 CITY OF YORK COUNCIL

**Meeting of the Executive**                                      **29 July 2008**

Report of the Head of Civic, Democratic & Legal Services

## Web Casting of Council Meetings

### Summary

1.  This report asks Members to consider the benefits of web-casting council meetings and the cost effectiveness of such an exercise.

### Background to Report

2.  At a meeting of full Council on 10 April 2008, the following Motion was moved by Cllr Scott:

    "Council notes the increasing use of technology by public institutions to communicate with the public.  Such developments can be evidenced in every public sector organisation in the country.  Mainstream political parties have taken advantage of new forms of communication such as YouTube and MySpace websites, as well as social networking websites such as Facebook and Bebo.

    Council believes that technological developments in the public sector should not be limited to exercises such as consultations and voter registrations. The public should be given every opportunity to engage with the decision-making process and, more specifically, meetings of Full Council.  This could open up the decision-making process to a whole new section of the local population, making it more inclusive and transparent.  Not only will this enable the public to witness elected Members debating local issues, it could also prompt better communication between councillor and constituent, strengthening local democracy."

    To this end, Council requested that:

    i.   Officers prepare a report on the feasibility of web-casting meetings of Full Council, as well as other Council meetings, which considered:
         *   The various options, from contracting outside services to providing services 'in house'.
         *   The cost effectiveness of such an exercise, based on overall cost against numbers likely to view web-casts from outside City of York Council.
         *   The feasibility of recordings being placed on the Council's website and other hosting websites.

    ii.  Officers present the report to the Executive not later than 17 June, in order that the issue can be referred to the 30 June meeting of Full Council.

## Background to Webbased Multimedia Tools (Webcasting) – What is it?

3.   Multimedia can be described as any audio visual form of communication. When using the internet as the transmission medium, audio visual multimedia is called 'Webcasting' or streaming. Anyone with access to the Internet, an appropriate viewing tool (Real Player, Windows Media Player,), and speakers/soundcard on their PC can then view such transmissions 'live'.

4.   Because the video signal is digital, such transmissions can also be captured (archived) and viewed at a later date. The audio video transmissions can be viewed via the Internet or an Intranet. The size of the picture can vary depending on the distributor and indeed the viewer, but traditionally the actual picture is about 3" square which is seen as the right quality combined with the expected functionality on a webpage i.e. this is not TV but internet where the viewer expects to do more than just watch. What is key is that even at the lower encoding rates the movement is smooth and, more importantly, the sound quality is good[1]. Although access to the transmitted content would be via the Councils website (or the Intranet for staff / Members), this would simply provide a link to a specialised website from which the video would be streamed.

5.   The two main key features of webcasting are:

   • the ability to stream both live and archive (on demand) content - this makes it an extremely effective communication tool as it enables viewers to look at content where and when they want.

   • by using the internet as the transmission medium it is also possible to attach or link related information to the webcast to enhance the viewing experience e.g. agendas, reports and minutes.

6.   The system installed can be either fixed or mobile and will consist of cameras and a control/encoding station. The cameras capture the proceedings under the control of an operator from the control station. The audio is captured from the Councils existing audio system (or, with the mobile system, from its own audio system) it is then synchronised to the video and encoded for transmission. The encoding of these feeds is then done using either Real Player or MS Media Player both being the most widely available webcasting software packages.

7.   The Control PC also allows the operator to include details such as speaker names, agendas and presentations within the webcast. The encoded feed is then 'transmitted' through a sufficient internet connection (normally an ISDN or ADSL line) into the supplier's network where it is placed on a transmission (viewers) page. The supplier will 'host' (hold the webcast on file for any viewer to call to view) for an agreed period and provide sufficient bandwidth for unlimited viewers to the webcast during this period. A viewer will access the webcast from a link provided on the Councils website into the transmission page.

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[1] It should be noted that, sometimes, organisations claim to be webcasting if they have one or more fixed cameras at a variety of locations showing a particular view which is updated every few minutes. This is normally known as a 'webcam' and is different to 'webcasting'.

8.   In addition the system will automatically archive the webcast including inserting key jump points such as speaker names or each agenda item, for ease of viewing at any time after the live webcast. The system thus avoids lengthy post production editing by the operator.

## Consultation

9.   The Head of ITT Operational Services has been fully involved in sourcing the available systems capable of providing webcasting to City of York Council, and has advised that in-house resources are currently insufficient to provide the required services.

10.  Information on the introduction of webcasting at other Councils has been looked at.  Overall councils seem to regularly achieve viewing numbers of between 500 and 1000 per month.  Interestingly 3 of the top 10 council websites (as determined by their usage) include councils that incorporate multimedia on their site. Examples of councils using a webcasting service detailing how they promoted their service initially, what ongoing promotion they do and their average viewing figures are detailed in Annex A.

11.  It is recognised nationally that when compared with the previous 'attendance' at meetings, the regular virtual attendance has been deemed to exceed expectations and certainly far exceeds the physical attendance capacity in most council chambers.

