

Subject: Web-casting and televising of Council meetings
Report by: Head of Customer, Community & Democratic Services
Report to: Scrutiny Management Panel

1. Purpose of report :

To provide information to the Scrutiny Management Panel (SMP) in response to the Notice of Motion to Full Council by Councillors Donna Jones and Jim Fleming on televising council meetings.

2. Background:

On 23 March 2010 a notice of Motion was presented to Full Council by Councillors Donna Jones and Jim Fleming as follows:

"I propose in the interest of democracy and with the national focus on political community engagement, that this council televises Full Council meetings.

I propose council meetings are played on the big screen in Guildhall square, at agreed times with the BBC, via the Portsmouth City Council website, and the News website. The camera equipment would be paid for by the News.

This will enable members of the public and staff to watch council meetings at their own leisure and make the decision making process in Portsmouth, clear, transparent and leading the way in the public sector in the South East of England."

At the meeting of SMP on 1st July it was decided that further information should be requested with regards to the opportunities and implications of web-casting and/or televising Full Council meetings.

3. Televising

In the Notice of Motion it was felt that the 'Big Screen' could be used for the purpose of televising Full Council . However, under the contract with the BBC, PCC are only able to use the 'Big Screen' for certain things and at certain times with the prior permission of the BBC until such time as the screen is handed over to us at the end of 2012.

A request has been made to the BBC about screening Full Council but was not accepted due to the length of time that meetings often take and conflicts of timing with BBC schedules. It may however be possible to screen some 'highlights' after the event if appropriate scheduling times can be found.

Options for televising other events such as Mayor Making, visits by dignitaries etc may also be worth considering if Council decide to pursue the option of televising.

4. Web-casting

Web-casting is a modern form of mass communication. It involves the use of computers and phone lines to broadcast usually audiovisual material to a select audience or a mass audience over the internet.

Web-casts can either be shown live or archived and saved for viewing later.

Many local authorities already stream their council meetings onto their own websites as attached at Appendix 1. The majority are streamed with delay and many only provide highlights of meetings (such as debate and votes on key issues).

4.1 To do, or not to do ?

In order to evaluate the value of web-casting for local government it is important to consider some of the possible advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

There is a view that web-casting provides in many ways a more exciting application of tools to achieve re-engagement of the electorate – making the public more informed in the democratic process and engendering an atmosphere of trust to encourage them to start applying this knowledge.

Web-casting is increasingly being used by local authorities to open up local democracy to a wider audience and to create a forum for discussion that enables citizens to contribute and scrutinise.

Archived web-casts can be recalled and reviewed at any point by anybody with a computer. This openness of information can be used to hold local politicians accountable and serves as a permanent and easily assessable record of the events of any particular meeting.

Web-casting authority meetings also suggests that the organisation is not hiding information as it is prepared to air meetings to the public; this ultimately improves public trust in local authorities.

Shows the willingness of local authorities to modernise. This potentially gains the attention and interest of young people and can allow re-evaluation of the image of a local authority.

The implementation of web-casting will increase computer familiarisation amongst those prepared to watch web-casts. This would support our commitment to lifelong learning and also possibly improve public opinion of the council.

Disadvantages

Although web-casting has been quite widely used since 2002 it is still regarded in some fields (such as public sector engagement) as a new technology. The use of such modern techniques is always risky as some new technologies fail to find their way into common usage, examples of this are eight-track cartridges and mini disks - if not used appropriately it could become an expensive failure.

It is believed that web-casting is unlikely to grow quickly amongst the public due to the personal expense of purchasing a computer and an Internet connection efficient enough to receive web-casts. This brings a risk of web-casts being seen as an elitist tool of local government.

Digital television presents a threat to the web-cast. With the availability of more channels the cost of air time is expected to fall. To show council meetings on television through a local news channel could eventually provide an even larger audience at less of a cost and leave web-casting obsolete.

Despite the minimal running costs once set up, web-casting can be a costly venture initially. Not only is there the cost of purchasing all of the relevant hardware and software, there is the cost of installation and furthermore the cost of training staff in its use.

4.2 Other considerations for web-casting

According to a study by the Improvement and Development Agency , many council officers believe that the broadcasting of council meetings was not the best use of web-casting, but instead believed that in order to maximise the impact and potential benefits of web-casting a wider use should be considered such as:

Live streaming of, and accepting emails during appropriate council meetings. In this way, the public are able to engage in politics, thus increasing public political participation with the potential to improve turn out at elections and increase legitimacy of local authorities.

Activities such as the web-casting of meetings, consultation briefings and community updates to develop trust by demonstrating transparency and showing the people involved in the process.

Web-casting could also be used for “on site” progress reports on significant items that will be of interest to residents e.g. a Leisure Centre, traffic schemes etc

Another use is for training and communication both internal and external.

4.3 Is there a business case?

As with any democratic activity it can be difficult to build a financial business case to support web-casting.

Many of the local authorities who are currently web-casting reject the idea of identifying a business case as they see the kind of openness and transparency which it brings as being an essential cost of democracy in a digital age and it is worth noting that when measured against the cost of other democratic activities such as public meetings web-casting can be seen as an extremely cost effective way of reaching citizens.

5. Costs

Detailed costs for an in-house solution are available on request.

It would be proposed to utilise a 'special offer' on the camera from the suppliers of our audio system and high-level costs would be as follow, with reasons given:

Auto track cameras and base system (linked to pan in on those on microphone at that time) **£8.8K**

The viability of streaming out through our network is not proven so we are not in a position to guarantee this – with the impact of streaming on the network we have recently experienced this would be a risky thing to do – hence **ADSL £500 as a separate connection.**

Additionally, the corporate site does not have sufficient bandwidth to the internet and streaming/web-casting is a specialised service hence **contracting with a company that can provide the web-hosting element for the streaming media** (I think a lot of the other reference council sites use specialised third party) **£18K.**

An element to **record the stream onto another medium** – this might be a luxury but I erred on the side of caution as you may need to keep a recording of anything you publish out to the web **£2K**

This total is £29.3K.

In addition we would have to factor in staff costs for implementation and for operating once live.

6. Other

In the original Notice of Motion it was suggested that there had been an offer from the Portsmouth News to provide the necessary equipment and to stream the meetings to their website, but could also be used by PCC.

In addition it would appear that a similar offer may be forthcoming from Portsmouth Live TV.

Neither of these offers have been pursued at this time.