CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Constitution Committee

Date of Meeting: 23rd March 2017
Report of: Head of Governance and Democratic Services
Subject/Title: Webcasting, Recording of Meetings and the Use of Social Media

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1.0 Report Summary

1.1 At its meeting on 24 November 2016 the Constitution Committee requested that consideration be given to the logistical implications of recording, webcasting and providing social media commentary in respect of the Council's decision making meetings.

1.2 This report begins to develop the options that were requested by the Committee.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 That Constitution Committee consider how this matter should be taken forward.

3.0 Background and Options

3.1 For over two and a half years Cabinet meetings have been live webcast. Viewers have been able to view the webcast for the following six months, accessing the recording from the Council's website. Both live webcasts and recordings are linked into the Council's Committee administration system (Modern.Gov), meaning that viewers can read reports and clearly see which item the meeting is discussing. They can also move to a particular agenda item at the click of a mouse.

3.2 In 2016 Cheshire East Council began to audio record all decision making meetings, with an MP3 (audio file) being posted on the Council's website after the meeting. The cost of audio recording is relatively low. Equipment has been purchased and it is proving relatively straightforward to operate and is producing recordings of an adequate quality.

3.3 Council can rightly say that it is now more transparent than has ever been the case, with all decision making meetings being recorded and accessible via the website.

3.4 Webcasting is currently undertaken by Public i, the company who provide the service to almost all local authorities who webcast meetings. The cost of webcasting Cabinet meetings is £30,000 a year. Cheshire East pay more for webcasting then most local authorities. This is because the

Council does not have a dedicated Council Chamber or Committee Room where cameras, microphones and other equipment are permanently installed. Such equipment has to be brought in and set up each time a meeting is held, with the equipment being operated by a technician supplied by Public i.

3.5 Webcasting has not been without some minor problems, with the sound quality not always being perfect, especially when speakers have failed to use the microphones provided. On a small number of occasions recordings have had to be edited, to remove comments made by speakers. This is currently undertaken by Public i for a small additional fee.

3.6 Viewing figures for Cabinet webcasts are relatively low; October's Cabinet was watched live by 65 people and the archived version by 141 separate viewers. In total this webcast has been viewed on 357 occasions.

3.7 There is no consistent pattern in relation to webcasting by other local Councils. However; the majority of larger authorities, such as Cheshire East, would appear to webcast some of their meetings.

3.8 Initial research would suggest that there are no local authorities who webcast all of their meetings.

3.9 The table below gives a number of examples from a range of local authorities across the county.

Council	Number of live webcasts in January 2017	Comments
Cheshire West and Chester	5	Includes Council, Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny and Planning
City of Leicester	4	Includes Planning and Scrutiny. Council also webcast
Kent County Council	9	Including Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny Meetings
Solihull Council	2	Including Cabinet, and Holocaust Memorial Day Service
Manchester City Council	11	Including Executive, Planning and Scrutiny Meetings
Bath and North East Somerset Council	1	Most months 2 or 3 meetings are webcast, including Cabinet

Cornwall Council	3	Inc. Cabinet and Council

3.10   Cheshire East's near neighbour, Cheshire West and Chester Council are one of the more active authorities in relation to webcasting. They have cameras and microphones permanently set up in two locations (HQ in Chester and Wyvern House in Winsford) together with a mobile system which is, on occasion, used to provide a service to other organisations. They employ their own technicians to administer each webcast, with the technician being present for the duration of the meeting. The staff used have broader roles with the Council, but have become expert in webcasting.

Social media

3.11   The majority, if not all, Local Authorities use social media as a way of communicating with their residents and other stakeholders. Most Councils that webcast meetings appear to provide some from of commentary on the meeting using social media; particularly Twitter. In providing a commentary staff need to ensure that it is politically neutral and factually accurate.

Option 1 - Retain the current webcasting arrangement

3.12   The first option would be to continue with the current arrangement whereby a fully managed service is procured in respect of Cabinet meetings only. A technician from an outside supplier brings in and sets up the equipment (including microphones) for each meeting and takes full responsibility for its operation.

3.13   The current arrangement whereby the Council procure a fully managed webcasting facility from a commercial company is expensive. It would not be practical or affordable to extend the current arrangement to a wider range of meetings.

3.14   Whilst a procurement exercise would need to undertaken, it is likely that the cost would be similar to the current contract, with no savings being achieved. If additional meetings were webcast the cost would increase, roughly in proportion to the number of additional meetings covered.

Option 2 – Retain audio recording and stop webcasting meetings

3.15   As indicated above, since 2016 all decision making meetings have been recorded and can be accessed via the website. Improvements to the functionality of the system; providing a link to modern.gov could be provided for approximately £4,000 a year.

