

# Bolton Council

**Report to:** Constitutional Panel

**Date:** 11 January 2016

**Report of:** Chief Executive

**Report No:**

**Contact Officer:** Helen Gorman

**Tele No:**

**Report Title:** **Public attendance at meetings of full Council**

**Non Confidential:** **(Non-Confidential)** This report does **not** contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public.

**Purpose:** To update members on arrangements proposed for the Council meeting in February 2016 and stream the meeting to an alternative venue.

**Recommendations:** The Panel is recommended to:

1. note the constraints on numbers of members of the public to attend the next meeting of full Council;
2. agree that members of the public will be asked to provide identification confirming their name and address before being allowed entry into the meeting, and,
3. approve the live streaming of the meeting of full Council on 24 February 2016 and,
4. delegate to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader on the alternative venue for members of the public to view the streaming of the meeting.

**Decision:**

**Background Doc(s):**

*(for use on Exec Rep)*

**Signed:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Leader / Executive Cabinet  
Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Monitoring Officer

**Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Background Information**

Meetings of the full Council have been disrupted on:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2014 (whilst still in the Council Chamber) – members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax took part in a noisy protest to disrupt the meeting, refusing to be quiet despite being asked to do so, refused to leave and the police attended to clear the public gallery;
- 25<sup>th</sup> February 2015 (whilst still in the Council Chamber) – trade union members and other protesters about the proposed budget took part in a noisy protest to disrupt the meeting and attempt to prevent Council business from being concluded.

Since June 2015 the Council meetings have been unable to be held in the Council Chamber due to refurbishment works in the Albert Halls. Council meetings have been held in the Bolton Magistrates' Courts and the lecture theatres in the Central Library.

There has been further disruption as follows:

- 26<sup>th</sup> August 2015 – in Lecture Theatre 1, Central Library – members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax made a second noisy protest, refused to be quiet despite being asked to do so, refused to leave, some members chaining themselves to chairs and the police attended. The meeting had to adjourn to an alternative venue to conclude the meeting.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2015 – in Lecture Theatre 1, Central Library members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax attended the meeting, some with equipment to engage in a noisy protest, which was confiscated before the meeting began but then put on masks so as to cause some councillors to express the fear about what would happen next. The protesters then left the public area of the Lecture Theatre and refused to return to their seats leading to the meeting being adjourned and moved to an alternative room.
- On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2015 members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax trespassed in the staff only part of the Town Hall. Police were in attendance as the group was holding a protest on Victoria Square. The group refused to leave but did so eventually with police intervention.

In addition to the issues experienced at these meetings and in the Town Hall, a review of security arrangements generally has been carried out following incidents during 2015 to ensure the safety of elected members, staff and members of the public in Council buildings.

Following this review, at the last full Council meeting members of the public were asked to give their name and address. Some attendees appear to have given their name and address others clearly provided false details.

The recommendation to ask members of the public to provide proof of identity would help in ensuring that if necessary in the future the Council wishes to exclude disruptive members of the public it is able to identify those members of the public who had disrupted meetings in the past, protecting those members of the public who wish to attend and observe without disrupting Council business.

Also, after members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax chained themselves to seats in Lecture Theatre 1 searches have been carried out by Security and Response staff to try to avoid future incidents.

### **Council meeting 24<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

At the budget setting Council meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2016 it is anticipated that members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax and, based on previous meetings, trade union members and other protesters will attend the meeting not only to listen to the meeting but potentially with a view to disrupting the meeting.

Section 1(1) of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 provides that “any meeting of a body exercising public functions, being to which this Act applies, shall be open to the public.”

However, section 1(8) states that “the provisions of this section shall be without prejudice to any power of exclusion to suppress or prevent disorderly conduct or other misbehaviour at a meeting.”

The level of disruption to date by members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax would appear to provide the Council with sufficient grounds to exclude members of that group from future meetings of the full Council, however, the exercise of this power must be reasonable.

From the information available it would be impossible to identify members of Bolton Against the Bedroom Tax to exclude them from the next meeting.

The next meeting of the full Council is to set its annual budget.

This meeting attracts a broader cross section of the community than most meetings. A blanket exclusion of all members of the public would appear unreasonable despite the level of disruption to date.

The problem has been exacerbated by the temporary accommodation which is being used by the Council as outlined above. The layout of the seating enabled members of the public to move to areas of the lecture theatre so as to disrupt the last meeting of full Council. Whilst there are more available seats in Lecture Theatre 1 for members of the public than in the public gallery of the Council Chamber, the layout of the lecture theatre and proximity to members of the Council mean that there should actually be fewer seats made available for the public to use.

It is proposed to limit seating in the Lecture Theatre 1 to the first section to the rear of the theatre.

This provides seating for 43 persons. It is easier to manage from a security point of view as it limits access to the rest of the lecture theatre.

Given the constraints on available space, the history of disruption and anticipated further disruption it is proposed to limit the numbers of members of the public to attend at Lecture Theatre 1 but to also provide live coverage by streaming the meeting to an alternative venue which is currently being identified.

## **Recommendations**

The Panel is recommended to:

1. note the constraints on numbers of members of the public to attend the next meeting of full Council;
2. agree that members of the public will be asked to provide identification confirming their name and address before being allowed entry into the meeting;
3. approve the live streaming of the meeting of full Council on 24 February 2016, and,
4. delegate to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Leader on the alternative venue for members of the public to view the streaming of the meeting.