

PE1731/S

Petitioner submission of 5 December 2019

Response to comments from the Respondents / Petitions Committee.

(For the purpose of brevity I have placed similar type subjects in groups)

1. Lack of Comments

I am aware that one of the members of the petitions committee commented on the fact that there were only two comments from the public registered with the petition and appeared to infer that indicated a lack of interest from the public on the subject.

I was aware that comments from the public play no part in the deliberations of the committee. Once I submitted the petition on line, after a few minutes I went back online and clicked on no comments to be permitted, however two comments had already been made. The restriction on comments remained in force throughout the period the petition was displayed. I was also aware that keeping a petition open for public comments could delay its presentation to the committee for consideration.

2. Staff Time / Cost

There is no staffing or cost implications for councils.

I note the comments that councils would wish to audio record themselves for a number of reasons, if the public were permitted to do so. I would suggest that there is no requirement other than a member of staff switching on a council mobile phone, recording the meeting, then downloading to a desk top computer. Thereafter accessible by staff and councillors at any time.

3. Sensitive Information

At present all councils invoke the following should they wish to discuss any sensitive matters.

Resolution to Exclude Press and Public It is recommended that the Council pass the following resolution:- "That under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part I of Schedule 7A of the Act".

4. Disruption to Meetings / Interference with microphones

I have been audio recording meetings, with permission, of East Renfrewshire Council, full council, Planning, Audit & Scrutiny for over one year. Never has my hand held phone caused any disruption to the meeting, the ringer is always switched to silent.

Never has the phone interfered with the council audio or web cast system.

5. Recordings taken out of Context / Manipulation

As I have indicated I have audio recorded Full Council meetings, and certain Committee meetings (with permission) and reported the councillors comments on my web site. I have never once had any comments that I have misquoted councillors.

Indeed I would have to suggest that taking written notes are more likely to raise complaints regarding lack of accuracy. I am aware of instances when elected members disputed what reporters claimed they had said in their articles. I am also aware of a number of councillors who at subsequent council meetings disputed what they had been reported as saying in the 'not verbatim' minutes. These councillors have then stated that they viewed the 'web cast' and could impart what they actually said. I would suggest that audio recording would support honesty and transparency, rather than anyone attempting to manipulate content.

6. Invasion of Privacy / Permission from Public / Data Protection

Council meetings, including committee's are held in public and as such the Data Protection Act 2018 / General Data Protection Regulations 2018 to not apply. That legislation relates to 'personal information'.

7. Use of recording / reasons for recording / public interest

I would have to ask, is it relevant why a member of the public wishes to audio record a public meeting other than for openness and transparency of councils. Having attended many council meetings I have witnessed a frequent number of councillors failing to operate their microphones, therefore the camera does not turn to them, and their voice is not recorded on the web cast and those comments are never recorded in the minutes.

I personally record in order that I can report exactly what was said, unlike what is reported in the non verbatim minutes. In addition some very important speeches and comments by councillors can be missed and not reported on and they should be as they are outstanding.

I am also aware of a gentleman who audio records as he is disabled and cannot hear properly and the acoustics of the chamber do not help him. He takes his audio home and listens to it there. This of course will include the comments made off camera and off microphone, which were part of the meeting.

8. Inhibit robust discussion

I would have to say that so far Web Casting of Councils has not prevented Councillors from being forthright in their discussions, and I have not found audio recording of my local council to inhibit councillors in any way.

9. East Renfrewshire Council

My local council, since I submitted this request to your committee have now passed a motion that members of the public will no longer require to request permission to record 'full' council meetings. I would suggest that this is due to none of the above being found to be issues over the past 12 months.

I am unaware regarding any of the above being issues in England, where recording of public meetings has been permitted since restrictions were lifted in 2014.