Option 3 - Install a permanent basic webcasting system into the Westfields Committee Suite (or elsewhere)

3.16 The cost of such a system would be very significantly less than a fully managed system. A procurement exercise would need to be undertaken and a detailed specification developed; but excluding the cost of purchasing a microphone system (see paragraph 3.18 below) it is estimated that annual costs to webcast Cabinet meetings would reduce to about £11,500 a year (plus installation and configuration costs in year one). If this second option were adopted it would be possible for other meetings to be webcast from the Committee Suite at a very reasonable additional cost. There would be some additional costs if the total number of webcasting hours exceeded that which had been contracted each year.

3.17 Such a system would deliver excellent quality sound and adequate pictures, but would not have as much flexibility over camera angles as the current, fully managed system.

3.18 For such an option to be viable a microphone system would need to be purchased for use at Westfields. A traditional committee microphone system (such as the one currently used at Cabinet meetings) would cost approximately £15,500 to purchase, but have a life expectancy of over ten years.

3.19 A permanently installed system would necessitate Cheshire East staff operating the equipment in the way that the Public i technician does at present. This would need to be an additional member of staff. It would not be realistically possible for the Committee Clerk supporting the meeting to undertake this role, which they can with audio recording. When the issue was considered three years ago, the need for staff to set up and operate the system was one of the factors that led to the Council opting for a fully managed service. Whilst technology has moved on, it should not be underestimated how time consuming setting up and operating webcasting equipment would be.

Option 4 – Mobile system

3.20 Should there be a desire to webcast meetings not held in the Committee Suite as Westfields this would be possible by leasing a mobile webcasting system, comprising of cameras and a mobile digital controller. Such a system would be covered by the Council's existing licence (assuming that a system was already being leased) and technical support.

3.21   Summary of estimated costs.

Option	Estimated Costs	Comments
Option 1, retain the current arrangement	£30,000 a year	Additional webcasts would increase cost
Option 2, move to an audio only system.	To retain the current audio system would have no additional costs. A link into modern.gov could be provided for approximately £4,000 a year.	
Option 3, permanently installed system	Lease of encoder £1,725 Lease of 4 SD Cameras £ 920 Licence £6,500 60 Hours of webcasting £1,080 Helpdesk and monitoring £1,170 Service and maint. £1,150 Total **annual** cost **£11,415** One off costs, including equipment build, installation, delivery, training **£7,850** Total cost in year one £19,265 Bosch dual user microphone system, (8 units / 16 users) **£15,425**	High definition system available for £14,344 All costs plus VAT Microphone system could be expected to have a life expectancy of in excess of 10 years
Option 4, mobile system	A mobile system would cost approximately £8,000; in addition to the costs outlined above.	

3.22   Summary position in relation to webcasting / audio recoding.

- Current system is expensive and limited to Cabinet meetings.

- Expanding the current system to a wider range of meetings would be extremely expensive.

- Installing permanent cameras and equipment in the Committee Suite at Westfields would now appear to be an option. This would allow other meetings to be webcast from the Committee Suite should that be required.

- Purchase of a mobile webcasting system would allow meetings from other locations to be webcast, but would be more complex to set up and take more staff time.

- Audio recording of meetings is working well, sound quality is adequate but there is no connectivity into the Committee system (modern.gov)

3.23 Whilst webcasting could be said to improve the transparency of decision making, the question does need to be asked if webcasting is needed at all if meetings are audio recorded. Webcasting could be seen to:

- Provide some individuals with the opportunity to "showboat".

- Reduce attendance at meetings by the public and journalists.

- Be subject to occasional technical failure, and

- Require additional staffing recourses (should the Council move away from a fully managed solution).

3.24 In addition, at a time of austerity, webcasting could be seen as being too expensive.

4. Wards Affected and Local Ward Members

4.1. All Wards.

5. Implications of Recommendation

5.1. Policy Implications

5.1.1. There are no specific policy implications.

5.2. Legal Implications

5.2.1. There are no specific legal implications.

5.3. Financial Implications

5.3.1. The estimated costs of a range of options are identified in this report.

5.4. **Human Resources Implications**

5.4.1. The staffing implications of undertaking webcasting are indented in this report.

5.5. **Equality Implications**

5.5.1. There are no equality implications.

5.6. **Rural Community Implications**

5.6.1 There are no implications for the rural community.

5.7. **Public Health Implications**

5.7.1. There are no public health implications.

6. **Risk Management**

6.1. There are no risk management implications.

7. **Background Papers**

7.1. There are no background papers.

8.0 **Access to Information**

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report author:

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