

Decision Maker: GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE

Date: 6th February 2024

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Non-Executive Non-Key

Title: LIVE-STREAMING OF MEETINGS

Contact Officer: Graham Walton, Democratic Services Manager
Tel: 0208 461 7743 E-mail: graham.walton@bromley.gov.uk

Chief Officer: Tasnim Shawkat, Director of Corporate Services and Governance

Ward: All

1. Reason for decision/report and options

- 1.1 At its meeting on 3rd November 2022, the Committee considered a report on the options for introducing live-streaming of all committee meetings. The Committee decided not to live-stream meetings except in cases where the Chairman and the Chief Executive agreed that it would be appropriate given wide public interest, subject to further review after a year.
-

2. **RECOMMENDATION**

That the current policy of using live-streaming as a useful tool available for a limited number of meetings where there is particular interest or a likelihood that the capacity of the public gallery will be exceeded is maintained.

Impact on Vulnerable Adults and Children

1. Summary of Impact: Not Applicable
-

Transformation Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy
 2. Making Bromley Even Better Priority:
(5) To manage our resources well, providing value for money, and efficient and effective services for Bromley's residents.
-

Financial

1. Cost of proposal: Estimated Cost: Up to £94k PA
 2. Ongoing costs: Recurring Cost
 3. Budget head/performance centre: Democratic Services
 4. Total current budget for this head: £402k
 5. Source of funding: Revenue Budget
-

Personnel

1. Number of staff (*current and additional*): 6FTE
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours: Regular live-streaming will require additional staff resources – see below.
-

Legal

1. Legal Requirement: None
 2. Call-in: Not Applicable: Non-executive decisions are not subject to call in.
-

Procurement

1. Summary of Procurement Implications: Not Applicable
-

Property

1. Summary of Property Implications: Not Applicable
-

Carbon Reduction and Social Value

1. Summary of Carbon Reduction/Sustainability Implications: Not Applicable
-

Impact on the Local Economy

1. Summary of Local Economy Implications: Not Applicable
-

Impact on Health and Wellbeing

1. Summary of Health and Wellbeing Implications: Not Applicable
-

Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users or customers (*current and projected*): Not Applicable
-

Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? No
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments: Not Applicable

3. COMMENTARY

- 3.1 Live-streaming is the transmission of audio or video via the internet while the meeting is taking place, so that anyone can see and hear the meeting from anywhere in the world as it happens. Meetings can also be recorded and made available for later viewing. During the covid-19 lockdown, the Government relaxed the requirement in the 1972 Local Government Act for Councillors in England to meet in-person, and Bromley, like most local authorities, swiftly moved to virtual, online meetings. Bromley used Webex for its meetings, linked to a Youtube livestream so that members of the public could watch and listen to councillors as they conducted Council business. The temporary provision enabling virtual meetings was not renewed by the Government in May 2021, forcing Councils to return to in-person meetings.
- 3.2 During the lockdown period, just over one hundred meetings were live-streamed (in addition, some meetings were made available as a Webex Event instead, or were not available online). The highest recorded number of views was 182 for a Development Control Committee considering a particularly controversial planning application. This figure will have included people who logged on for just a few seconds, members of staff and repeat attendance by the same people logging in and out more than once. Attendance varied considerably at other meetings, with a small number of meetings achieving more than a hundred views but most well below this and a few with virtually no views at all. These numbers are probably slightly higher than would have been attending in person if this was allowed at the time, but still low in the context of the overall population of the borough. It is clear, though, that viewing figures reflected the content of the agenda, and a single controversial report would lead to greater interest and more views.
- 3.3 Following the resumption of in-person meetings in May 2021, officers continued to facilitate remote attendance by both Councillors and officers on a variety of equipment including phone lines and screens (via Teams meetings), with the majority of meetings held in the Council Chamber with a new fixed layout to facilitate social distancing and other covid precautions. Early in 2022, the PA/audio-visual facilities in the Council Chamber were upgraded, with new loudspeakers, screens and electrical equipment. The new equipment makes remote attendance much more practical and professional, and was used for the first time at the full Council meeting on 28th February. The new system allows for cameras to focus on each speaker, linked to a range of a range of pre-set room layouts. The new equipment does allow the Council to livestream meetings if Members think that this would be helpful, but still requires substantial additional staffing to link together all the IT systems and applications involved.
- 3.4 Since the Committee reviewed live-streaming at the end of 2022, a number of full Council meetings have been streamed. These occasions have required substantial additional resources in terms of technical support from IT and Communications staff. Should live-streaming be re-introduced on a regular basis then Democratic Services staff will need to be trained in how to live-stream so that this becomes business as normal. However, this will require additional resources on an on-going basis as two members of the team will need to be present for each meeting, rather than one. Additional support will also be required from IT, at least on a standby basis, should there be technical issues.
- 3.5 Live-streaming of meetings is used by some Councils, but is by no means universal, even in London. For example, Bexley live-stream most of their meetings, but Greenwich do not live-stream at all. Both benefits and concerns can be identified, summarised below, and set out in more detail in [Appendix A](#) –

Benefits -

- Makes the Council more accessible and transparent to residents
- Enables residents (and other members and officers) to watch meetings without having to travel
- Provides a more detailed record of each meeting (although arguably this could undermine the role of the minutes which are the formal record of each meeting)
- May be perceived as being a more accessible format for younger people

Concerns -

- There could be a constraint on debate if Members and other participants are concerned about their words and actions being recorded and available (perhaps distorted or out of context) across the internet
- Remote attendance could lead to a drop in personal attendance at meetings by the press and public
- There is little evidence of substantial demand for live-streaming and recent viewing figures have been very low
- There are resource implications – live streaming does create a greatly increased risk of technical failure and substantial additional work at the meeting, the costs of which will need to be absorbed within current budgets

3.6 Since the end of the lockdown, the Council has reserved live-streaming for particular meetings, and a positive approach could be to continue with this. This would mean that meetings are not routinely live-streamed, but the option is available on specific occasions, such as the annual Council meeting, or when there is unusually high interest in a meeting to the extent that there would be pressure on the public gallery. In these cases the Chief Executive, in consultation with the chairman of the meeting, could arrange for live-streaming as a means to avoid overcrowding in the Council Chamber.

