

Wirral Webcasting Project Option Paper

CONSULTATION PAPER - FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE MEMBERS' EQUIPMENT STEERING GROUP

Introduction

There are many benefits to the webcasting of Council meetings, but the overall aim is to improve public engagement in the Council's democratic process. Many Councils across the country have invested in webcasting technology. It gives people who may not be able to attend Council meetings the ability to view democratic proceedings on the internet making public access easier and decision making more transparent. It is a cost effective way to reach a large audience on key issues. The Council is not obliged to live stream its formal meetings but it is considered best practice.

The Public-i solution procured is designed to provide high levels of public engagement with meetings webcast. It is fully integrated with the Council's Committee Management Software, thereby enabling viewers to instantly call up on screen details of relevant agenda papers and information on those Members speaking at every point of the debate. Viewers can follow in real time presentations, videos and slide shows as they are displayed to the Committee. The potential exists to incorporate social media activity into live broadcasts, enabling residents and Members to interact as the meeting progresses. Consideration needs to be given to the best means of productively harnessing the benefits of this new form of engagement.

Meetings are streamed live and recordings subsequently made available for repeat viewing in an online archive available for repeat viewing in an online archive hosted by Public-i (but customized to fit seamlessly with the Council's own website) for a period of 2 years. The permanent retention of an off-line digital file of the recording so that it can, if necessary, be referred to at a later date, needs to be explored.

Background Summary

Funding for the Webcasting Project was secured from the Capital Programme. Consequently, webcasting equipment was procured for a three year period and funding was provided for two full time Band G posts to assist the webcasting for one year.

Part of the ongoing webcasting implementation period is about testing out the balance between ICT storage and human resources cost of webcasting and getting the right number of meetings webcast to achieve the best level of public access.

To both of these ends, the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee is requested to consider the following options paper setting out the project outturn in terms

of webcasting equipment installation, benchmarking against other authorities and options for consideration regarding the possible number of meetings to be webcast, meeting minute style and staffing resources to support the project in the future.

Information regarding the views of Wirral's webcast meetings and archive views is attached at **Appendix 1**.

Contents

1. Decision Required
2. Primary Project Directive
3. Current Status
4. Options - Benefits / Risks
 - Option 1 – Number of Meetings to be Webcast
 - Option 2 – Style of Minutes
 - Option 3 – Officer Support
5. Recommendations / Decision
6. Next Steps

Appendices

Appendix 1: Webcasting viewing hits figures

Appendix 2: Webcasting project timeline

Appendix 3: Other Councils

- Number of meetings webcast
- Staff who attend meetings

1. Decision Required

The webcasting project has now reached a stage, that Members' views are requested to provide views on how allocated resources may be utilised to best effect.

Each Member of the Equipment Steering Group is requested to review the proposed options, and associated impact on resources, with a view to providing comments to the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee when it meets on 29 August 2018 to consider the matter, and comments from the Council's Senior Leadership Team.

2. Initial objectives of the Webcasting Project

- A more robust communication solution. To strengthen the Council's democratic accountability to the local public both directly and via the local media.
- A more accessible Council. Increasing public understanding of the workings of local government.
- To promote a more transparent model of governance.
- To utilise the solution for commercial opportunities e.g. Training, conference streaming, wedding recording, facility hire etc.
- To align the Council with its local and national peers.
- To promote engagement with the Council's constituents and its wider audience and improve public participation in the political process.
- To reduce the cost to committee services of detailed manual minute recording by Council officers.
- The complete digital recording of Council meetings.
- To ensure greater equality of access to Council information.

3. Current Status

Current status for the Webcasting, Committee Room and Wallasey Town Hall (WTH) Council Chamber equipment upgrades is as follows:

Civic Hall

Cabling and HD Cameras are installed and have been used on 14 May 2018 to successfully webcast Mayor Making (Annual Council Part 1) utilising Mobile Kit as planned.

