

SUBJECT:	PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AT COMMITTEES AND WEBCASTING
REPORT BY:	DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1 The Council is committed to increasing the level of democratic engagement from the public. Increasing the level and quality of democratic engagement could be achieved in a number of manners, some of which are considered within this report and provided for members to recommend any appropriate actions.

2. Public Involvement in Committees

2.1 Committee meetings are a crucial part of the Council's decision-making structure. The Full Council and the Executive are responsible for many of the key decisions affecting the operation of the Council and, along with the Planning and Licensing Committees, have a significant impact on the development of the city.

2.2 At present some of the main opportunities for the public to become involved in the Council's democratic process include:

- Attending public committee meetings
- Speaking in respect of applications for development at Planning Committee
- Public question time at Council
- Attending as an expert witness at scrutiny meetings
- Petitions and e-petitions
- Taking part in meetings as a member of an advisory group or panel.

2.3 A number of these opportunities are seldom taken up by members of the public. Particular examples include the e-petitions system and the public question time at Council, which offer a direct route to communicate with Full Council but have not been subject to wide use.

2.4 It is therefore useful to consider the reasons for this comparatively poor use. Members may wish to consider whether the following areas contribute towards the often low level of public engagement with committee meetings:

- Disengagement with local and national politics as a whole
- Lack of awareness of the Council's democratic process
- Difficulty in accessing the facilities intended to improve public engagement
- A reliance on elected representatives to represent the views of local

communities on the public's behalf.

2.5 Having considered the possible reasons behind this relative lack of public engagement, members may wish to consider methods by which public engagement can be encouraged. Some potential options members may wish to consider include:

- Increasing the visibility of and proactively promoting the existing means by which the public can become involved with the Council's democratic process
- Actively encouraging participation in meetings by representatives of local groups with particular skills or knowledge to contribute to issues under discussion
- Holding meetings of particular relevance to a local area in the most accessible venue for community members
- Widening access to policy suggestions from the public which, subject to certain criteria, can be debated by Council or another committee
- Commissioning further research on areas of particular interest.

3. Webcasting

3.1 As referenced above, public attendance at committee meetings gives the public the opportunity to engage with and properly scrutinise the decisions taken by their elected representatives. However, with the exception of meetings considered something of direct local interest, such as a planning application or an alteration to the provision of a particularly publicly-visible service, most committee meetings are not attended by members of the public. While the Council, subject to legislation covering exempt and confidential information, makes all committee agendas and minutes available online, these can only give a flavour of the debates taking place.

3.2 In order to increase levels of public accessibility and accountability consideration should be given to alternative means for widening the availability of committee meetings. The Council currently does not routinely make audio or video recordings of its meetings, although meetings have occasionally been recorded in the past, as at the Full Council meeting of 6 March 2012. The constitution also currently prohibits recording unless permission has been granted by the chair of the meeting.

3.3 A number of other local authorities, including other councils in Lincolnshire, have facilities to broadcast live public committee meetings through their websites. Typically, these are provided through specialist companies which provide equipment and website hosting. Examples of these systems can be viewed on Lincolnshire County Council's (www.lincolnshire.public-i.tv) and West Lindsey District Council's websites (www.west-lindsey.public-i.tv).

3.4 Current public demand for webcasting is difficult to gauge. It is likely that decisions with a high level of public interest, including those made by the Council, the Executive and the Planning Committee, would have the largest potential audience. As of November 2012, the Council's meeting on 6 March 2012 had been viewed 275 times on the website YouTube, although these figures are likely

to be atypical given the recording's novelty. Based on the experiences of comparable councils, ordinary meetings might not have viewing figures exceeding double figures unless items of particular public interest are under consideration.

- 3.5 A quotation received from a widely-used provider of webcasting services was approximately £16,000 per annum for a total of 60 hours of broadcast meetings from City Hall and the Guildhall. There is currently no provision or capacity within existing budgets to cover this cost.

Some potential general advantages and disadvantages relating to webcasting are set out below as a matter for discussion:

Advantages	Disadvantages
A broadening of public access to committee meetings.	The financial cost is potentially high relative to the possible usage.
Creating a visual record of the Council's major decisions.	Officer time in establishing and administering the system.
Provides a continuing reminder to members of the link between their role as a representative and the public as a whole.	The potential inhibition of open debate through the awareness of an unseen audience. While members have a responsibility to ensure their contributions are always relevant and proper, greater scope would exist for misinterpretation through a lack of context.

- 3.6 In view of the likely cost of webcasting committee meetings, members should note the pressures on budgets across the Council. However, if the costs are considered to be prohibitive, a consideration by members of the broader principles surrounding the recording of meetings remains potentially timely.
- 3.7 Consideration could also be given to developing a bespoke off-the-shelf webcasting solution. Any system developed internally has the potential to be significantly cheaper, with particular regard to ongoing annual revenue costs. However, any such system is unlikely to be as well-presented as a ready-made system, although further research would be required on the specific details. Such a system would also inevitably place a greater strain on existing officer resources.
- 3.8 Members could also give consideration to the current provision within the constitution's council procedure rules, specifically excluding the recording of a meeting unless permission is granted by the Chair. Given the widespread availability of small recording devices and recent trends to recognise the role of citizen journalists, it could be an opportune time to revisit this issue. While legally the Council still has the power to exclude members of the public attempting to record a meeting, this is perhaps contrary to a broader public expectation that meetings will be conducted in an open manner.
- 3.9 The Committee may therefore wish to consider whether:
- It supports in principle the notion of webcasting
 - The cost of a commercial provider would be prohibitive

- Further consideration should be given to developing an in-house webcasting system
- Additional research by members or officers relating to the operation of systems within other councils would be beneficial
- The current blanket restriction on the recording of committee meetings should be altered.

4. Strategic Priorities

- 4.1 The Council's commitment to democratic engagement and the Ethics and Engagement Committee's remit in this regard gives members a clear direction to investigate ways to improve the public's involvement in the Council's democratic process.

5. Finance Implications

- 5.1 None arising from this report, although the cost of webcasting in particular could not be met from within existing budgets.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 None arising directly from this report.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 That the Ethics and Engagement Committee:
1. Note the current levels of public engagement with the Council's committees and consider any changes which could improve the extent or quality of this involvement.
 2. Consider and offer views on the costs, advantages and disadvantages associated with webcasting committee meetings.
 3. Recommend any additional actions to be taken arising from the report, potentially including the commissioning of further information-gathering relating to areas of particular interest.