

PROTOCOL ON WEBCASTING AND ELECTRONIC VOTING

Council - 25 July 2024

Report of: Monitoring Officer

Status: For consideration

Also considered by:

- Governance Committee - 11 July 2024

Contact Officer: Martin Goodman, Ext. 7245

Recommendation to Governance Committee: To recommend to Council that the Protocol on Webcasting and Electronic Voting be confirmed in line with the instructions of Members.

Recommendation to Council: That that the Protocol on Webcasting and Electronic Voting be confirmed in line with the instructions of Members.

Reason for recommendation: This report allows Members to review the operation of the Protocol and to propose any necessary changes.

Introduction and Background

- 1 On 30 January 2024, the Governance Committee recommended the attached Protocol on Webcasting and Electronic Voting be adopted by Council. It was duly adopted and incorporated into the Council's Constitution as Appendix Z2 on 20 February 2024.
- 2 At the January meeting, Members specifically requested that the introduction of the protocol be reviewed. The matter was duly put on the Work Plan and this report supports that item.

The Protocol

- 3 The protocol, as attached, is self-explanatory. Webcasting has been in place for all public elements of Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings since the decision of the Council to adopt it.
- 4 Electronic voting necessitated the purchase of a new system. This was first used at Full Council on 23 April 2024 and has subsequently been used at Development Management Committee meetings.
- 5 It should be noted that due to the nature of the system, electronic voting is impractical for smaller meetings or ceremonial occasions.

Member feedback on electronic voting

- 6 Member feedback received by email on the operation of the electronic voting system is briefly and anonymously summarised below. There was no one single view expressed by Members about the voting system.

Email feedback

- Is there a way to check after each vote that all members are happy that their vote has gone through please?
- Is there any way that the votes can be hidden until the vote is closed?
- Do you think it may be help if the voting devices were to include the instructions for voting in order to cover any possible issues around accessibility?
- I am very pleased to see the new process in place.

- It is essentially a recorded vote, when no one has procedurally asked for a recorded vote. There is also concern it unduly draws attention to people's names on controversial votes, particularly online, which may draw unwarranted attention.
- However, just voting (without names being displayed) causes the problem that it would not be possible to see how people have voted at all – ie in committee, at least a show of hands shows how people have voted to other councillors. A potential way around this is to not display how individuals have voted in a meeting, but in the minutes at a later date (such as KCC does).
- Not displaying names could also mean some councillors who have pushed buttons too early, or technical error, means their votes aren't cast. A potential way around this would be to display everyone's names, but only display if they are recorded as voted or not (for example in a navy blue VOTED, or light grey NOT VOTED) kind of system, so it prompts councillors to press the button again.
- For some committees it may be simpler (such as development control) to have a simple show of hands rather than use the voting system. That really seems pragmatic.

- In Council I think the system should be left 'open' so to speak until everyone's vote has been recorded (or until everyone has voted). In Council on a couple of occasions Members did not have votes recorded or perhaps chose not to vote, even to abstain, which feels wrong.
- In DMC the system only showed the total votes cast, not who had voted which way. In the interests of transparency, I think everyone's vote should be visible. This may require the full Members page, as used in the Council votes, to be on the screen for DMC as in Council.
- As a new system I think it's worked pretty well, so thanks to all the team involved.

- At the last meeting, all voting was via the electronic system and as each member's name was recorded on the screen and on the webcast, this meant that in effect every vote taken was a recorded vote.
- My personal view would be to continue to have a show of hands for approval of all decisions unless it is at the budget meeting as per the constitution, or if a member asks for a recorded vote.
- A number of councillors felt particularly uncomfortable that their names were displayed along with their voting intention
- Every vote will become a recorded vote by default
- It is suggested that hand controllers be randomly distributed to Members with only the random number displayed on the screen to ensure anonymity
- The voting system now gives you an accurate and easy to obtain record of votes for, against and abstentions. I would propose that these numbers are always set out in the minutes of meetings as a matter of record.
- Even if we want to retain the system for requesting a Recorded Vote (which I would personally make the default), this would at least give the public a much better feel for how Councillors voted and the margins by which decisions were taken.

Verbal feedback given to Officers

- When the 'named grid' method was first introduced, some Members commented that they would have preferred the anonymous 'bar chart' display.
- When the 'bar chart' method of displaying votes anonymously was later used, some Members indicated a preference for the 'named grid'.

Clarifications

- 7 It is important to clarify that the below constitutes a 'recorded vote':

Recorded Vote - If five Members present at the meeting demand it by rising in their places before the vote is taken, the names for and against the motion or amendment or abstaining from voting will be taken down in writing and entered into the minutes, or when full Council votes on budget decisions as set out in Rule 31.

Members are advised that none of the current Electronic Voting systems automatically create a recorded vote by definition, as the term relates to entering ('recording') votes in the minutes.

- 8 If hand controllers were randomly distributed to Members it would not be possible to carry out a 'recorded vote' using the electronic voting system.

Member and Officer feedback on webcasting

9 There has been infrequent feedback on the operation of webcasting, with Members occasionally expressing opinions both for and against the continuation of the new system. Comments have been received as follows:

- The recordings of our meetings are quite well hidden on the YouTube site, under the banner of 'Live'. Members of the public may struggle to find them. Can we make them more prominent and under a more understandable and self-explanatory heading (perhaps Council meetings)?
- It would be useful if the web team could find a way of linking to the recordings from the Home Page

Review

10 In view of the above comments, and considering any others made by Members, Officers or residents, Members are requested to confirm the Protocol, with or without adjustments in line with Member instructions.

11 Given the busy committee schedule, limited existing resources and budgetary constraints, the Governance Committee is advised to hesitate to recommend implementation of any suggestion which would increase demand on Officers or necessitate additional spending.

Other options Considered and/or rejected

None.

Key Implications

Financial

None.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

There are potential GDPR implications whenever data is retained or a broadcast made. However, these issues are entirely capable of being contained and addressed within existing data practices and policies.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Climate Change Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to tackle the challenge of climate change. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

Conclusions

Members' confirmation of the Protocol is sought, along with any further instructions.

Appendices

Appendix A – Protocol on Webcasting and Electronic Voting

Background Papers

None

Martin Goodman

Monitoring Officer