Wallasey Town Hall Council Chamber

Cabling, Cameras, Monitors, PC equipment controller, amplifier are installed and were used on 15 May to successfully webcast Annual Council Part 2.

Outstanding works – installation of bespoke microphone and voting buttons – hardware delivered onsite to WTH (6 June 2018). Contractor completed these works week commencing 25 June 2018. At the request of Elected Members, the installation of a second display monitor is scheduled to take place within the next 6-8 weeks i.e. in time for the October meeting of Council. Additional desk mounted monitors have been requested by the Mayor and the Director: Governance and Assurance. A microphone to be used by members of the public asking questions at Council meetings has also been suggested.

Committee Room 1

All works completed and configured for Camera to Microphone Tracking, Webcasting and the delivery of PPT/internet/intranet files from visiting presenters using own laptops (simple plug in via HDMI cable) – this included Cabling, Cameras, Monitors, PC equipment controls, Amplifier.

Outstanding works – general tidy up and minor making good of paintwork where old equipment has been decommissioned (Facilities team coordinating these works).

Committee Room 2

As per CR1 - all works completed and configured for Camera to Microphone Tracking, Webcasting and the delivery of PPT/internet/intranet files from visiting presenters using own laptops (simple plug in via HDMI cable) – this included Cabling, Cameras, Monitors, PC equipment controls, Amplifier.

Outstanding works – general tidy up and minor making good of paintwork where old equipment has been decommissioned (as per CR1 Facilities Team is coordinating these works).

Committee Room 3

All works completed and configured for Camera to Microphone Tracking, Webcasting and the delivery of PPT/internet/intranet files from visiting presenters – this includes Cabling, Cameras, Monitors, PC equipment controls, Amplifier.

Final software commissioning took place in the week commencing 25 June, general tidy up and minor making good of paintwork where old equipment has been decommissioned is in hand, as per other committee room installations.

Mobile Kit

An upgraded control unit delivered on (7 June 2018). Cameras, Tripods, Sound Equipment, Projector and Screen all held onsite at WTH – due to the bulk and weight of the mobile equipment plans for its full time storage at Birkenhead Town Hall (BTH) are being investigated.

Standalone Microphone units are onsite, configured for use with mobile equipment and committee room installations utilising either automated or operator controlled camera tracking. 2x20 (40 microphones in total)

Timeline

Updated project plan and status as at 31 July 2018 is attached at **Appendix 2**.

Training

Staff overview introduction to the webcasting procedures took place on 18 July 2018, and Staff Training (including invited Members) on the electronic voting system took place on Thursday 9 August 2018, in Wallasey Town Hall Council Chamber.

Additional media and communications training is being arranged by the Communications Team as part of the Member Development Programme.

Cascade staff training i.e. practical experience, has already commenced utilising the system at future webcast meetings.

4. Options

The recommendations of this Steering Group will take the form of preferred options i.e. a pick list from the following options, or alternate suggestions arising from the Steering Group discussions. The views of the Council's Senior Leadership Team are also currently being sought. A further report to include financial / resource costings will be presented to the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee for consideration.

I. Number of Meetings to be Webcast:

At present, a phased approach has been taken with regard to the webcasting of meetings prioritising Council, Cabinet and Planning Committee meetings. An additional webcast also streamed and recorded the meeting of the Audit and Risk Management Committee held on 23 July 2018.

Options:

- a) Webcast all meetings of the Council held in public.
- b) Webcast selected key meetings – Council, Cabinet, Planning, Overview and Scrutiny? Call-Ins?

