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**Report of :  Chief Officer Democratic & Central Services and**

**Chief Officer ICT Services**

**Report to :  General Purposes Committee**

**Date:        30th August 2012**

**Subject:  Webcasting Council Chamber Meetings**

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|---|---|---|
| Are specific electoral Wards affected? <br><br> If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s): | ☐ Yes | ☐ No |
| Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration? | ☐ Yes | ☐ No |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-In? | ☐ Yes | ☐ No |
| Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? <br><br> If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: <br><br> Appendix number: | ☐ Yes | ☐ No |

**Summary of main issues**

In May 2012 General Purposes Committee approved proposals to review and modernise the arrangements for Council meetings. The report referred to the potential for webcasting Council meetings and officers were asked to carry out more detailed work and report back with further information.

This report provides information on the potential benefits and the experiences of other authorities who already provide webcasts of meetings. It sets out the main options and costs to to implement a system in Leeds and concludes that it is feasible, within reasonable costs, to provide the facilities to webcast Council meetings.

Recommendations

General Purpose Committee are recommended to agree to the trial webcasting of a Council meeting as a one off event and, subject to the outcome of the trial, authorise the Director of Resources to develop the proposal to webcast Council meetings from the start of the 2013/14 municipal year.

**1 Purpose of this report**

1.1 This report considers the introduction of webcasting for Council meetings. The purpose of this paper is to present the main issues, a broad summary of the likely costs and benefits in the introduction of webcasting and to seek guidance as to whether Members would wish to introduce webcasting as part of improving engagement and transparency in local democracy.

**2 Background information**

2.1 In May 2012 General Purposes Committee approved proposals to review and modernise the arrangements for Council meetings. The report referred to the potential for webcasting Council meetings and officers were asked to carry out more detailed work and report back with further information.

2.2 Officers undertook discussions with two leading suppliers, together with the Chief Officer for Democratic & Central Services and appropriate ICT Officers, suggest it is feasible to implement a webcasting system.

2.3 The following information has been obtained through discussions with representatives of leading suppliers and one neighbouring council as well research via the Internet.

**3 Overview of Webcasting**

3.1 It is possible to make a live event viewable via the Internet using streaming media technology. All the audience needs is a device with an Internet connection and they can tune-in and watch the event.

3.2 Typically, features of such systems allow 'live' access over the Internet to full Council meetings and on-demand to a library of previous meetings. Webcast Providers are also able, alongside the video screen options, to provide access to the agenda, papers and presentation documents, along with index points and times. Some sites encourage and facilitate discussion via email, and social media such as Twitter.

3.3 The end to end process of producing a live video Webcast requires an audio input, video production, video encoding of the stream, transmission of the stream over the Internet to a streaming media server(s).

**4 Main issues**

4.1 <u>Potential benefits</u>

4.1.1 Webcasting would potentially enable website visitors to:

- View meetings live, which may be helpful for people who have difficulty travelling to attend the meeting, who may find attendance at a formal meeting intimidating or who may otherwise prefer to watch from another location

- Replay meetings after they have taken place, which may be helpful when the meeting time or location is inconvenient

- Search for, and view, particular speakers or agenda items

- Allow viewers to re-view points which may not be immediately clear to them as a result of the necessary procedures to a formal meeting appearing alien to the observer

- Hear meetings (for people with visual impairments or basic skills needs)

- Gain additional contextual information from e.g. speakers' names, agenda documents, PowerPoint presentations etc. appearing with the webcast, however, some of this is additional functionality and the full scope of the webcasting requirements will need to be determined

4.2     In addition:

- Members not able to participate and travel to the Civic Hall would be able to view meetings live

- Members would be able to draw on webcasts as a resource for the purposes of tracking debate on particular issues or for the purposes of drawing constituents' attention to relevant parts of a Council meeting

- It could provide a learning resource (e.g. in relation to citizenship lessons in schools or induction training for both officers and Members)

