

# **BIRCHINGTON PARISH COUNCIL**



## **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION WORKING GROUP – LIVE STREAMING**

### **REPORTING TO : FINANCE, POLICY AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

#### **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

To review the pilot introduced in September 2025 and consider the future recording and live streaming of Council meetings.

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The pilot demonstrates that live streaming can improve openness and make Council business available to residents who cannot attend in person. The principal value to date has been the continuing availability of recordings rather than the number watching at the time of the meeting.

Between September 2025 and 31 July 2026, nine Full Council meetings were included in the pilot. The first meeting was recorded and uploaded afterwards, six meetings were successfully live streamed and two live streams failed for technical reasons. The seven published recordings generated 1,001 total views and 133.4 hours of watch time. Of the six live streams, 36 views occurred live and 693 total views had accumulated by the reporting date.

The evidence supports continuation, provided that the Council improves reliability, ownership of account access, privacy arrangements and promotion.

The working group recommends a staged extension: Planning Applications Committee first, followed by the Place and Environment Committee and Finance, Policy and Governance Committee after review. Staffing Committee should not routinely be live streamed because its business frequently involves confidential or personal information.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

The Council began live streaming Full Council meetings in September 2025 following earlier tests of recording meetings. The pilot was intended to explore whether streaming could increase transparency, accessibility and public understanding, and whether it could be delivered reliably with proportionate cost and staff time.

The current equipment comprises a camera, laptop and a dedicated mobile-data dongle and SIM card. The dongle was introduced because the internet connection at Birchington Library was unreliable. The newly refurbished Parish Office should allow equipment to remain set up and is expected to provide a more controlled audio environment.

#### **LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONTEXT**

The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 protect the public's right to report open meetings by filming, photographing, audio-recording or using other communication methods. The Regulations do not require the Council itself to live stream, but the pilot is consistent with the wider principle of open and accountable local government.

Streaming must be managed alongside data protection, safeguarding and meeting-management responsibilities. Attendees should receive clear advance and on-site notice; the camera should normally be directed towards the meeting table; reasonable arrangements should be available for a member of the public who does not wish to be filmed; and the Council’s recording policy and privacy information should explain the purpose, platform, retention arrangements and contact route for concerns.

Where the press and public are lawfully excluded because publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business, streaming must stop before that item begins. Confidential papers, private conversations and personal data displayed on screens must not be broadcast.

## PILOT RESULTS TO 31.07.2026

| Measure                               | Result                  | Comment                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meetings included                     | 9                       | One uploaded recording, six successful live streams and two technical failures.           |
| Successful live streams               | 6 of 8 attempts (75%)   | The failure rate confirms that resilience and documented procedures are still needed.     |
| Published recordings                  | 7 of 9 meetings (77.8%) | Includes the first meeting, which was recorded and uploaded rather than streamed live.    |
| Live views                            | 36 across 6 streams     | Between 3 and 14 per meeting; average 6.                                                  |
| Total views: live-streamed meetings   | 693                     | Includes later on-demand viewing; average 115.5 and median 99.5 per recording.            |
| Total views: all published recordings | 1,001                   | Includes 308 views of the first uploaded recording.                                       |
| Total watch time                      | 133.4 hours             | 95.6 hours for the six live-streamed meetings plus 37.8 hours for the uploaded recording. |

## INTERPRETATION OF THE FIGURES

- On-demand viewing is substantially greater than viewing during the meeting. The archive is therefore an important part of the service, not simply a by-product of the live stream.
- Interest varies by subject. The highest total for a successful live stream was 259 views for the extraordinary meeting concerning the need for an election; the lowest was 28 views for the most recent meeting in the dataset.
- The figures should be treated with care. YouTube “views” do not necessarily represent unique Birchington residents, and totals are affected by the subject matter, promotion and how long a recording has been available.
- Average viewing represented approximately 13%–18% of the meeting length for the successful streams, indicating that many viewers select the items most relevant to them rather than watch the full meeting.

## BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

| Benefits evidenced or anticipated                                                                                            | Limitations and controls                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Greater transparency and accountability; residents can hear the complete debate and see how decisions are reached.           | Recordings can be clipped or quoted out of context. Retaining and linking to the complete recording provides an authoritative source.              |
| Access for residents unable to attend because of disability, caring responsibilities, work or other commitments.             | Streaming is supplementary: it does not replace formal agendas, minutes, accessible documents or the right to attend open meetings.                |
| A searchable public record that supports community awareness, member and officer learning, and correction of misinformation. | YouTube viewing data has limitations and should not be presented as a count of individual residents.                                               |
| Existing equipment and a free platform keep direct costs relatively low.                                                     | There is continuing officer time for scheduling, notices, checks, promotion, uploading and responding to technical issues.                         |
| The Parish Office should improve audio and permit a more permanent setup.                                                    | Technical failure cannot be eliminated. A local backup recording and a clear statement that failure does not invalidate the meeting are advisable. |
| Streaming may encourage preparation and orderly debate.                                                                      | Some members or speakers may initially feel inhibited; chairing, familiarisation and training will be important.                                   |

## PROPOSED PHASED EXTENSION

| Meeting                                  | Proposal                       | Reason                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Full Council                             | Continue routinely             | The pilot provides sufficient evidence of public value, subject to the controls in this report.                                                                                                                                |
| Planning Committee                       | Next phase: six-month pilot    | Planning matters are location-specific and attract direct resident interest. Clear camera positioning and management of personal information will be particularly important.                                                   |
| Place and Environment Committee          | Consider after Planning review | As a large proportion of the Council's budget is spent on public-facing services and projects it is anticipated that these committee meetings are suitable for live streaming, once capacity and reliability have been tested. |
| Finance, Policy and Governance Committee | Consider after Planning review | Much business is suitable for streaming, but confidential staffing, contractual, legal or commercially sensitive items must be excluded.                                                                                       |

| Meeting            | Proposal                     | Reason                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Staffing Committee | Do not routinely live stream | Meetings frequently concern employees, recruitment, performance or other personal and confidential matters. Any open business remains subject to the usual public-access requirements, but routine streaming would create disproportionate privacy and employment-relations risk. |

Expansion should be subject to officer capacity, appropriate equipment and a short written evaluation after the Planning Committee pilot. The review should consider reliability, views, watch time, feedback, staff time, privacy incidents and whether streaming affected meeting conduct.

