

Governance Committee

13 May 2019

Part I

Webcasting of Committee Meetings

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Summary

Webcasting is seen as an important part of open and transparent government and as a way of increasing accessibility to the authority's decision-making functions. It is included in the Council's performance reporting as a means of showing improved community engagement and access.

The Committee is asked to consider aspects of the County Council's use of webcasting – namely the amount of webcasting undertaken, who should take the decision as to whether a meeting should be webcast and what criteria they should consider when deciding this.

Recommendations

- (1) To consider how decisions should be taken to webcast a meeting;
- (2) To consider whether any meetings other than the County Council should be presumed to be webcast; and
- (3) To consider criteria to determine whether a meeting should be webcast.

Proposal

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 The County Council has been webcasting meetings since February 2008. Webcasting is seen as an important part of open and transparent government and as a way of increasing accessibility to the authority's decision-making functions and democratic debate. The Council webcasts all of its meetings of the County Council (six a year) and other committee meetings where it is judged there is likely significant public interest. This may include Planning Committee or any of the Select Committees. It is a convention that the committee chairman and vice-chairman will take the decision whether a meeting should be webcast. For select committees, this is sometimes done by the Business Planning Group
- 1.2 The current contract for webcasting allows up to 60 hours a year of committee time. This level has never been reached to date. For some years, webcasting was only possible in the formal environment of the Council chamber, but a mobile kit now enables meetings to be webcast in any committee room and from other venues external to County Hall.

- 1.3 Webcasts are usually streamed live and are archived for view for up to six months after the meeting. This enables members of the public to watch meetings at a time to suit them and most viewing statistics show that meetings webcast often reach the hundreds in a whole six-month period. There is a target in the West Sussex Plan to increase the number of meetings webcast in the interests of transparency.
- 1.4 Following a decision not to webcast a meeting in January 2019, it was suggested that the Governance Committee should consider the decision-making and criteria for webcasting. It is also an opportunity to consider the purpose and value of webcasting and what the benefits and aims of webcasting may be. It is an opportunity for members to consider whether there should be a drive to increase webcasting so as to improve access to the democratic process.

2. Proposal

- 2.1 The first proposal is to consider whether there should be an aim of increasing the use of webcasting and whether there should be a presumption in favour of webcasting all meetings of Planning Committee and of the Select Committees. Should that be extended to any of the other non-executive Committees? Should there also be a presumption that Cabinet, when meeting in public, should also be webcast?
- 2.2 In the event that a presumption of webcasting is adopted the Committee is asked to consider whether the decision to waive that presumption should rest with the chairman and vice-chairman of a committee or, in the case of select committees, whether this should rest with the Business Planning Group (BPG). Consultation of a BPG could be done by email. If the Committee is not persuaded that a presumption should apply should the decision to webcast be taken through these routes?
- 2.3 The Committee is asked to consider whether any criteria or factors should be adopted to inform the decision – either to webcast or to waive the presumption. These could include:
- The subject is/is not of significant interest to residents
 - The subject has/does not have a significant impact on the Council's budget or on an area of service delivery
 - The subject is/is not a call-in at a Select Committee
 - The subject relates/does not relate to a matter of current national or local interest
 - The location of the meeting will/will not inhibit public attendance
 - There are/are no specific reasons for webcasting in order to ensure the widest possible audience or accessibility by the public.
- 2.4 The use of such criteria for webcasting could be included in the Constitution. This might be helpful to chairmen and BPG members when considering whether to webcast a meeting or to waive the presumption and would help reduce inconsistency of practice and bring some clarity for the wider membership and the public.

3. Resources

- 3.1 The County Council is entering the final year of a five-year contract with Public-i, webcasting specialists who have provided the County Council's webcasting services since they began. The standard contract allows for up to 60 hours of webcasting. If the Committee wanted to move to webcasting every select committee meeting, it might exceed this and would cost an additional £37.50 per hour.
- 3.2 There is a staffing implication to webcasting. An operator is required for most webcasting operations, particularly when using the mobile kit. This is usually a member of staff in Democratic Services, but any significant increase in webcasting might have a staffing resource implication.

Factors taken into account

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Not applicable.

5. Risk Management Implications

- 5.1 Not applicable.

6. Other Options Considered

- 6.1 Ceasing webcasting altogether or limiting it to the meetings of the County Council is a possible option. This is not recommended as the extension of webcasting would enable members of the public to observe more meetings and see the debate and decisions at them.
- 6.2 Audiocasting is another approach used in some local authorities, including Essex County Council, which is likely to be cheaper. This is not recommended as the County Council currently has modern videoconferencing equipment and as it has webcast for more than 10 years, the public would now expect to be able to watch webcast meetings of the County Council.

7. Equality Duty

- 7.1 Of significance for this issue is the question of accessibility to the democratic process. Webcasting means that people with an interest in Council business will be able to view meetings from their homes or from anywhere they choose and which has internet access. This will have a benefit for those with disabilities, those in communities more distant from Chichester and those who cannot use time during the working day to attend meetings but who may be able to see an archived webcast at a later time. This applies equally to members who have an interest in a committee of which they are not a member.

8. Social Value

- 8.1 Not applicable.

9. Crime and Disorder Act Implications

9.1 Not applicable.

10. Human Rights Implications

10.1 Webcasting is only undertaken at public meetings, where members could be filmed at any time by any member of the public or press. So extending or clarifying criteria for webcasting should not have any impact on human rights.

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Background Papers

None