

SUBJECT:	WEBCASTING COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS
REPORT BY:	DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To consider the outcome of an investigation into the potential costs and benefits of webcasting committee meetings.

2. Background to Webcasting

- 2.1 Further to a report considered by the Committee at a previous meeting, officers and the Chair were requested to undertake a further examination of the possibilities for broadcasting committee meetings on the internet for public use.
- 2.2 The previous report had indicated a likely cost of up to £16,000 per year to provide a service broadcasting up to 60 hours of meetings per year. There is no funding available at present to cover a webcasting service and so any recommendation by Committee to adopt such a service is likely to require approval by the Executive and the identification of funding options.
- 2.3 The previous report outlined some options for webcasting including a fully-supported option, a non-supported option, and alternative arrangements; these are laid out below.

3. Cost-Benefit Analysis

- 3.1 In order to establish whether systems currently in operation at other local authorities in Lincolnshire were appropriate to the Council's needs, the Chair visited Lincolnshire County Council for a practical demonstration of its webcasting system.
- 3.2 System costs
An initial quote from an established provider of webcasting services to local authorities had provided an indicative price of £16,000 per annum to webcast meetings of the Council and Planning Committee/Executive from the Guildhall and City Hall respectively. Any final costings would be subject to more detailed negotiation over service levels. The same service provider currently supports Lincolnshire County Council's webcasting.
- 3.3 In addition to the cost of providing any equipment and a service contract, the webcasting system demonstrated was operated by a dedicated officer. Any requirement for a dedicated officer overseeing webcasting is not likely to be feasible within the Council's current staffing structure given the combination of the

relatively low number of Democratic Services Officers and the Council's commitment to evening meetings.

3.4 Typical usage

The primary measure of a webcasting system's success is likely to be the number of people making use of it. With that in mind, viewing statistics for the Full Council meeting of 17 May 2013 are provided below

Total webcast viewers: 1082

Total live webcast viewers: 211

Total archived webcast viewers: 871

The viewing statistics are certainly in excess of usual attendance in the public gallery. In considering these figures, members will note that the total possible audience for Lincolnshire will be significantly higher than for Lincoln alone, potentially meaning that any audience for Lincoln's meetings would be a fraction of the above.

- 3.5 As a county council covering an extremely large geographical area and holding its meetings during office hours there is perhaps greater justification for Lincolnshire County Council in meeting the costs of webcasting than for the City of Lincoln Council. As members are aware, the majority of Council meetings are held in central Lincoln during the early evening to maximise opportunities for the public and councillors to attend. As a compact urban area in which public attendance for most meetings can be counted in single figures, it is unclear whether there is a latent appetite to view webcasts of Council meetings. However, subject to cost, the online broadcasting of meetings would certainly contribute towards ensuring the Council operates in as open and transparent a manner as possible.
- 3.6 In terms of the operation of the system itself, the Chair noted that the likely impact upon sitting members would be minimal. While an awareness of the cameras and permanent recording could affect members' contributions to meetings, the operation of the system itself should not cause undue difficulty. The camera system can be synchronised with the Council's microphones, meaning the camera will automatically focus upon a microphone which has been activated. The chair of the meeting can be given control over the activation of microphones which then controls the focus of the broadcast. This can be operated through a straightforward touchscreen monitor.
- 3.7 Alternative arrangements
Given the Council's ongoing budgetary pressures, an annual charge at or around £16,000 would present a significant resource challenge. In determining whether the committee is minded to recommend proceeding with the development of a webcasting system, serious consideration should be given to balancing the costs and benefits of the system, and determining the most cost effective options.
- 3.8 In this vein, committee members at the previous meeting had suggested that university students, possibly drawn from the media department of Lincoln University, could form a cost-effective resource for managing the webcasting of meetings. This option was investigated by officers, but, following contact with representatives from the university, is unlikely to form a viable alternative to webcasting. In particular, a manually-operated system would be heavily reliant on

the availability of students, which would present problems outside university term-time and with regard to integrating the recording within existing course structures.

- 3.9 A more viable, though still costly, option could be to develop a non-supported bespoke system. This would be likely to be considerably cheaper than £16,000 per annum; equipment costs would need to be met with either option but a bespoke system should carry considerable savings through not requiring ongoing customer support. The lack of customer support could make the system more labour-intensive and less resilient, although it is likely that this could be mitigated through providing a more streamlined service focussed primarily on the simple recording and relaying of meetings without providing detailed breakdowns of content. If members were minded to investigate this option, it is recommended that professional external advice should be sought in order to determine the available options and costs for equipment, installation, and services.
- 3.10 In addition, since the last meeting of the Committee, the Department for Communities and Local Government has issued guidance in relation to the 2012 Executive Regulations. The guidance emphasises that local authorities should, by default, be open to members of the public filming the public elements of meetings. While the legal basis for this aspect of the guidance is questionable given the minimal legislative obligations, there is a strong argument that public meetings ought to be open to public recording and broadcast provided that there is no disruption to the meeting. As such, members are recommended to consider a change to the existing presumption within the Constitution that permission to record a meeting should always be sought from the meeting's chair. Instead, a reversal of the current arrangements would potentially be more appropriate; this would allow a meeting's chair to prevent recording only if it were causing a disruption.

4. Organisational Impacts

4.1 Finance

An initial professional consultation on options for webcasting could be met from existing budgets. However, the introduction of a fully-supported webcasting service could not be funded from existing budgets and so would require significant resources to be diverted from elsewhere.

4.2 Legal Implications

None arising directly from this report.

5. Recommendation

- 5.1 That the Ethics and Engagement Committee consider the report, in particular the cost of providing a webcasting service against its likely use, and make any suitable recommendations.
- 5.2 That the Ethics and Engagement Committee consider recommending to Council a change in the Constitution to allow the recording and broadcasting of all public meetings of Council and committees provided that the meeting is not unduly disrupted by the operation of any associated equipment.