## Options

12.  Having considered the information contained within this report, Members may decide:

     i)    not to introduce a webcasting facility;

     ii)   to proceed with the introduction of a webcasting facility either by leasing a system on an 'out-hosted' basis – this means that we would not need ICT to support the system either through direct management/support or server infrastructure,  or purchasing a system to run in-house (subject to further investigation).  If this option is pursued, the Council could choose to:

           a)   test the current market by means of a tender process. The difficulty with a tendering procedure may be finding a sufficient number of companies that can provide a service in this niche market.  The Council would need to be satisfied that such a service provider could meet all the requirements of the Council, not just some of them.  A project team would need to be set up to oversee the tender process which, of necessity would need to run alongside an ITT development bid for the funding that would be required. The Council could still decide not to accept any tender.

           b)   Seek a negotiated contract – if there are a limited number of companies (three or less) who are able to provide a system that would meet our requirements, it may be necessary to seek a waiver of standing orders in order to pursue a negotiated contract.  However, without an

assessment of the market by way of tender or seeking expressions of interest it is difficult to assess whether enough viable suppliers exist.

iii) If a decision is taken to lease an 'out-hosted' system, agree whether or not to proceed on the basis of a 1-year pilot period.

## Analysis

13. There are a number of arguments in favour of web-based multimedia:

External Benefits
a. It encourages eParticipation:
- The eDemocracy landscape is still being defined however web based multimedia is being consistently mentioned as part of the emerging picture. The EU's eTEN, eEurope eGovernment and i2010 objectives encourage public bodies to implement and benefit from a full range of eParticipation tools to broaden the participation of citizens in the democratic process.
- A increasing number of leading Councils are already using the technology and have identified the following as key points in their reasoning:
  i. Seamless transmission of meetings/events/briefings makes the council more accessible and transparent to its citizens.
  ii. There is a clear case for showing that webcasting encourages eParticipation by giving citizens access to core council business without the intermediary of Council minutes or media coverage .
- It provides the ultimate record of a meeting ensuring full transparency to all of the process.
- A recent EU project called 'eParticipate'[2], evidenced not only an increase in virtual attendance but also an increase in physical attendance and this increase was seen as a result of the increase in publicity about the democratic process.

b. It is a flexible medium which delivers value for money:
- Webcasting is not limited to formal meetings and as such can deliver additional value for money.  Other content that has been webcast by local authorities includes:
  i. Events (internal and external within the community) e.g. in late April 2007, the West Essex PCT held a number of road shows about their emerging strategy for healthcare in West Essex. The Epping road show was held at the Civic Offices and was webcast live by Epping Forest District Council.  The PCT were recharged for the event at cost. Promotion of the event was the responsibility of the PCT, and as no effective publicity was undertaken by the PCT, very few people attended. Having said that, the webcast was subsequently viewed by over 200 people so could be seen as having reached significantly more people than could have been accommodated at a public meeting.  This was a valuable lesson in planning events with third party organisations.

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[2] eParticipate: Webcasting by Local Authorities -
http://www.public-i.info/documents/eParticipate%20Validation-Evaluation%20Report%202006.pdf

       ii.   Community news programmes

       iii.  Internal and external briefings

       iv.  Promotional content (e.g. tourism videos)

       v.   Training content

c. It is a strategic communication tool which provides content in a format people respond to:

- Today's younger generation use web-based services providing a means to interest this group in local politics.
- Multimedia can make a website more visually exciting compelling and engaging and therefore informative
- Viewers have growing expectations of the functionality they will find on websites. Multimedia content is the next level of quality and functionality increasingly expected
- It allows a council to communicate without the mediation of the media
- The public increasingly gets its information from multimedia sources, in particular television. Web based multimedia (e.g. webcasting) communicates with people using a medium that they are increasingly familiar with and trust

14. There are also a range of potential ideas which could enhance the information provided through a website by incorporating Multimedia. For example one of the more innovative uses has been the creation of frequent community news programmes of events and news from within a council region. By capturing video footage either from the community or from within the council an informative news programme could easily be developed.

15. <u>Internal Benefits</u>

It has a wide application within a Councils communication strategy. For example it can be a useful internal communication tool to enable officers and members to keep up to date with current debate or issues and for providing internal briefings. Maximising internal communications would realise value:

- webcasting and archiving staff briefings for those who cannot attend would be one way to use webcasting to enhance and improve communication with staff
- enabling live transmissions to be delivered to numerous staff instantly at their desks.
- Training such as Members Code of Conduct or other such statutory training could also be considered.

16. <u>Other Benefits</u>

The Audit Commission has given a positive rating to the communication benefits of webcasting within the CPA process. Indeed, a recent MORI survey[3] found that 'higher rated CPA authorities are more likely to use webcasts'. In addition, the 'PARSOL Better Planning Operating Standards'[4] defined the webcasting of planning meetings as one of the graded standards for the delivery of better planning services in an e-enabled environment.

