

27th November, 2020.

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To: The Mayor and Each Member of Limerick City and County Council

Live-Streaming of Council Meetings: Issues Paper

A Chomhairleoir, a chara,

Councillor O'Donovan moved the following Motion at the Ordinary Meeting of Limerick City and County Council held on 3rd July:

"I will move at the next Meeting that Limerick City and County Council allow for live streaming of all Council Meetings deemed open to the public; that the Council implement this urgently, considering the impact of public accessibility to Council Meetings due to COVID-19 restrictions."

This item was considered at the Protocol Committee Meeting on 28th September 2020. At this meeting, the Party Leaders asked for further details, including information on costs, the technical issues involved and the experience of other Local Authorities. I now outline an update on the issues as requested.

Background:

Live-streaming (or 'webcasting') of meetings involves live or 'real time' audio or video streaming of a meeting's proceedings over the web so that the meeting can be viewed or listened to remotely. In addition, a record of the meeting may also be made available after the event if decided to make meeting records available on playback.

Update on other Local Authorities:

The following Local Authorities currently have the facility to live-stream/webcast their physical meetings:

- Fingal County Council (the first Local Authority in Ireland to stream its Council Meetings live online in 2004);

- Dublin City Council;
- Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council;
- Roscommon County Council

A number of other Local Authorities have alternative options in place, including:

- Mayo County Council currently audio-records its Council Meetings;
- Wicklow County Council now provides real-time captioning and live text streaming;
- Cork City Council has commenced live-streaming its Virtual (online) Council Meetings. On 9th November, members of the public were able to watch the live-streamed Ordinary Meeting of Cork City Council. The streaming consisted of the Teams Meeting window on screen, broadcast on www.corkcity.ie/tv.

Key Issues

Drawing on the experiences of those Local Authorities that currently use webcasting and those that have examined its feasibility, there are a number of positive benefits highlighted. These include:

Greater openness and transparency – Live-streaming Council Meetings gives the public the ability to have accurate and immediate viewing of meetings or to use the playback facility; this helps to improve public trust in Local Government;

Promotes public understanding – Live-streaming Council Meetings supports understanding of how the Council works and how and why decisions are taken;

Encourage Engagement – Live-streaming Council Meetings promotes engagement with young people using mobile technology. Further, the webcasting service can include a feedback page/survey that allows stakeholders/residents to provide information and to better interact on the type of further information they require;

Raises Profile of Councillors – Live-streaming Meetings will afford Councillors better ‘reach’ into their respective constituencies and so the opportunity to raise their profiles given the accessibility of live-streamed Meetings for a Councillor’s constituents.

The following issues need to be also considered in the context of live-stream Council Meetings:

Cost /Viewership

The costs/viewership from other Local Authorities who are live-streaming are as follows:

Local Authority	Annual Costs	Viewership
Dublin City Council	€19,295	On average, 131 people watched each Full Council Meeting live in 2019. On average, 288 people used

		the playback facility to watch a Full Council Meeting in 2019.
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	€12,834	Viewership was between min. 158 and max. 321 views per Full Council Meeting.
Roscommon County Council	€15,448	On average, 71 people watched each Full Council Meeting live in 2020. On average, 130 people used the playback facility to watch a Full Council Meeting in 2020.
Fingal County Council	No costs available	On average, 85 people watched each Full Council Meeting live in 2020. On average, 125 people used the playback facility to watch a Full Council Meeting in 2020.

In Limerick, the estimated average cost annually to support live streaming is estimated at €15,000 per District (licensing and live-streaming subscription/support) or €75,000 per annum. In addition, audio-visual upgrade costs will need to be considered for each of the Chambers.

Online Streaming may place a constraint on Councillors – Live-streamed Meetings are more public by their nature and so opinions that may otherwise have been expressed in a Council Chamber may not be expressed in a live-streamed Meeting. Some Councillors may thus feel constrained in the manner in which they operate.

Defamation / Litigation Issues - Defamation issues could arise with a portion of one webcast from one Local Authority taken down due to a threat of legal action from one participant in the Meeting. It is important that Members and staff are generally aware that recording is taking place. Councillors do not enjoy the same privilege on the floor as TDs would in Leinster House, effectively exempting them from defamation actions. Councillors have qualified privilege unlike members of the Oireachtas who have absolute privilege. The onus is on a Councillor to establish that they meet the grounds of a defence under the Defamation Act 2009.

'Grandstanding' - Live-streaming of Meetings could lead to "grandstanding." There can be a tendency for speakers to exceed their allotted time to maximise exposure when Meetings are live-streamed, particularly with regard to contentious issues.

Hacking/Editing of Content – Webcasts can potentially be open to hacking and being edited etc. from Third Parties. Such editing can misrepresent a Member if then broadcast on Social Media etc.

IT issues during live-streamed Meetings / Ensuring a quality Stream – Live-streaming technical issues could interfere with a broadcast and ultimately with the running of a statutory process.

Subtitled Video Archives for Deaf/Hard of Hearing - Subtitled video archives for the deaf/hard of hearing may have to be made accessible to the public.

Recommendation:

Having considered the issues as outlined, it appears that neither the cost nor the viewership figures in other Local Authorities currently justifies introducing live streaming of meetings. Also, at the moment, the required audio /visual technology is not in place to facilitate live streaming. Further, Council Meetings are currently managed in an open and transparent manner with the notice of Meetings and agenda published online in advance of Meetings, the public and press can attend Meetings, the press report on the Meetings and the Minutes of Council Meetings are published online.

I recommend that this matter is further reviewed in 12 months. At this stage, it is hoped to have resumed Full Council Meetings in the Council Chamber (post-Covid 19) and the planned audio-visual update to the Chamber will also be complete at that stage.

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