3.7 Since the Committee's decision last year, a limited number of full Council meetings have been live-streamed in accordance with current policy. The following figures are provided by YouTube.

Date	Meeting	Peak Concurrent Views	Total Views on the night
18/5/22	Annual Council	12	-
15/9/22	Council	7	15
10/10/22	Council	7	15
12/12/22	Council	36	177
27/2/23	Council	38	291
24/4/23	Council	20	79
10/5/23	Annual Council	13	39

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are financial and resource implications to opting to live stream all committees. The hardware is in place for live-streaming, however, there will be additional staffing costs should regular live-streaming be introduced (see Personnel implications below.) The likely overtime costs for this will be approximately £22k pa (based on 120 meetings) for increased attendance by Democratic Services and possibly IT or Communications staff.
- 4.2 If IT require support from BT, the Council's current IT contractor, then this would be in addition charged at half a day per meeting. Two engineers would be required per meeting at a cost of £600 per day, so at half day rate that would be £600 per meeting for both engineers, costing approximately £72k per annum based on 120 meetings.
- 4.3 This brings the total cost for live streaming all committees to circa £94k per annum, for which there is currently no budget, this would require members to approve permanent growth, which given the current financial challenges faced by the authority and the future budget gap would be difficult given the need to fund statutory priorities.

5. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Provision of live-streaming will require additional staffing resources. Experience during the lockdown (May 2020 to May 2021) when all meetings were held online and live-streamed showed that the additional demands of live-streaming required two members of the Democratic Services Team to administer each meeting, rather than one, nearly doubling the Team's commitment to evening work. Additional technical support would also be needed from IT technicians.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The requirement in the 1972 Local Government Act is that for Councillors to be legally present at a meeting they must be physically in the room. This applies to all decision-making meetings, but there are some meetings not covered by this requirement, such as SACRE or some partnership meetings, where online meetings can continue. There is nothing to prevent any Member from joining a meeting online, and contributing as technology allows this, but they cannot be counted as formally present, do not count towards calculation of the quorum, cannot move or second motions and cannot vote. The Council also has to make reasonable provision for members of the press and public to attend meetings in person if they wish, but there is no legal requirement that meetings should be live-streamed or recorded.

7. CARBON REDUCTION/SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Live-streaming of meetings could potentially result in fewer journeys to the Civic Centre, leading to a small but positive impact on carbon reduction targets.

8. CUSTOMER IMPACT

- 8.1 Live-streaming should be of benefit to residents, enabling more people to watch the work of their local representatives without need to travel to the Civic Centre.

Non-Applicable Headings:	Vulnerable Adults and Young People/Policy/Procurement/Health and Wellbeing/Local Economy
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	Report to GP&L Committee 3/11/22

Advantages of live-streaming	Concerns about live-streaming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased transparency of meetings and Council decisions • Offering increased accessibility to public meetings for vulnerable or disenfranchised groups (elderly/people with disabilities/carers etc) and young people • Raising awareness of Council activities/achievements/the democratic process • In line with normal practice at some other local authorities • Reduced need to travel, reducing carbon footprint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members and officers may feel more constrained in expressing themselves in a situation where their comments are live-streamed • Some members of the public may be reluctant to speak at Planning meetings, or put questions in person at meetings • There is little evidence of widespread demand for live-streaming • Availability of a live-stream may discourage personal attendance at meetings, thereby reducing democratic participation • There are staffing/resource implications and costs • Increased risk of GDPR non-compliance/data breaches where reference is made to private matters or to constituents by name • Technical requirements of running live-streams may be outside of officers' existing skillsets – it is possible to train for basic operational requirements, but will non-IT staff be able to trouble-shoot issues arising at live meetings? • Over-reliance on a limited pool of Democratic Services staff to run the livestream (doubling the requirement for evening working). • Resource implications of setting up a livestream for a 5-minute meeting. • Need for additional agreed guidance around meeting etiquette (e.g. – when livestream goes down, do meetings need to be suspended?) • Reliance on external parties – primarily Youtube. • Reliance on technology – what would we do if the microphones/screen set up ceased to work? • Live-streaming is only possible in the Council Chamber at present, so only one meeting can be live-streamed • Can the approach be applied unilaterally across all meetings (e.g. – would Plans Committees have a different approach due to the participation of members of the public?) • Do Councillors/Partners/Officers/public speakers have a right to anonymity and how could this be accommodated at a live-streamed meeting?

- | | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Live-streaming of some PDS meetings would require under-18 Youth Representatives to give consent to their participation.• Would the quality of live-streaming be sufficient in a meeting with a very large public presence (e.g. – could you hear the live-stream over the noise of the gallery?)• Reputational damage – meetings have occasionally been targeted by protesters or activists, and their impact could be magnified in a live-streamed meeting (the Handforth Parish Council meeting was a notorious example of a difficult meeting going viral during the lockdown.)• Additional caution and self-restraint would be required from Members during periods of pre-election purdah.• Additional complexity of in-person meetings being live-streamed may lead a Chairman to mistakenly move into Part 2 whilst a live-stream is running.• It will be harder to move temporarily into Part 2 during a meeting, due to the logistical difficulties of stopping and starting a live-stream |
|--|---|