Subject: Webcasting of Council Meetings

Lead Officer: Balvinder Heran
Contact on 01789 260470

Lead Member/ Portfolio Holder: Councillor M Brain

Summary

A webcast is a live video recording that is transmitted over the internet. It gives the audience a chance to watch a meeting as it happens or view it at a later date, if more convenient. Following the successful webcasts of key planning Committees in 2011, this paper proposes a pilot to webcast future public meetings of The Cabinet where it is practical to do so.

Recommendation

(1) That a pilot scheme for webcasting meetings of The Cabinet from November 2012 to 30 April 2013 be agreed;

(2) That other Council committees be invited to participate in the trial;

(3) The protocol set out at Appendix 1 be agreed for the trial period.

1 Background/Information

1.1 The Council chose to webcast key planning committees in 2011 due to the predicted interest in the planning applications under consideration. This allowed those who could not travel to the meeting to view the proceedings. It also allowed those who could not gain access to the Council Chamber, in some cases queuing outside Elizabeth House, to watch the meeting on mobile devices. The webcast proved successful on all fronts.

Webcasting – The view from Communities and Local Government

1.2 The following is a brief extract from a document, dated 23 February 2011, issued on the C&LG website:

"Councils should open up their public meetings to local news 'bloggers' and routinely allow online filming of public discussions as part of increasing their transparency, Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles said today.

Local Government Minister Bob Neill has written to all Councils urging greater openness and calling on them to adopt a modern day approach so that credible community or 'hyper-local' bloggers and online
broadcasters get the same routine access to Council meetings as the traditional accredited media have.”

**The partnership with Stratford College**

1.3 The physical filming and uploading of the webcast was performed by staff and students from Stratford College. This benefits the College, with the students gaining valuable ‘real-life’ work experience. The pilot would be operated on this basis, but options for any future arrangements, if pursued, would be examined during the pilot period.

**2 Options available to the Committee**

2.1 The Cabinet has four options:-

(1) Not to webcast meetings;
(2) To record meeting but only offer play back (viewing of the webcast) after the meeting has finished;
(3) To provide a live webcast that can also be viewed after the meeting; and
(4) To provide an audio stream only (sound transmission but no picture).

**3 Evidence Base**

3.1 Many local authorities already broadcast their meeting on a live basis. The key reasons are the same as proposed in this paper. To enable greater participation in the democratic process, to offer transparency, to allow those, particularly in rural areas or with transport issues, to be included in the process. It also offers choice and the ability to view the meetings at a time convenient to the resident. Cherwell District Council has successfully webcast their Council meetings for a number of years and the system is well regarded by elected members.

3.2 The following are some quotes from Local Authorities who offer this service with meetings broadcast live and available to view on their websites, together with some of their comments:

3.2.1 Haringey ([http://www.haringey.gov.uk](http://www.haringey.gov.uk))

“Every week, Councillors elected by you attend meetings where decisions are made about local issues - issues affecting you, your neighbour and everyone in your area.

Now you can see these decisions being made and witness local democracy in action wherever and whenever you like thanks to Haringey’s webcast service.”

3.2.2 Epping Forest District Council ([http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk](http://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk))

“It brings local Democracy right into people’s homes and makes Epping Forest District Council much more open and accountable to our residents.”

3.2.3 South Oxfordshire District Council ([http://www.southoxon.gov.uk](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk))

“By webcasting meetings, the council aims to provide local residents who cannot attend meetings - through prior commitments, transport issues, disability, work patterns or child-care issues - with an opportunity to play
a part in the local democratic process, and to get involved in the decisions affecting their lives.”

4 Members’ Comments

4.1 Comments below received from Councillor M Brain:-

“I fully support this initiative as it will enable members of the public to have a better understanding about how the Council works and how we make important decisions. It will also ensure that those who are unable to attend in person can see the debate in full.”

5 Implications of the proposal

5.1 Legal/Human Rights Implications

5.1.1 Defamatory statements would be prohibited as far as is practicable in webcast meetings, in the same way as they are in regular meetings. A reminder of this for public in attendance could be included in standard introductory comments before each meeting. However by webcasting the meeting the Council is exposing itself to liability as the publisher of any slanderous comment which is not the case if the meeting is not broadcast to the outside world.

5.1.2 Any statements which cause concern from a legal perspective could be edited from the version of the meeting kept on the website for later viewing. This would mitigate any risk of liability attaching to the Council but it would not eliminate it. The only way of achieving elimination would be by broadcasting an edited recording after the meeting as per option (2) above.

5.1.3 The number of people able to access Council meetings would be significantly increased by webcasting and enable those unable to travel to access the meetings.

5.1.4 Any proposal to extend the pilot going forward would require consequential changes to the Constitution and potential compliance with Contracts Standing Orders if a cost is to be incurred.

5.2 Financial

5.2.1 Provisionally an option has been agreed that from 1 November 2012 to 30 April 2013 the college will work with the Council on a trial basis. There is no financial impact to the Council and the filming will be undertaken by the students of Stratford College, supervised by their tutors. The students are able to use the practical experience as part of their evidence for their course work. The pilot will provide an opportunity for the Council to assess the effectiveness of this new approach to widening public participation. Opportunities for a joint arrangement to assess the most optimum longer term solution for recording public meetings and events (if pursued) and confirm any further costs.

5.3 Environmental

5.3.1 Removing the need to travel across the District to view a Council meeting has environmental benefits.

5.4 Corporate Strategy

5.4.1 Aim 3 – Improving access to services; priority: “We will support wider
participation in local decision making processes through the use of digital technologies, enabling people who are unable to physically attend meetings or to take part in more traditional consultation programmes to have their views heard.”

5.5 **Equality Impact Assessment**

5.5.1 The proposal opens up The Cabinet meetings for a trial period to those less able to travel due to physical restrictions, or other commitments, and offers more choice to the District’s residents in how they interact with the Council.

6 **Risk Assessment**

6.1 The attached protocol - Appendix 1 seeks to minimise any risks.

7 **Conclusion**

7.1 The use of webcasting meetings is becoming more widespread in local government and is recommend by Central Government for transparency. The live broadcasting of The Cabinet meetings for a three month trial commencing November is suggested to evaluate public interaction, viability and options for the future. The Cabinet could recommend to other committees of the Council that they consider participating in this trial.

Balvinder Heran
HEAD OF CUSTOMER ACCESS

Background papers:

None.