

Central Bedfordshire Council

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

17 December 2015

WEBCASTING REVIEW

Report of Cllr Richard Wenham, Executive Member for Corporate Services

Advising Officers:

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Purpose of this report

This report summarises the review of webcasting and recommends improvements and next steps to further increase transparency and participation in council decision making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to:

1. Review feedback from a range of stakeholders on the initial phase of Central Bedfordshire Council's webcasting.
2. Agree to the extension of webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings with appropriate additional Member and Officer support and training.

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

Not applicable.

Introduction

1. Webcasting is a process that allows anyone to view democratic processes online, either through live transmission or watching later after the event.
2. Central Bedfordshire Council introduced webcasting of the following meetings earlier this year:

- Development Management Committee
 - Executive Committee
 - Full Council
3. As part of the implementation plan we committed to review webcasting after six months and report recommendations to General Purposes Committee.

Review summary

4. In conducting the review, feedback was sought from the following key audiences/ exercises:
- All Members of the Council
 - The public (who have viewed previous webcasts)
 - Central Bedfordshire Council staff
 - Officers directly involved with the implementation and operation of webcasting including officers from Facilities Management, Committee Services, IT and the Communications Team.
5. Generally, the feedback received has been positive. Since launch, more than 1,200 views of webcasts have taken place and some members of the public have suggested that the Council should consider extending the range of meetings that are webcast. A range of suggestions for improvement of the service have also been proposed.
6. The stability of the webcasting equipment has been an issue at times. However, as part of a more comprehensive upgrade of the Council's audio/visual facilities, this will be improved.
7. During the initial phase of webcasting, meetings have been broadcast from venues other than the Council chamber and these have worked well. In order to extend the range of venues from which webcasting is possible the council will need to ensure that such facilities have good enough internet connections to enable webcasting.
8. Members have raised concerns about how they are perceived by the public. In particular, because the filming is not intrusive, it is easy for Members to forget they are being filmed. This is particularly true when Members feature in the webcast because they are sitting close to a speaker, rather than contributing directly to a debate. To address this, some amendments to the scope of the image recorded have been made. Some Members have also suggested that the Council provide further awareness raising sessions on webcasting.
9. It is proposed that such sessions are arranged and resourced through the Member training budget.
10. In view of the fact that members of the public who have watched a webcast have found it useful, it is proposed that more proactive

marketing and promotion of the service is now undertaken to increase public involvement with it.

11. There is general support from the public and Members to for extending webcasting to other meetings.
12. It is therefore proposed to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.

Council Priorities

13. Increasing webcasting will increase transparency and participation in our decision making.

Corporate Implications

14. As with all technologies, there are risks for potential failure. These are mitigated as much as possible through contract arrangements with a third party supplier which address contingency and recovery arrangements. Also, plans to upgrade the conferencing equipment in the Council Chamber at Priory House will also reduce the risk of technical failure as webcasting and conferencing equipment are linked.
15. The council has already been through a competitive tender exercise to select the provider.
16. If the recommendation to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings is agreed, the Overview and Scrutiny/ Corporate Policy Officers who support these committees will need to be trained to operate the webcasting system and may need additional support for the first few meetings.

Legal Implications

17. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to webcast Council meetings, it is recommended best practice by the Department for Communities and Local Government.
18. Last year Central Government published new regulations; Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, which strengthened the rights of the public and press to film, audio record, photograph, blog, tweet or use any other type of social media to report any public meetings of their councils, including committees, sub-committees and joint committees. In this context, it is beneficial for the Council to have and make available its own complete and accurate record of meetings via webcasting.
19. The minutes of meetings continue to be the formal record of the meeting.

20. Protocols are already in place to protect the Council from potential legal challenges relating to the Human Rights Act and/or Data Protection requirements.

Financial Implications

21. The cost associated with the recommendations in this report are covered by existing revenue budgets.

Equalities Implications

22. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
23. The proposal to extend webcasting to all Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings is likely to increase access to and awareness of and involvement in our democratic processes to all members of our community.

Conclusion and next Steps

24. Subject to the approval of the recommendation to extend webcasting to Overview and Scrutiny Committees arrangements will be put in place to:
 - Support Democratic Services colleagues to operate the webcasting equipment
 - Brief and train Chairmen of the meetings
 - Update the agenda front sheets and signage at meetings to include a note about being filmed
 - Ensure all public speakers are aware they will be filmed
 - Promote the webcasts

Appendices

None.

Background Papers

None.