

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of meeting: 11 January 2010
Report of: Acting Senior Member Development Officer
Title: Webcasting Case Study: Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Following a question at Council, the Leader asked the Committee to consider whether it would be beneficial for Cheshire East Council to introduce a system for the film recording of Committee meetings. A similar approach was adopted by one of the legacy Councils, Crewe and Nantwich Borough and this report outlines the introduction of the system at Crewe; the installation requirements; the operational challenges experienced and explains how the system was used.

2. The Technology

- 2.1 To make its meetings more accessible to the public, Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council entered into a contract in 2006 with Public-I, which currently provides webcasting services to 55 organisations in the UK and Ireland including many district, borough, county and unitary authorities. The system chosen enabled meetings to be broadcast live over the internet or recorded for viewing at a later date from one fixed location; the Council Chamber, Municipal Buildings. The cost of the contract in 2008 which included the supply of services, software and equipment was £19,425.

- 2.2 The technical kit was installed over a period of two/three days in the Council Chamber and comprised –

Three small video cameras positioned around the Chamber
Wi-fi connection and associated wiring
Server Suite (laptop/ audio equipment/DVD recorder)
Mobile recording kit (stand alone cameras and DVD recorder)

- 2.3 As part of the contract, all staff within the Democratic Services Team were provided with a half day training session on how to use the system and from the author's personal experience, the equipment is user-friendly and does not require a high level of IT skills to operate. In addition, one individual became responsible for the management of the kit and acted as a liaison point for Public-I, this task falling to a Committee Officer.

3. Operational Matters

3.1 Preparatory Work before Broadcasting

- 3.1.1 The Council took the decision that in the first instance, only meetings of the Development Control Committee would be broadcast as this was a meeting which had high public interest. Therefore, as part of the training, a typical committee layout was set up using the software provided with the system (Attachment 1). This enabled individual camera positions to be allocated to each Committee Member/officer who would attend the meeting, a procedure which had to be carried out for each Committee which was to be broadcast.
- 3.1.2 The advantage of using a standard configuration was that it reduced the set up time before meetings and, when used over a period of time increased the responsiveness of the webcast operator when switching from one speaker to another. The downside was that the physical layout of the room had to be exactly the same every time and officers and Members had to sit in allocated places so that the correct name would come up on the webcast screen. Alterations could be made before committee to accommodate changes but not immediately prior to a meeting due to the requirement to test the system before 'going live'.
- 3.1.3 Each broadcast had to be booked with Public-I a minimum of one week in advance by the Committee Officer responsible for the meeting to ensure there were staff available to support the meeting in the Public-I studio. Once the date had been confirmed, the agenda had to be loaded onto a CRM system by the Committee Officer so that Members of the public logging onto the Internet micro-site (the access point for the webcasts) could view the agenda.

3.2 The Broadcast

- 3.2.1 Dependent on the requirements of the meeting, the system allows for three types of broadcast; test (the action is monitored but is not broadcast), local (the action is recorded and uploaded onto the internet without editing within 24 - 48 hours after the meeting), or live (broadcast in real time). Meetings which were classed as local or live could be accessed by the public from the micro-site for 6 months after the date of the broadcast.
- 3.2.2 For those watching a broadcast, the system showed whatever camera position the webcast operator has chosen to select. So during a debate, the camera position would change constantly to follow the discussion, showing the person speaking with their name and title together with the relevant agenda item displayed on the screen (Attachment 2).

- 3.2.3 The system provided by Public-I enabled presentation and documents to be uploaded and shown as part of a meeting broadcast, although this option was never used at Crewe. The system also allowed for on-line surveys and opinion polls to be run from the mocro-site but again, this option was not utilised.

3.3 Operational Requirements

- 3.3.1 Although the kit is easy to use, the system requires a webcast operator to be in position for the duration of the meeting. For the broadcast to run smoothly the webcast operator has to be responsible for that task alone, therefore he/she cannot be the Committee Officer resulting in two people having to be present at each meeting. Resourcing the service became problematic at Crewe as, with only two Committee Officers in Democratic Services, volunteers had to be sought from within the authority to be trained in its use. Experience showed that it was necessary to have a pool of people who could be called upon to operate the kit in order to cover for holidays, illness, unforeseen absences etc as the unavailability of the webcast operator often prevented a meeting from being broadcast.

- 3.3.2 Broadcasts were always shadowed by a member of the Public-I Team who provided a 'trouble-shooting' service during the procedure, communicating with the operator via email as the broadcast took place. This support was also available prior to the meeting to allow for testing of the equipment. Organisations signed up to the service became Members of the Public-I User Group; meetings of which are held periodically during the year.

4. Advantages/Disadvantages of Webcasting

- 4.1 The procurement of the webcasting system for Crewe and Nantwich was the responsibility of the Assistant Chief Executive. The author has no information with regard to whether other companies were considered and can only comment on the operation of the Public-I system.

4.1.1 Advantages

- The procedure at meetings was perceived to have improved with the proper procedure being followed and questions put through the Chairman
- Both members of the public and members of the Council were able to view a meeting either as it happened or at a time to suit them if they were unable to attend
- Controversial decisions could be viewed by a much wider audience that could be accommodated physically at the venue
- Disputes about decisions/debates could be resolved from viewing archive information

- Decision making became more transparent and open
- A mobile recording kit was also provided as part of the contract which allowed for recordings of events to take place off site although this was never used

4.1.2 Disadvantages

- The system relies on the co-operation of Members/Officers to sit in same location each time to prevent the need to reset the seating configuration on the system each time
- 2 – 3 hours preparation time is required prior to the meeting adding to the workload of the Committee Officer
- Dedicated webcasting operators are required for the system to run smoothly and to ensure continuity
- Smaller meetings are easier to broadcast whereas meetings such as Council would be more challenging
- Although kit has its own audio system, it relies on sound systems within the room to boost the sound and any obstacles or restricting the space around the suite can adversely affect the sound quality
- Quality of broadcast can also be affected by speed of connection and the specification of the equipment the broadcast is being viewed on
- 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 off site

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council's original intention was to broadcast a number of its meetings live over the internet. In practice, this did not happen due mainly to the difficulty in having a webcast operator available to operate the system. On those occasions where broadcast was possible, there were instances where technical problems prevented the broadcast from taking place, usually the result of the equipment standing idle for a period of weeks. The service also monitors the viewing hits received for a particular webcast but for the limited time the system was in operation, the number of users recorded was small.
- 5.2 The problem experienced was sound/picture quality. The position of the kit affects the broadcast quality and the location of the internet connection would be an important consideration. At Crewe there was only one place within the Chamber where the necessary wiring could be placed but this resulted in problems with the internet connection and restricted sound.

- 5.3 There is scope within the system to open up the decision making process to a much wider audience and to showcase the Council at ceremonial events. However, the system lends itself to being set up at one location if it is to be regularly used for committee meetings. Additional locations could have the necessary kit installed but that would add to the cost of the contract. As Cheshire East is spread over a number of locations the mobile kit would be of benefit but it would need to be transported between venues, set up and dismantled each time adding to the webcast operators hours and would only allow meetings to be recorded and not viewed live.

Officer: Diane Moulson
Designation: Acting Senior Member Development Officer
Tel No. 01270 529729
Email: diane.moulson@cheshireeast.gov.uk