

PE1731/G

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar submission of 21 October 2019

Thank you for your enquiry regarding the practice of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar in relation to audio recording of our Comhairle and Committee meetings by members of the public. I have answered the questions in the order set out in the Assistant Clerk's e-mail of 1 October 2019, as follows:

What is your policy on the audio recording of Public Council meetings?

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar was one of the first Councils to transmit live audio recordings of all full Comhairle and Committee meetings through its website, and the facility has been in place since November 2017. Since the Comhairle's meetings are bilingual (Gaelic and English) a simultaneous translation from Gaelic to English is also available through the website, which enables listeners to follow the debates in either language. There is a full audio archive of all meetings from 2017 to date.

In order to assist members of the public who may be listening, both Members and Officers are asked to identify themselves when speaking, if their identity is not already obvious from the debate itself.

When exempt information is being considered, the audio system is simply and quickly disabled.

If your Council does not permit audio recordings of public meetings, which is the rationale for this?

Not applicable in view of the answer above. The Comhairle had considered whether full webcasting of our meetings could be considered in addition to audio recording, but decided against, on grounds of cost.

What are considered to be the concerns of allowing members of the public to audio record Public Council meetings?

The Comhairle has no particular concerns; the meetings are open to the public, and it is only right that those who do not have easy access to the Chamber in Stornoway (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar represents the islands of the Outer Hebrides, and members of the public who are not resident in Lewis or Harris are not easily able to attend meetings in person) can listen to the Comhairle's proceedings; the Comhairle has been pleased with the response it has received to the introduction of audio recording. While statistics of the number of listeners are not kept, many favourable comments have been made to both Members and officers about the availability and desirability of the service, from throughout the Western Isles.

There may be concerns that audio recording by members of the public, other than through a Council-run system, may pick up and disseminate comments not made as part of the official proceedings, which could be seen as an invasion of privacy. Members of the public would have to be advised, in a manner that was not discouraging to principles of openness and transparency, that they are responsible in law for respecting the

privacy and rights of others, and that the lawful activity is the recording of the proceedings of the meeting, not other comments made in the Chamber.

With regards to the actions being called for in the Petition, are there any constraints faced by Local Authorities on what has been proposed?

None, other than the inevitable constraints of constituents being able only to listen, rather than contribute, to meetings which are considering matters on which they may have strong views or interests. The system has worked well hitherto, and the Comhairle intends to upgrade its IT and Communications equipment within the Chamber in Stornoway, and at meeting rooms elsewhere in the Western Isles, to ensure the best quality dissemination of our meetings.

I hope that this information is of assistance to the Committee, but please do not hesitate to contact me should any further information be required.