- There would be scope to relay transmission of particularly popular meetings to the public screen on Millennium Square (e.g. civic events such as Mayor Making and Freedom Ceremonies or Executive Board/Plans Meetings dealing with matters of particularly wide interest)

- Local media could more readily access and report information regarding council meetings

4.3     In turn webcasting could potentially:

- Strengthen the Council's democratic accountability to the local public both directly and via the local media

- Increase public understanding of the workings of local government both directly and via local media, schools etc

- Improve public participation in the political process

- Ensure greater equality of access to council information

4.4     Although the focus of this report is directed towards consideration of this technology in relation to broadcasting Council meetings, the technology could also be used for a range of other purposes (e.g. in connection with community events or conferences) but this would require further detailed study. Similarly the introduction of webcasting potentially provides a platform to build on to extend the e-democracy agenda.

4.5     Experiences of other councils.

4.5.1   More than 50 U.K local authorities now regularly webcast their council meetings and / or other meetings as part of their strategy to involve and engage people in local democracy. These include: Barnsley, Birmingham, Bristol, Derby, Hull, Kirklees, Leicester, Liverpool and a number of the large county councils.

4.5.2   Comments from Democratic Services Officers in Kirklees, who first broadcast Council in May 2010, are that the service has been well received by the public and the local press. They report that engagement in meetings is increasing from the usual small number of people in the public gallery to more than 10 times that number and audiences of more than 1000 where an item of significant interest is to be discussed.

4.5.3   Some Councils, including Kirklees, have linked webcasting to the refurbishment of the Council Chamber and the purchase of upgraded audio and voting equipment. More recent technology enables audio systems to link directly to webcast systems so that cameras automatically track the speaker.

4.5.4   There is no definitive source of statistics on viewing figures but quoted viewing figures can be anything from 30 to 1400 people.

4.5.5   Typically councils using webcasts report that the number of people watching live is considerably higher than the number of people who actually attend meetings, and that significantly higher numbers of people watch archived material as opposed to those who watch live.

4.5.6   Many councils seem to have identified the local media as a key target audience and a common feature seems to be increased media coverage of Council meetings as a result of journalists having ready access to details from meetings without the need to attend.

4.5.7   Although feedback seems to be largely positive, some have pointed to various technical difficulties they have had to face (e.g. the positioning of equipment being compromised by the constraints of listed building status and the inability of pre-existing sound systems to provide satisfactory quality). However, these difficulties are not insurmountable but may carry additional costs.

4.5.8   One council contacted had experienced considerable difficulties in obtaining member buy-in and was at pains to emphasise that ensuring this should not be over shadowed by a concentration on the technical aspects of the process. There would be significant cultural change required, including development of a programme for member support and training.

4.6     Issues to be addressed

4.6.1   There are a number of issues, technical and non technical, which would need to
        be addressed in order to take full advantage of webcasting Council meetings.

- Given the layout of the Council Chamber and its Listed Building status, any
  installation works will have to be carried out within these constraints. However,
  initial discussions with two leading suppliers suggest that they have the
  experience of implementing similar systems in listed buildings, including civic
  chambers of other councils and are confident they can work within the listed
  status restrictions. Any installation works to be carried out will require
  consultation with Planning and ICT Officers.

- A webcasting solution requires an audio input and a video source. The council
  already has an audio system in the Council Chamber. Although the existing
  audio system can provide an audio feed, the webcasting system will not be able
  to automatically point the camera to the speaker whose audio unit is switched
  on. An additional manual action is required to point the camera to the speaker.
  However, initial advice indicates that an upgrade of the audio system will obviate
  the need for manual operation and resource and allow automatic tracking of
  speaker by the camera, upon switching on of the speaker's particular sound unit.

- The current audio system is relatively old (installed 1990) and more up to date
  technology is available. The use of the current audio system may be prolonged
  but there is significant risk that it may break down. Moreover, there are no
  maintenance and support arrangements in place and any failure would
  necessitate an unplanned spend to re-instate the system.

