local monitors; but not including any lighting improvements that may be advised). It is likely that a mid-range solution could be identified that would reduce this cost by up to 50% by cutting out features not required.

### **Option 3 – full webcasting service**

- 6.8 The third option would be to contract with a webcasting service provider to record and host webcasts of Council meetings. A number of local authorities including approximately six London boroughs plus the GLA already offer webcasts of their meetings and there are a number of service providers in the market place. Officers have had initial discussion with a number of providers and the Council’s existing AV providers are also able to offer a hosted web application in conjunction with the system improvements at option 2.
- 6.9 Webcasting (‘web broadcasting’) uses streaming technology to distribute video and audio coverage of a meeting/event or other material via the internet. By using webcasting, council meetings can be accessed live (if the Council so decided) or subsequently by anyone with a computer and internet access, anywhere in the world.
- 6.10 A webcasting service would provide additional features to the options set out above. Typically a webcast consists of a video window showing the meeting, with synchronised sound and subtitles to indicate who is speaking. The title of the report or motion under discussion is displayed and the viewer can click on links to the published agenda, presentations, explanatory information and/or speaker biographies. Some services provide for

interactive functions such as viewer comments or surveys – these are particularly relevant where a webcast is used for consultation purposes.

- 6.11 After a live webcast has finished (or following a meeting, if it is not webcast live), the record is loaded into an archive and remains accessible for an agreed period – normally 6 or 12 months. Within this period any viewer can replay all or part of the meeting. When viewing an archived webcast the viewer also has the benefit of pause, rewind and fast-forward functions as well as index points so they can cut straight to a particular discussion item or speaker/speech as required.
- 6.12 Some councils have reported viewing figures of between 1,000 and 2,000 visits per month, with individual meetings attracting anything from 50 to 4-500 viewers. However these are combined figures for live and archived viewings – normally of a range of committee/cabinet meetings as well as the full Council - and the technical limitations of the monitoring process mean that it is not always possible to tell accurately the number of different individuals viewing or what proportion are from within the borough or even internal to the council.
- 6.13 Typically the webcasting service provider would install fixed cameras in the Chamber and would lease to the Council a specialist PC and associated hardware. Three or four cameras would be installed to enable good coverage of the whole meeting including close up shots of the member speaking and wide angle shots as required. Contract fees would be payable from approximately £25k per annum and there would also be some staffing costs.

#### **Option 4 – take no action**

- 6.14 A further option would be to take no action in relation to the recording and publication of the Council proceedings.

### **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF OPTIONS**

- 7.1 A brief assessment of the four options is set out below. Cabinet is asked to consider which of these it wishes to pursue. If options 2 or 3 are chosen, the officers will report back to the next meeting with a full proposal on the technical aspects, source of funding and tender process for the project:-

**Assessment of option 1:** It would be possible, within existing budgets, simply to utilise the existing equipment to record the meeting and then post the resulting files on the website but the resultant record is likely to be of poor quality, possibly incomplete and not user-friendly. Therefore although this option would be an economic way of implementing the Council's resolution, particularly in relation to capturing a record for future reference; in terms of public accessibility and ease of use it is not recommended.

**Assessment of option 2:** Upgrading the existing equipment would enable a higher quality record of the proceedings to be made for reference purposes

which would also be suitable for publication. It would also improve the experience for those actually attending the meeting. However, there would be a one-off cost estimated at between £35k and £75k; and the published record would still have limited functionality in terms of indexing, search and links to other records etc.

**Assessment of option 3:** Of the three options, a webcasting service would provide the most flexible and user-friendly means of viewing Council meetings. Depending on the solution chosen (which would need to be subject to tender under the Council's procedure rules), initial set up costs could be low as the equipment could be leased from the service provider rather than purchased. However, there would be ongoing revenue implications in the form of a contract, hosting and lease fee estimated at approximately £25k p.a. or more if additional meetings were webcast in future, and staffing costs as a webcast operator would be required at each meeting in addition to the committee clerk (estimated at approximately £2k p.a. initially).

**Assessment of option 4:** This option would have the effect of continuing current practice of not recording the Council meetings. This option would be lawful and would give rise to no budgetary implications.

## **8. COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER**

- 8.1 There is currently no budget provision for recording/webcasting the Council meetings. The report sets out three possible options for taking forward the resolution of the Council on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 on this matter together with a fourth option, to take no action.
- 8.2 The first option, using existing equipment, would give rise to minimal costs which can be contained within existing budget provision for Democratic Services although there would be some knock-on effect to delivery of other function by that team.
- 8.3 The second option, upgrading the existing equipment would incur one-off set up costs estimated at between £35k and £75k but minimal ongoing costs. In relation to the third option – a full webcasting service which would provide significantly better functionality – initial set up costs would be lower if a leasing option was chosen, but there would be ongoing annual costs of providing the service estimated at a minimum of approximately £27k per year.
- 8.4 If the Cabinet wishes to pursue either option 2 or option 3 therefore, funding will need to be identified of the sums mentioned in the current and/or future years as applicable. The Cabinet will wish to consider whether the benefits are commensurate with these costs and if webcasting is the most effective way of using this resource to open up the democratic process and enhance community engagement with local democracy.

## **9. CONCURRENT REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE (LEGAL SERVICES)**

- 9.1 As noted in the Council's resolution, an amendment to the Council's Constitution will be required to qualify the current prohibition on photography and recording of Council meetings to enable webcasting of those meetings within the agreed webcasting programme.
- 9.2 Webcasting raises a number of issues in relation to the Human Rights Act and Data Protection Act. Images of members of the public that may be captured by the webcasting are potentially 'personal information' under the DPA. It will be necessary to agree a protocol to ensure that the Council meets its statutory obligations, for example by ensuring that members of the public are made aware that a particular meeting is being webcast and that by remaining in the room they are deemed to have given their consent for any images of themselves that may be taken to be used for broadcast or training purposes within the Council.
- 9.3 The proposed protocol will also provide for the Democratic Services officer to confirm that webcasting has ceased, once any Camera Resolution for Part 2 of the Agenda has been passed. In addition, Members will be aware that absolute privilege does not apply to council meetings. The protocol will provide for the Chair or Monitoring Officer to cease the webcast if there is a possibility of inappropriate material being transmitted.

## **10. ONE TOWER HAMLETS CONSIDERATIONS**

- 10.1 Webcasting is one way of opening up access to the democratic decision-making process for residents who for whatever reason are unable or unwilling to attend meetings in the Town Hall and therefore has the potential to reach groups of residents who are currently not engaged in that process.

## **11. SUSTAINABLE ACTION FOR A GREENER ENVIRONMENT**

- 11.1 Webcasting will enable residents who wish to do so, to view meetings from home. This may decrease the need for journeys by car or public transport, thereby reducing the impact of such journeys on the environment.

## **12. RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 There are no direct risk management implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

## **13. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 There are no direct crime and disorder reduction implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

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**Local Government Act, 1972 Section 100D (As amended)**  
**List of “Background Papers” used in the preparation of this report**

| Brief description of “background papers”                    | Name and telephone number of holder and address where open to inspection. |
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| E-mails of 3 August and 4 August 2011 from AVM ltd to LBTH. | John S. Williams<br>Tel: 020 7364 4204<br>Mulberry Place, E14 2BG         |