## **COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMME**

Viewing levels are unlikely to improve through technology alone. A consistent communications programme should make the channel easier to find and explain why each meeting matters to residents;

- Rename and brand the YouTube channel clearly as Birchington Parish Council, with consistent Council imagery and contact details.
- Create a permanent “Watch Council meetings” page on the Council website containing the next-stream link, an explanation of how to participate, and an organised recording archive.
- Publish the meeting date, agenda and stream link on the website and social media when the agenda is issued, followed by a reminder on the day of the meeting.
- Use short, neutral descriptions of the principal agenda items so residents can identify matters relevant to them; avoid promotional wording that could prejudice a decision.
- Include a recurring item in the Parish Magazine and consider the use of QR codes on printed notices where practical.
- After each meeting, publish the recording link and, where feasible, add agenda timestamps so viewers can find individual items.
- Invite periodic resident feedback and report headline analytics to Council every six months, using consistent measures and recognising the limitations of platform data.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ACCESS AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY**

The YouTube channel is a Council communication asset. Administrative control should therefore rest with the Council through its officers. This is an administrative and business-continuity function and does not affect members’ responsibility for the content and conduct of Council meetings.

- Use a Council-owned administrative email account as the primary account and recovery address.
- The Clerk and other authorised officer(s) should manage access, with permissions limited to what each person requires.
- Store credentials and recovery information securely in the Council’s approved password-management arrangements; do not circulate a shared password by email.
- Maintain a simple access register and written setup, streaming, backup and incident procedures. At least two officers and one additional authorised person should be trained to provide resilience.

## FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The principal equipment has already been purchased and YouTube does not charge for use of the platform. A dedicated laptop has already been proposed and agreed so the system can remain available and configured in the Parish Office. The cost will be met from the 2026/27 budget.

Ongoing resource implications include the mobile-data SIM, officer time for scheduling and promotion, basic accessibility and archiving work, training, maintenance and periodic review. These demands are expected to be manageable for Full Council, but the phased approach will allow capacity to be tested before further committees are added.

## PRINCIPAL RISKS AND MITIGATION

| Risk                                          | Mitigation                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Technical or connectivity failure             | Permanent setup where possible; pre-meeting checks; go live early with microphones muted; dedicated connection; local backup recording; publish later if appropriate.            |
| Privacy or confidential information broadcast | Advance and on-site notices; camera framing; trained operator; Chair's script; stop the stream before excluded business; review privacy information and recording policy.        |
| Online abuse or disruption                    | Disable live chat/comments during meetings; apply the Council's social-media moderation arrangements to promotional posts; direct formal questions through established channels. |
| Account loss or inappropriate access          | Officer-managed Council account; password security (TQS); access register.                                                                                                       |
| Low or declining viewing                      | Consistent communications programme; agenda-specific promotion; accessible archive and timestamps; six-monthly analytics and feedback.                                           |
| Recordings mistaken for formal minutes        | State clearly that the approved written minutes remain the formal record of decisions.                                                                                           |

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Digital Transformation Working Group recommend :

1. that live streaming and on-demand publication of Full Council meetings continue as a standing Council service, subject to the Council's recording policy, privacy arrangements and the exclusion of confidential business;
2. that Planning Committee meetings be live streamed for an initial six-month pilot, beginning when officers are satisfied that the equipment, connectivity, procedures and staffing arrangements are in place;
3. that officers report back after the Planning Committee pilot on reliability, audience data, feedback, staff time, costs and any privacy or conduct issues, with recommendations on extending streaming to Environment Committee and Finance, Policy and Governance Committee;

4. that Staffing Committee meetings are not routinely live streamed because of the frequent confidential and personal nature of the business considered;
5. that the communications programme set out in section 7 be implemented, including clearer channel branding, coordinated website and social-media promotion, an accessible recording archive and six-monthly performance reporting;
6. that administrative ownership of the YouTube channel and associated passwords, recovery arrangements and permissions be managed by authorised officers through Council-owned accounts, with secure password storage, multi-factor authentication and an access register;
7. that a dedicated Council laptop be purchased, and that suitable authorised persons be trained to provide operational resilience; and
8. that the Council's recording policy, privacy notice, meeting notices and Chair's introductory wording be reviewed and updated before the expanded pilot begins.

## **CONCLUSION**

Members of the Finance, Policy and Governance Committee are requested to review the recommendations contained in the report above and agree that the live streaming proposals should be taken to Full Council for approval.

## **SOURCES AND NOTES**

Pilot data: "Data – 31.07.2026.xlsx", supplied by Birchington Parish Council. Figures are a snapshot at 31 July 2026 and may have increased subsequently.

Background: "Live Streaming discussion paper" and "Live Streaming Paper – September 2026", supplied by Birchington Parish Council.

Legal reference: Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014 (SI 2014/2095), regulation 4:  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/2095/body/made>

Government guidance: Open and accountable local government: a plain English guide:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-and-accountable-local-government-plain-english-guide>

Public exclusion: Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, section 1(2):  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/8-9/67/section/1>