Crawley Borough Council

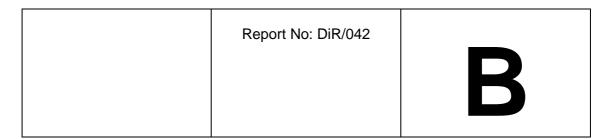|	Report No: DiR/042	**B**

Report to General Purposes Committee

25 June 2012

Webcasting of Council Meetings

1. Key Points

1.1   Full Council on 14 December 2011 agreed that: "to help create interest in the Council's work, and to enable greater public access to the Council's democracy, the General Purposes Committee investigates the costs of webcasting the Full Council meetings and, when appropriate, committee meetings".

1.2   This report sets out some of the advantages and disadvantages together with a summary of the practical and cost implications. The evaluation is based on assumptions set out in the report.   If Members were minded to introduce webcasting a detailed implementation plan would be prepared. At this stage the view of the Committee on the principle of webcasting is sought.

2. Recommendations

2.1   The General Purposes Committee is requested to determine if it wishes to support in principle the introduction of webcasting, taking into account the operational and financial matters set out in the report and the potential advantages and disadvantages associated with webcasting.

DAVID COVILL
Director of Resources

3.   Background

3.1   Webcasting involves recording sound and video of an event, live transmission to a server and onward transmission to the internet for live viewing. It can also be made available online for viewing after the event. The technology is not new but had been hampered by the level and quality of personal broadband access which has increased considerably in areas such as Crawley in recent years.

3.2   Webcasting is used in a number of authorities but the take-up has been less than many had predicted. Within West Sussex it is used by West Sussex County Council for its Full Council and a small number of Select Committee meetings which are likely to be of interest across the County. It is not used by any District or Borough in West Sussex.

3.3   Crawley Borough Council piloted webcasting in 2006 when the State of the Borough debate was broadcast live. The number of viewers was very low.

4.   Assumptions regarding use of webcasting

4.1   The arrangements for webcasting will depend on the number and location of meetings. This report assumes that webcasting is available in the Council Chamber and also in Committee Room B including the facility to broadcast questions asked by members of the public seated in Committee Room A. The report assumes that meetings of Full Council, Cabinet and the Development Control Committee are webcast.

4.2   Full Council is of course the upper decision-making body in the Council and the main forum for political debate. The number of members of the public that attend varies but is usually relatively low. Some of those who attend might do so anyway either because they wish to ask a question or witness a debate or because they have some involvement with the Council or a political party. It is difficult to assess how many people who do not attend meetings of the Council would watch all or some of the meetings on-line which may depend on whether the matters under discussion are of interest outside of the Council.

4.3   Cabinet is the main decision making body. The number of members of the public that attend is usually low.

4.4   The level of public interest in Development Control Committee meetings is usually higher than for Full Council or Cabinet. This is likely to be because the decisions taken have a direct impact on the lives and interests of the applicants and other residents and businesses.   On occasions the level of public interest is very high and whilst it is some years since a meeting was held outside of the Town Hall, in recent years both the Civic Hall and Council Chamber have been used as an 'overflow' with a live video link.

4.5   Quotations were obtained on the basis of one set of cameras for the Council Chamber only, or two sets for both the Council Chamber and Committee Rooms A & B as currently used. Members of the Development Control Committee have previously expressed a strong preference not to hold meetings in the Council Chamber even if screens were provided to show visual images of the applications under consideration. The Council Chamber would also not be an ideal location for Cabinet meetings. Given this, and the fact that there is relatively little difference in the costs between one or two sets of cameras (because some of the equipment can be shared), the information in this report assumes that both the Council Chamber and Committee Room (used with Room A) are equipped for webcasting.

4.6   A number of assumptions have been made for the purposes of this report and to inform a decision regarding the relative merits and cost of webcasting. These would be reviewed if a decision is taken to proceed.

- six Full Council meetings, nine Cabinet and sixteen Development Control Committee meetings a year.
- all of these meetings would be broadcast with no subjective decision made on the value or potential interest of any one meeting over another.
- a 'roving' microphone is used in the public gallery during Question Time.
- as the microphone system in Committee Rooms A and B is not suitable for webcast purposes, the Council would purchase a replacement system at a cost of approximately £10,000. An alternative would be a handheld 'boom' microphone but this may disrupt proceedings and would require at least one person to operate the microphone and select and mark each speaker on the video channel.
- training would be provided to ensure that microphones are used properly, Members and officers leave a short interval before speaking, and people do not speak across each other.
- both rooms must be provided with sufficient internet connection.
- there may be some parts (such as Part B) of proceedings that will not be broadcast but would still be recorded for record within the Council.
- the system must be easy to operate and not require special technical knowledge.
- the broadcast material would be easy to view, understand and access via our website.