- Advice from the existing audio system supplier suggests that due to the modular
  nature of the system, parts and components can be replaced on a 'need to'
  basis and the system should be maintainable for a few more years and currently
  does not present any problems. Although the introduction of webcasting
  presents an opportunity for its replacement this would incur significant high
  costs.

- If a modest upgrade of the current audio system is undertaken, an audio feed
  out of the current audio system can be provided with the signal to allow 'camera
  follow' to the speaker.

**5       Options on Webcasting acquisition and deployment**

5.1     Market research as well as discussions with leading suppliers has shown there are
        number of options for the deployment of webcasting of which an in-house option is
        the least favoured. Discussions with internal ICT staff confirm that this is a very
        specialist area and there is no expertise for the provision of in-house webcast
        solution and service.

5.2     Other options involve utilising external specialist webcast providers but these
        options also require a provision of audio capability and the Council already has an
        old, albeit operational audio system in the Chamber. It would be pragmatic for any

webcasting solution option to take an audio feed from this system, unless a view is taken to replace this system. Internal ICT resources would be required to separate out the video stream traffic on the ICT network, routing it through to external webcast provider and this work will require a commission to Corporate ICT services.

5.3    In addition, there will be internal IT costs and other internal services costs that will need to be managed depending on the option selected. e.g. ICT Officers time in the determination of the detailed requirements, Procurement Officers time in the procurement process and Planning Officers time in relation to works that may be permitted within the constraints of the Listed status.

5.4    As a consequence, Officers have concentrated on the main options that will work with the current audio system. Each option is listed in the following table with indicative costs provided by lead suppliers as well as brief appraisal comments. The option of complete replacement of the current audio system with a fully integrated audio, video, electronic voting and webcasting solution is also listed below for consideration.

|   | Option | Indicative Costs | Appraisal comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Fully hosted – this option entails leasing of equipment with the provision of webcasting live and on-demand from an external webcast provider, using audio system in place. Webcast Provider provides end to end service and support, enabling viewers to access video content. | Fully managed service at £16K per annum for the Civic Chamber and optionally extra to webcast Committee Rooms 6/7 at an additional cost of £9K. Plus basic upgrade of current Audio system at a 1-off cost of circa £6K Dependent on detailed requirements there may be additional internal ICT costs Supplier has indicated that they are able to webcast a full council meeting from the Council chamber, taking a feed from the current audio system as a trial for a one off cost of £3500 (plus travel and accommodation. | A simple managed service paid on an annual basis. This is a tried and tested solution and is used by majority of the Local Authorities who have elected to deploy webcasting. It can be acquired and implemented fairly quickly. There are no in-house ICT resources required for support, however, internal ICT will need to provide an adequate network routing facility to enable the audio feed to be sent across the Internet to the external webcast provider. The option to trial the webcasting of a Council meeting is attractive |
| 2 | Purchase equipment | Purchase and | LCC own the |

| | Option | Indicative Costs | Appraisal comments |
|---|---|---|---|
| | and use external webcast provider to host and broadcast video content.<br><br>With this option LCC purchase the equipment and upgrade the existing audio system to provide a feed to an external webcast hosting provider. | installation costs of between £17K to £20K, plus annual webcast hosting costs of £10K. Plus Audio system upgrade costs as option 1(£6K) Plus internal ICT estimated costs as option 1 (£15K) | equipment but pay for the hosting of the webcast on an on-going annual basis. LCC will have to make provision at an extra cost for the maintenance and support of the equipment and it may become necessary to renew the equipment to maintain the compatibility with webcast provider system and this may present issues going forward. |
| 3 | Refurbish Civic Chamber with fully integrated audio, video and voting system.<br><br>This option entails replacing the existing hardware and software, including microphones, the desk units, switching equipment etc with a modern up to date system that incorporates the webcasting equipment and system. | Based on an estimate received a few years ago, supplier costs would be in the region £110K-£150K, however recent study shows some authorities have spent up to £250K. | This is a major refurbishment project at a significant cost to the authority but if executed to completion will provide for an up to date fully integrated system offering enhanced functionality. It has an added benefit of future proofing the audio and voting capability within the Chamber and putting the system on a more robust footing. |

