



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

West Oxfordshire District Council

Name and date of Committee	Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee Wednesday 27 November 2019
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM No. 8
Subject	Live Streaming of Council and Committee Meetings
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Toby Morris, Cabinet Member for Resources Email: toby.morris@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Christine Gore, Executive Director (Commissioning) Tel: 01285 623605 Email: christine.gore@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	To consider the Notice of Motion regarding webcasting of meetings referred to the Committee by the Council and to make recommendations accordingly.
Annexes	Annex A: Report to Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee 30 March 2016 and associated minute extract.
Recommendation/s	<i>That consideration be given to the Motion as set out below.</i>
Corporate priorities	To meet the current and future needs and aspirations of residents and to provide efficient and value for money services, whilst delivering quality front line services.
Key Decision	N/A
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	N/A

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. At the meeting of the Council held on 23 October 2019, the following Motion was proposed by Councillor Jake Acock and seconded by Councillor Andy Graham, namely:-

“One of the ethos of this council is to be inclusive; not exclusive. We want to welcome people in and get more and more active with local government. This council recognises we are living in an age of technology that can be used to keep in touch, improve communications and change peoples lives for the better. Therefore, in order to improve our communications, we charge that every council and committee meeting is filmed and recorded, then placed on the West Oxfordshire District Council website for West Oxfordshire residents to view and listen to our meetings. Across the country from Manchester, Wandsworth and Bath, council meetings are recorded. Therefore, this council charges that we will now record and stream live all of our council meetings and committee meetings”

- 1.2. In accordance with paragraph 11(e) of the Council Procedure Rules, it was resolved that the motion should stand referred without discussion to the Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1. The Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee has previously considered a report on the Webcasting of Council meetings, in March 2016. A copy of that report and the associated minute extract are attached as Annex A to this report, where it can be seen that at that time the resolution of the Committee was “That the content of the report be noted and the Cabinet be advised that the Committee was of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the matter at this juncture.”
- 2.2. In the three and a half years that have passed since this matter was last considered, the webcasting/live streaming of meetings has become more commonplace. Across the Publica partnership, Forest of Dean District Council introduced webcasting of its Council and Planning Committee meetings in May 2018; Cheltenham Borough Council has recently introduced webcasting from its Council Chamber only, and webcast their first meeting on 14 October 2019; and Cotswold District Council is currently investigating the feasibility and cost of webcasting its meetings.
- 2.3. Webcasting/live streaming of meetings does provide access for residents who are unable to attend meetings in person. Since January this year there have been a total of 489 ‘views’ of Forest of Dean’s six Council meetings and 1079 of their ten Planning Committee meetings, whilst there have been a total of 524 views to date of Cheltenham’s one webcast of their Council meeting. The recording of meetings can also provide a helpful record of meetings which in due course may increase the efficiency of the Council’s Democratic Services function by reducing the need for extensive written minutes.
- 2.4. Conversely there are logistical, financial, and potential data protection issues associated with webcasting and live streaming. As indicated above, both Forest of Dean and Cheltenham are restricted in terms of which meetings can be webcast as they only have the relevant technology installed in their Council Chambers. The same issue would apply in WODC where the only room suitable for a permanent set up of the technology is the Council Chamber, which currently is only used for Cabinet and Council meetings, all other meetings being held in the Committee rooms. The Committee may therefore wish to provide some clarity as to which meetings might be webcast/live streamed, as there will be different implications associated with different options.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1.** The cost of any system would be significant, depending upon the precise extent and nature of what may be required. Forest of Dean spent £45,000 in 2006 on a new microphone system (which included an electronic voting facility) and a further £25,000 of capital costs on the actual webcasting system in 2018. An annual maintenance fee of £10,000 is also payable. This would represent a revenue growth item.
- 3.2.** In terms of the number of views, the approximate cost per view based on the total number of live/downloaded views since the system was introduced amounts to £4.56. Clearly this number will be higher or lower based upon the popularity of the system.
- 3.3.** In contrast Cheltenham's system cost approx £65,000 plus £1900 maintenance cost for two years. In addition in both cases there was an installation cost. In the case of WODC there would almost certainly be a need for a full upgrade to the microphone system as well as the actual webcasting technology, plus potential changes to the configuration of the chamber itself.
- 3.4.** Detailed costings have not been sought at this stage pending a decision by Council based on any recommendations from this Committee, but based on the experience of other councils a sum in the region of at least £70,000 capital expenditure to cover the Council Chamber only would not be an unreasonable estimate. Were the other Committee rooms required (to cover for example Planning Committee) then this would increase the cost proportionately.
- 3.5.** The ongoing revenue costs for system maintenance and licensing are likely to be in the order of £10,000 per annum however some providers also charge per additional hour of webcasting once a certain number of hours are met. This can only be properly established once a clear specification of the number of meetings to be covered is determined.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1.** As indicated above, there are potential data protection issues associated with webcasting and live streaming of meetings. Should Council decide to progress with such a project it would be essential to learn from the experience of others and ensure robust safeguards were in place to protect against the misuse of such recordings. This will include the installation of notices in the council chamber and/or other rooms where webcasting/live streaming takes place, updating the constitution to include a protocol for webcasting, and an updated privacy notice.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1.** The main risk associated with webcasting/livestreaming of meetings is highlighted in section 4 above, i.e. the misuse of such recordings. Putting in place robust safeguards would mitigate against such a risk.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 6.1.** No alternative options have been considered at this stage.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1.** There are no background papers associated with this report other than those attached as Annex A.