5.   Indicative costs of webcasting

5.1   Two companies with experience of webcasting local authority meetings were asked to provide quotations. These are for illustrative purposes and a formal tender exercise would be undertaken if Members decide to proceed and once a formal specification, including the exact number of meetings, is determined.

5.2   Both companies would provide:
- three or more fixed cameras per room
- Member and staff training
- integration with Council audio systems
- live webcast
- hosting and streaming of content
- speaker names & profiles
- agendas, documents and images
- jump points to allow viewing of certain sections of a meeting.

	Company A	Company B
Number of exisiting local government clients	more than 10	5
broadcast available for viewing	6 months	12 months
year 1 cost	£16, 327	£23,715
year 2 cost	£16, 327	£7,900
year 3 cost	£16, 327	£7,900
Total three year cost	£48,981	£39,515
Average annual cost over 3 years	**£16,327**	**£13,172**
Average annual cost with discount for three year contract	£14,109	n/a

5.3 There are differences in the service such as the level of interactive features such as polling, real time questions and feedback. These may however not be appropriate to Full Council, Cabinet or Development Control Committee meetings.

5.4 If Members were minded to proceed, a full specification would be prepared which could include the option of additional meetings such as the Overview and Scrutiny Commission or the Licensing Committee. There might be potential to include other types of meetings in the Council Chamber or Committee Rooms A and B at additional expense although it would be unwise to do this without ensuring that participants and operatives are fully trained.

6. Other local authorities

6.1 Although the take-up of webcasting is relatively low and no other Districts or Boroughs in West Sussex use webcasting, Guildford Borough Council has recently decided to introduce webcasting at an estimated annual cost of £20,000.

6.2 The report to the Guildford Borough Council Working Group includes usage statistics for two other local authorities, Mole Valley District Council and East Herts District Council. These show that for the period between January and March 2012 the average number of viewings for Mole Valley was; Full: Council (22), Executive (41), Development Control Committee (124), Scrutiny (18), Standards Committee (7) and Audit Committee (12).

6.3 For East Herts the figures for the same period are; Full: Council (54), Executive (38) and Development Control Committee (87).

6.4 Mole Valley's population is 84,600 whilst East Herts' is 138,500. Both are geographically larger than Crawley. There is of course also no indication as to the extent that Members and officers account for a proportion of these viewers.

6.5 Guildford Borough Council is likely to broadcast their Full Council, Executive and Planning Committee meetings.

7. Alternative approaches

7.1 It might be possible to record an event using relatively inexpensive camera equipment and convert it to the correct format for broadcast to the web. There are however sufficient technical disadvantages to this approach which would potentially result in a poorer quality sound or video and lose the advantages of being able to add speaker information, agendas and presentations. The initial costs of acquiring a streamer service, developing the media player and providing additional bandwidth and server space would be in excess of £30,000.

7.2 There are also portable systems but the quality of broadcast may be less and these would require more manual intervention during meetings.

7.3 The possibility of sharing equipment has been raised but as none of the neighbouring authorities are understood to be intending to introduce webcasting the costs of transporting the equipment further afield would be prohibitive. There would also be the possibility of a clash of meeting dates.

8. Potential advantages and disadvantages of webcasting

8.1 This section sets out potential advantages and disadvantages. Some of these are subjective, for example if a person views a webcast rather than attending a meeting it could be regarded as something that reduces active democratic activity or alternatively as a more convenient service for customers. Members are also better placed to comment on the likely views of constituents.

<u>Potential advantages</u>

8.2 Some members of the public may be reluctant to attend Council meetings or reluctant to attend for an evening meeting. Members of the public may also currently be put off attending a meeting if they are concerned that an item of interest to them might not be considered until late evening. For users of public transport this could mean leaving before the item in question is debated. This may be less of an issue for the Development Control Committee as the order of the agenda for meetings tends to reflect the level of public interest and is sometimes changed on the night. For Full Council, however, items are taken in the order of the relevant Committee and the early part of the meeting often addresses matters relating to the Council's procedures and Constitution. Members of the public who attend Full Council for Public Question Time often leave during this period and therefore miss matters which have been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Cabinet. With webcasting however, this would be less of an

issue if a person is able to view the meeting in their own home or select the item of interest at a later time.

8.3   The age profile of those that do attend meetings is not representative of Crawley's population. Whilst webcasting is not the answer to democratic engagement, the very high level of internet use by younger generations may make Council democracy more visible and accessible.

8.4   Regardless of the number of people who view web broadcasts the fact that they exist might send a message of openness and transparency. A comparator may be the BBC Parliament channel which exists to shed light on the parliamentary process rather than to attract huge audiences.