## 6       Corporate Considerations

## 6.1    Consultation and Engagement

6.1.1   The introduction of webcasting is likely to have a significant impact on Members and it would be necessary to invest a considerable effort into ensuring buy-in and overcoming any potential concerns or difficulties that they may have. Webcasting would have considerable impact on the conduct and governance aspect of the council meetings. Webcasting providers include training as part of the implementation and this would have to be tailored to take account of member concerns and needs. It would also be necessary to put in place member support and an on-going training programme and this would entail costs particularly if it was extended to cover media training and presentation skills.

6.1.2 Members across all parties have not yet been consulted, however, members can be provided reassurance that there is an opportunity for trialling the system as a one-off event, as proposed by one leading supplier at an indicative cost of £3.5K. Members can also get a feel for the nature of webcasts of other Local Authorities by visiting their websites.[1]

**6.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration**

6.2.1 Webcasting of Council meetings could potentially make an important contribution in promoting local democracy and increasing community engagement by enabling more of its citizens to having greater involvement in the democratic process.

6.2.2 People who cannot currently access the public gallery of the Council Chamber (e.g. wheelchair users).

6.2.3 It would remove the need to travel to Civic Hall, in order to view Council Meetings and observe the decision making process.

6.2.4 It would also further the interests of good governance by providing increased transparency of decision making.

**6.3 Resources and value for money**

6.3.1 Option 1 - Indicative pricing from leading suppliers for webcasting as a managed service are around £16000 per annum depending on a number of factors (e.g. number of hours for webcasting, number of cameras and the sophistication of the hardware provided etc.) Normally these include:

- Leased hardware (including maintenance and upgrades)
- Software licence
- Project and account management
- Helpdesk support
- Full hosting of all content.

6.3.2 The current audio system provider has indicated the system can be upgraded at a cost of between £6K and £26K (depending on components purchased), to enable integration with a webcasting solution. At the top range cost figure, it builds on the existing infrastructure rather than replace the existing audio and voting system (e.g. microphones, desk units etc). The updated equipment would include cameras and control system, screens, a new control PC and the latest audio conference system, providing the ability to broadcast live events internally from within the civic building on projector screens e.g. show live voting results in different graphic formats etc. The webcasting solution would be a bolt-on to the upgraded audio system with additional costs. However Officers believe, it is not necessary to upgrade at the top-end cost, rather the LCC requirements for an audio feed output to enable camera automation can be achieved at a relatively modest cost, estimated to be £6K.

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[1] http://www.surreycc.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/70697,
http://connect.kirklees.public-i.tv/site/player/pl_v7.php?a=79877&t=0&m=wm&l=en_GB

6.3.3    Option 2 - Alternative to a fully managed service is to purchase the equipment and use an external webcast provider for managing the video content and streaming the webcast. One supplier has provided indicative prices between £17,000 and £26,000 to supply the equipment. There will be additional costs to stream the webcast on a monthly basis, to store previous webcasts of meetings and potential archiving and to manage and support the equipment. In this case the indicative annual costs for webcasting would be circa £10K.

6.3.4    Additionally, having purchased the necessary upgrade equipment from current audio system supplier,  recurring costs would arise in relation to the hosting of meetings (assuming 120 hours of meetings hosted per year, one supplier has indicated a charge of  £17,000 for providing this service although, again, this estimate may prove to be on the low side).  Support and maintenance charges for the audio equipment would also have to be added.

6.3.5    There would be additional internal ICT costs to determine detailed requirements and to investigate the network capacity and works required to upgrade the communications network to channel the video traffic to the external webcast provider.

6.3.6    As a consequence, Officers are of the opinion that option 1 together with the upgrade of the current audio system presents the optimum 'value for money' solution.

**6.4      Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In**

6.4.1    It would be appropriate to develop a protocol in relation to the webcasting of council Meetings, including such matters as notifying of the intention to record and broadcast particular meetings, how long broadcasts should be made available, retention and archiving criteria etc. and arrangements for withholding the broadcasting of any particular items etc.