Advantages:	
OPTION A	<p>Meets the initial objectives of the project in terms of a more accessible Council and promotion of a transparent model of governance.</p> <p>Enables online access to meetings, and engagement with the democratic process for residents who may not otherwise have attended Town Hall meetings. Complies with the Council's disability awareness and access criteria. Provides a true record of all the meetings. This helps to supplement Minutes and to counteract any misleading use of 'edited highlights' by anyone filming the meeting.</p> <p>There is some evidence to suggest that there are fewer time consuming Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) to Councils when Council meeting records can be so easily viewed.</p>
OPTION B	As above - pro-rata reduction in costs.
Disadvantages:	
OPTION A	<p>Staffing resource – by covering all meetings of the Council additional Flexi hours and accumulation of TOIL (time of in lieu hours) could impact on officer availability during the core working week. The majority of Wirral's Council / Committee meetings take place after 18:00hrs – must be taken in conjunction with any decision regarding officer support at meetings.</p> <p>An additional staff member is needed at meetings to operate webcasting equipment. At least one hour preparation time is required before the meeting to ensure that it runs smoothly and effectively.</p> <p>Webcasting needs to be accompanied by linked agenda, reports, etc. to help people understand what they are watching and the procedures being followed - this is an extra work load.</p> <p>Additional enquiries about meetings may also arise from the webcasting of meetings.</p> <p>The Mobile Kit is large and heavy and is not easy to move around. Suitable transportation would be required if the equipment was to be moved from Birkenhead Town Hall to webcast a meeting of the Wirral West Constituency Committee for example.</p>
OPTION B	<p>As above; plus</p> <p>Limiting the number of webcast meetings is contrary to the initial project brief and objectives. Possible challenge along the lines of 'what is being hidden' if not all meetings are broadcast or recorded.</p>

Hardware failures will always be possible and can be expected. Webcasting is not fully resilient, whilst checks to ensure functionality prior to each meeting can help reduce the impact of these.

Member's views are requested.

*(A summary of other Council's meeting webcast statistics is attached at **Appendix 3**)*

II. Style of Minutes:

At present Wirral's house style provides a detailed (but not verbatim) record of Council meetings i.e. a stand-alone record of meeting topics, discussion and decisions – not requiring reference to the original officer reports.

One of the initial project's potential outcomes / initial objectives suggested cost savings arising from a change to the level of detail contained in the Council minutes needs to be explored.

Guidance from 'Knowles on Local Authority Meetings – A Manual of Law and Practice' states:

"The minutes of a meeting cannot be successfully written up without a clear understanding of the purpose of the minutes – these need to:

- establish an accurate record of the decisions taken;
- comply with legal requirements; and, where minutes are used as the mechanism to bring proposals before the cabinet, other Committee or full Council for decision, the need also to:
 - ensure that the record is sufficiently self-explanatory to enable the Council to make a decision in full possession of the relevant facts; and
 - provide adequate information about the authority's business for press and public.

The obligation on local authorities to keep minutes of proceedings could be met by brief notes, as the law does not prescribe the form in which the minutes should be written up; but the authority may need to substantiate its actions by production of minutes authorizing the action taken, drawn up in terms that will satisfy legal requirements.

The form adopted by any particular local authority is a matter of individual choice or local custom and minutes do not have to be written up during the course of a meeting – this is not practicable as the Committee Services Officer needs to be paying attention to the proceedings. Pre-drafting may take place and it is usual practice in many local authorities for the minutes to be transcribed from rough notes taken at the meeting.

Minutes can be kept brief by being selective: a minute is not, and should never be, a verbatim record but a summary of the proceedings that includes only the essence of the discussion (in that) together with the decision and (where required but held as good practice) a sense of the reasons for coming to that decision.

It is rarely necessary to reproduce, however summarily, what a particular speaker said; but it is helpful, as a rule, to pick up the main threads of the discussion that led to the conclusion”.

Options:

- a) Retain the current house-style.
- b) Minimise content to an abbreviated format to show the bare minimum required by law.

Advantages:	
OPTION A	Established practice, tested under challenge in law, no requirement for staff re-training.
OPTION B	Simplified / brief minutes would free up officer time either for other duties, and/or resource savings in terms of reducing the number of committee service officers.
Disadvantages:	
OPTION A	Additional time taken in preparing meeting minutes.
OPTION B	Extreme care needed to ensure minute construction meets the basic requirements of accuracy and recording of council business and decisions, containing sufficient clarity and precision for the avoidance of legal challenge.