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 MARCH 2016

WEB CASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS
REPORT OF THE JOINT HEAD OF BUSINESS INFORMATION AND
CUSTOMER SERVICES

(Contact: Phil Martin: - Tel (01993) 861201)

(The report is for information)

PURPOSE

To explore the feasibility and associated costs of introducing web casting of Council meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee considers the report and makes recommendations to Cabinet.

INTRODUCTION

This Council supports the principles of openness and transparency in its workings;

The Openness in local Government Bodies regulations 2014 give members of the public and press the right to record (either pictures and/or audio recordings) meetings of the Council held in public. Whilst the Council has allowed filming for some time and has a protocol in place the Chair has always had the discretion to suspend or terminate any activities that, in his or her opinion, are disruptive.

BACKGROUND

Webcasting of meetings involves live or 'real time' audio and/or video streaming the proceedings over the web so that the meeting can be experienced remotely. In addition, or as an alternative, a copy of the broadcast will also be made available after the event which is known as „on demand“ availability.

Webcasting usually involves either the use of at least one camera with pan and zoom facilities or the use of several fixed cameras focusing on different parts of the room linked to activation of microphones. A thirds option could be one fixed camera providing a suitable 'wide' shot of the Committee Members, however a detailed survey would be required to ensure a suitable approach, taking into account our facilities and available staffing resources to manage cameras during an event would need to be undertaken to identify the associated costs.

While web-casts are generally considered to be positive in terms of increased transparency and understanding of the decision making process, viewing of such web-casts can vary considerably in scale.

Experience from Cherwell District Council who have been webcasting their meetings for a number of years has shown that in 2015 the number of 'live' viewers was approx. 1,129, so relatively low but they had 30,522 archive video viewers. This is to some extent similar to other Councils experiences, but numbers can significantly increase when a controversial item is discussed.

Some of the wider advantages and disadvantages are outlined below:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows people to view proceedings from a wide range of locations rather than having to attend the meeting – this could be a benefit given the geographic spread of the district although ironically those in the more remote areas are likely to have the poorest broadband service at present. This would also support the sustainability agenda through reducing the need for members of the public to travel to witness meetings • Helps meet public expectations of Authority transparency and provides the potential for increased public understanding of decision making processes. • High quality pictures available for a wide range of subsequent purposes including evidence. • Existing print and broadcast media have steadily moved away from providing lengthy, verbatim reporting of what goes on in elected bodies because it's not what the public wants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost – There is currently no budget provision for webcasting. • Given the current pressure on budgets it is possible that the budget for other activities would have to be reduced to accommodate this new cost. • Ideally webcasting should be accompanied by information to help people understand what they're watching, the reasons it is relevant to them and what procedures the Council is following. This is an additional workload, especially as further enquiries/questions may be raised. • Potentially low levels of 'live' viewing for meetings based on experience of other users • Webcast video quality can be affected by low bandwidth, either from the broadcast venue or through the user's internet connection.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on Cherwell DC current solution, the Council could expect to pay around £17,500 per year for 60 hours of uploaded content.

In addition to this, 'one-off' set up costs of between £25,000 - £50,000, depending on the specific requirements the Council has, which would include video cameras, microphone conference units, projectors /monitors, would need to be factored in following a site specific survey.

Currently there is no provision within the ICT capital or revenue budgets to meet the costs associated with introducing web casting of Council meetings.

RISKS

The risks are mainly reputational and arise from the conduct of the meeting or of individual Members as a result of inappropriate words or gestures being broadcast, some of which could breach legislation.

Recordings/webcasting of quasi-judicial proceedings such as Planning and Licensing & Regulatory Committees and the consequences of having a 'recording' of proceedings should a decision be questioned by a member of the public. Recordings/webcasting do not make a meeting any more 'public' than it already is, but it does provide a transcript which could allow for a greater level of challenge.

There is no legal risk should the Council wish to remain with the current arrangements.

Phil Martin
Joint Head of Business Information and Customer Services

Date: 24th February 2016

68. WEBCASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

Consideration was given to the report of the Shared Head of Business Information and Change regarding the feasibility and costs of introducing webcasting of Council meetings.

Mr Dorward suggested that the projected cost of providing such a service appeared high. In response, the Strategic Director advised that the figures were based upon costs incurred by neighbouring authorities in contracts with external service providers. He stressed the importance of providing a high quality, reliable service and confirmed that, should the Council wish to commission external provision, it would do so through a competitive process.

Whilst having supported the call for a preliminary investigation, Mr Cooper indicated that, having seen the initial costings, he was of the view that it would not be appropriate to pursue the concept further at a time when the Council was endeavouring to make significant financial savings.

Mr Howard concurred and Mr Saul suggested that, whilst it should be recognised as a desirable aspiration in the longer term, the Council faced more pressing financial priorities, particularly at a time when the future structure of local government was in a state of flux.

Mr Good suggested that students from Witney and Abingdon College might be able to assist in providing facilities on an ad hoc basis. The Strategic Director agreed to make enquiries but suggested that it was essential for the Council to have a consistent policy as to what was to be broadcast. He went on to caution against incurring budget growth at a time of financial restraint.

RESOLVED: That the content of the report be noted and the Cabinet be advised that the Committee was of the opinion that no further action should be taken on the matter at this juncture.