8.5   Webcasting of meetings in other local authorities is reported to have a positive effect on conduct of meetings although this may not be permanent. This is because Members are aware of being broadcast and also that 'speaking across' another person or making 'quips' will disrupt the recording and broadcast as the technology cannot distinguish between the purpose of an individual's intervention.

8.6   Council minutes are produced which provide a formal record of decisions taken and the basis for the decisions. They may reflect some overall themes of the debate but do not cover every point raised. Some Members may however wish to have a transcript or at least a detailed record of points made. Webcasting would provide such a facility but without Democratic Services staff having to produce lengthy verbatim minutes which could be difficult to understand.

8.7   Webcasting combined with social media and other collaboration tools can increase participation in the democratic process, for example by allowing people to post questions during or in advance of a meeting.

Potential disadvantages

8.8   Unlike West Sussex, Crawley is a small geographical area so attending a meeting in Crawley town centre is likely to be less of a deterrent for residents than travelling to Chichester. Borough Council meetings are also held during the evening, making them accessible to residents who work during the day, unlike County Council meetings which are held during the daytime. These factors might increase the risk of very low usage.

8.9   Webcasting could potentially reduce the number of people who do attend meetings, although people who feel strongly about an issue attend a meeting not just to listen to the debate but to display their support or opposition. People may also attend to ask questions.

8.10   Matters relating to the conduct of meetings are entirely within the control of those attending the meetings and, it could be argued, not a reason to purchase equipment and broadcast meetings. Moreover if the installation of the equipment does not have the desired effect then the subsequent broadcasts may not reflect well on the Council. If conduct is a concern, one-off recordings could be made to assist Member training.

8.11   Based on the information in Section 5 webcasting is likely to cost in the region of £500 per meeting. It would also involve the replacement of some equipment at additional expense. It is difficult to estimate usage but the cost per viewer may be high particularly if those people with no direct connection to the Council are excluded.

9.   Ward Members' Views

9.1   Not applicable.

10.   Staffing, Equalities, Financial and Legal Implications/Powers

10.1   Webcasting may be beneficial for people who find it difficult to attend meetings at the Town Hall, for example due to disability, caring responsibilities or access to transport. People with specialist modifications to their home computer equipment for sight or hearing problems might also benefit. It is difficult to predict the number of people that might benefit in this respect given that the overall number of people watching webcasts may not be very high; for example, it is not known how many of the 12 people who watched the State of the Borough debate in 2006 were unable to attend the debate.

10.2   Section 5 explains that based on indicative quotations the average annual cost would be in the region of £14,000 to £23,000 depending on the length of the arrangement. Costs in the first year would be higher and the Council would also be required to fund a replacement sound system in Committee Rooms A and B.

10.3   Depending on the timescale for gaining a formal Council decision and undertaking a procurement exercise, Cabinet could be asked to approve a supplementary estimate if webcasting were to be introduced in 2012/13 with future years' costs incorporated into the Budget Strategy. Alternatively a bid could be submitted for consideration by the Budget Advisory Group and a decision taken by Full Council in February 2013 with a view to introducing webcasting at Annual Council in May 2013. The latter option would require a procurement exercise to be undertaken in parallel with the budget process and an early indication of the Council's likely view would be beneficial.

10.4   Section 100(7) of the Local Government Act 1972 states that the Council is not required to permit the taking of any photographs of any proceedings, or the use of any means to enable persons not present to see or hear any proceedings (whether at the time or later) of the making of any oral report on any proceedings as they take place. Where a Council decides to web cast its proceedings, considerations needs to be given to provisions in the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Human Rights Act 1998, in particular that members of the public have given effective consent to their own appearance in any webcast a suitable protocol would have to be developed in order to ensure that the Council is compliant with its obligations under The Data Protection Act 1998 and The Human Rights Act 1998. Webcasts could be used as legally admissible evidence.

11.   Risk Implications

11.1   There is a risk that edited footage of Council meetings could be used to misrepresent the Council or an individual Member or to show the Council in a bad light. A Councillor in another local authority was once suspended for six months after he published selected parts of a webcast meeting on YouTube. He later won an appeal against the decision but this does show the potential to place webcast broadcasts on YouTube or similar media.

12.   Environmental Impacts

12.1   There is a theoretical minimal reduction in carbon emissions if people who currently attend meetings and travel by car instead decide to stay at home.

13.   Reasons for the Recommendation

13.1   To gain the views of the General Purposes Committee on the potential introduction of the webcasting of Council meetings.

14.   Background Papers

Minutes of Full Council 14 December 2011

Contact Officers:

David Covill - Director of Resources

Alison Hunt - Web Services Manager