Member's views are requested.

III. Officer Support:

The traditional task for committee section is to provide administrative support and guidance before during and subsequent to Council and Committee meetings, the introduction of webcasting requires that an additional member of staff is now required to monitor and or override automated elements of the audio video streaming – this includes indexing of meeting agenda items.

An officer would be required to manage proceedings throughout the meeting itself, to ensure the system is monitored and that progression through the meeting agenda items and actions are indexed against the recording. This allows people watching an archived recording to skip directly to an agenda item of interest.

Feedback from other Councils indicates that officer support requirements vary considerably. The support requirement could be a dedicated officer on Band G: the hourly rate including on-costs is £17.86. The officer would spend between 3-5 hours per meeting on webcasting at a cost of around £54 - £90 per meeting.

Options:

Within the existing resources, a number of operational decisions are under consideration. Such as:

- a) Retention of current staffing levels i.e. web operator and committee clerk.
- b) Committee Officer takes on a dual role – controlling all technical aspects of webstreaming, providing guidance to the Chair and minuting the meeting.
- c) Training in the operation of webcasting equipment be extended to other Council staff – for example Facilities, ICT, Marketing and Communications Officers.

Advantages:	
OPTION A	Clear demarcation between Committee Service Officer and Webcast Operator roles. No need for job description review and/or job evaluation.
OPTION B	Possible resource savings in terms of officer time, and impact on core service hours i.e. Flexi and TOIL hours. Dependent on the quality assurance and level of indexing required for live and archived recordings.
OPTION C	Extended pool of trained Webcast Operators provides development opportunities for staff outside of Committee Services to experience aspects of Committee Services work, and provides a pool of operatives reducing pressures on the Committee Services Team.
Disadvantages:	
OPTION A	With 2 officers from the same service area attending evening meetings there will be an impact on core service hours through Flexi and TOIL hours – must be taken in conjunction with any decision regarding the number of meetings to be webcast.

OPTION B	<p>The Committee Services Officer needs to be concentrating on the proceedings (per Knowles). The Webcast Operator is required to monitor streaming, microphone usage and quality of recordings, camera override where necessary and meeting index points (in addition - vote recording at Full Council meetings).</p> <p>Where Councils use 1 member of staff – selecting automated “start” at the beginning of the meeting, clerking the meeting and taking the minutes, then “stopping” the webcast at the meeting end.</p> <p>Note: this option relies heavily on the camera automation and means that should the camera angles be incorrect or Councillors move away from the pre-set camera angles there is nobody there to make adjustments. Additionally Councils using this level of staffing don’t change/index the agenda items during the meeting and anyone watching the live stream will find it extremely difficult to identify different agenda items or know which one is being debated. Councils using this approach add indexing to the archived video that can be watched afterwards but results in a member of staff spending the best part of a day (for a longer meeting) going through the video and trying to index the agenda to the speakers. This also adds delays to the publication of, and public access to, the archive record.</p>
OPTION C	<p>Reluctance from other service area managers to release staff, as a result of impact on work week core hours – due to additional accumulation of Flexi and TOIL.</p>

Member’s views are requested.

*(A summary of other Council’s staffing levels for webcast meetings is attached at **Appendix 3**)*

NOTE: Officers will provide general guidance on the resource implications arising from each of the above to aid Members in their consideration of the above options, and budget costings will be provided to the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee. Further consultation will take place with HR and other service areas of the council dependent upon the recommendation of the Committee.

5. Recommendation required

Member’s views are requested.

6. Next Steps

The taking into account the views of the Member Equipment Steering Group and Council's Senior Leadership Team arising from this consultation, recommendations of the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee will be forwarded to the relevant officers for further plan development, and consideration, as part of their work in delivering good governance and assurance practice in line with the Council Constitution and Local Government Legal Framework.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Webcasting viewing hits figures

Appendix 2: Webcasting project timeline

Appendix 3: Other Councils

- Number of meetings webcast
- Staff who attend meetings