**6.5      Risk Assessment and Management**

6.5.1    A high level risk assessment has been carried out pertaining to the options considered and the main ones are listed below.

6.5.2    Option 3 has relatively high costs and consideration would need to be given to the timing of any required structural works against any scheduled meetings to minimise the disruption to activities within the Council Chamber.

6.5.3    As a consequence,  Officers have concentrated efforts on the remaining two options that include using the audio feed from the current audio system and using a professional webcast provider to host and broadcast proceedings:

         (a) Option 1 – Leased equipment and external webcast hosting of Council Chamber meetings facility, optionally including committee room 6/7;

         (b) Option 2 – Purchased equipment and external webcast hosting of Council Chamber meetings and optionally including committee room 6/7 meetings

6.5.4    Of the above options considered, option 1 utilising expert webcast providers to provide an end-to-end solution, is a tried and tested approach that has been adopted by many local authorities and presents the least risk to the authority.

6.5.5    The current audio system presents a significant risk as it may fail at any point and it may not be possible to re-instate and recover the system to an operational mode. The PC is very old, there is no software copy held within the council to re-install, even if a new PC is acquired, there is no expertise to re-configure the system without seeking external expertise which will be at a cost to the authority. Moreover, there is no guarantee, that any new PC and software upgrade will re-instate the system to its current functionality.  Early indications from the existing supplier are that this element of the system is upgradeable and is compatible with the remainder of the system but this needs a detailed survey to confirm.  Similarly the initial indications are that the additional "bolt-on" functionality to support web-casting does not present an additional risk with respect to the failure of the current audio and voting system (although naturally, if the system did fail during a live broadcast there would be potentially greater visibility).

6.5.6    It may be appropriate to resource a Member Development programme (either internally or with our Training partner) to support members in relation to participation in webcast meetings.

## 7    Conclusions

7.1    It is apparent from initial discussions with suppliers that by having close working arrangements with Civic Building staff, Planning Officers and ICT Officers and subject to a detailed supplier survey, a viable solution can be implemented.

7.2    The webcasting of Council meetings could make a contribution to promoting the democratic process and to increasing the transparency of the Council's decision making.  Additionally, once acquired, webcasting equipment could be used for a variety of other purposes, though these would require further detailed study and would typically involve additional costs.

7.3    Option 3 pertaining to the full refurbishment of the Council Chamber with a fully integrated audio, video, electronic voting and webcasting system would lead to significant expenditure and there would be a need to manage and minimise any disruption to the Chamber proceedings.

7.4    In order to get the maximum benefit from such a system, it would be necessary at an early stage to consult widely with Members in order to identify and offset any concerns and difficulties that they may anticipate.

7.5    An in-house solution is unrealistic and impractical as there is no in-house expertise to undertake the development, implementation and support of video streaming.

7.6    In terms of the technical solution, the nature of webcasting is a highly specialist area and as a result there is a reliance on suppliers to deliver the functionality required. Option 1 combined with an upgrade of the audio system, constitutes the only viable solution at this time.

7.7 One feature of Option 1 is that before making a long term commitment to a webcasting solution there is an opportunity to trial the webcasting of a Council meeting as a one off event.

7.8 At the present time no budget or funding source is identified for this project. The relatively low level of cost for a one off event can be met within current budgets. It would be necessary to secure a funding source if it was decided to go ahead with regular webcasting. Provision could be made in the 2013/14 budget if implementation was planned for the 2013/14 municipal year..

## 8 Recommendations

8.1 General Purpose Committee are recommended to agree to the trial webcasting of a Council meeting as a one off event and, subject to the outcome of the trial, authorise the Director of Resources to develop the proposal to webcast Council meetings from the start of the 2013/14 municipal year.

## 9 Background documents[2]

9.1 Report to General Purposes Committee 9th May 2012 "Review of Council Meetings"

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[2] The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.