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[3] eDemocracy Survey 2005 – Local authorities experiences of democracy on and off line. www.e-democracy.gov.uk

[4] PARSOL Better Planning Operating Standards http://www.pas.gov.uk/pas/aio/30692

17. Content is undoubtedly key to the success of any multimedia project and not just content in the video but the contextual information linked to the video. To achieve the best value from the project and a good take up, a planned programme of meetings and events would need to be considered.  These events should be based on those likely to improve communication both with the community and with staff, engage citizens, boost use of the service, and create a positive PR image.

18. Concerns
Whilst webcasting clearly increases the viewing potential for meetings, making the experience more widely transparent, it would be difficult to prove that webcasting leads to increased opportunities for residents to 'influence' or contribute to decision-making by Members.

19. Any contractual arrangements would need to provide sufficient hours viewing time, as the length of some meetings is unpredictable.  It would be essential to ensure viewing time was maximised and uninterrupted.

## What's Right for York?

20. In-house or not?
The benefit of a system that is not run in-house is that the infrastructure that would be needed to be installed and supported is not a drain on the Council's ICT Service.  On demand video streaming requires dedicated ICT resources and equipment that is not cost effective to provide in house. Specialist software would also be needed to run a content management system and operators console.

21. The alternative, is to lease a system.  For example, a company called Public-i, based in Hove in Sussex (the main market leader in the supply of web casting facilities to local authorities), offers a service that includes the hosting of the system (the video files and microsite are run by them) thus minimizing the impact the system has on the Council's IT resources. At each webcast meeting their staff monitor the recording and the operator has messenger contact with them during the meeting which means that the continued streaming of the webcast can be ensured. An annual contract with Public-I would include annual service charges, leasing costs and a maintenance/fault resolution Service Level Agreement (SLA).

22. Static or Portable Units?
A fixed static system would require substantial cabling work in the Council Chamber. This would require careful consideration in order to achieve minimal damage to the chamber including consultation with English Heritage.

23. Portable versions do exist but whilst smaller in design, the equipment is still bulky and heavy and would require a number of staff to move it within the building and the use of a Council vehicle to take it off site.  There is also the health and safety issue of the cables running around a room.  The benefit of a portable unit is that it could be used to service Committee Rooms 1-4 as well, and could be used off site for special events.

24. Another alternative would be to use video cameras to capture content instead of a webcast unit.  This has proved successful for some Councils as video cameras are often a more viable option for less formal events.  This would not allow for 'live' webcasting as capturing events via video camera does mean that an element of

editing is required to ensure that content uploaded to the website is of a good standard, and some further minor investment in software would be required to facilitate this.

## Other Considerations

25. <u>Compatibility</u>
Any webcasting system introduced would need to be compatible with the audio system within the Council Chamber, and in order to enable this, it may be that the current audio system would need to be upgraded or replaced.

26. It should be noted that the Public-i system is compatible with our Committee Management System and therefore would provide an integrated approach to council meetings. The cost of their system is detailed in Annex B together with comparison figures from another company.

27. <u>Internal Support</u>
Members need to consider how this multimedia work can be supported by the authority i.e. it is a good example of a multi-service project. For example:

- Some work would be required from the website team to ensure a high level of integration within the website to webcasts from Council news and content pages. This would involve the insertion of many entry points into webcast content from different website pages and the linking of news stories to webcast content.

- It would require a very high level of commitment from staff in Democratic Services with support from colleagues in ICT. Staff responsibilities would need to be formally recognised and integrated into job descriptions as necessary.

28. <u>Potential Cost Savings</u>
A cost benefit analysis is difficult to conduct. However, an increase in viewing numbers compared with previous attendance at most council's is significant on its own. There will be the initial cost for purchasing and installing a system and then there is the cost per hour for 'Live' web casting. Obviously, the more hours of 'Live' web casting, the more expensive it is. On the other hand, there are some potential cost savings as follows:

- Time and travel savings for residents (i.e. can 'attend from home')
- Time and travel savings for Officers / members (reduction in need to pay travel expenses)
- Recording of meetings. Ability for Officers to complete minutes during normal working hours
- Reduction in printed matter required to communicate with residents, officers and Members
- Reduction in telephone costs to brief staff

29. <u>Advertising</u>
Successful webcasting is invariably dependant upon the publicity of the facility combined with the content. Even for formal statutory Council meetings significant increases in viewing numbers has been evidenced and sustained by other

Authorities.  However, ongoing success requires ongoing publicity and planning to ensure the webcast provides suitable content in an easily accessible manner. This can be achieved with minimal cost by limiting the advertising to the Council website and via relevant council correspondence e.g. in the case of a contentious planning application that is due to be dealt with at a webcasted meeting, any letters issued relating to the application could include a reference to the forthcoming webcast.

## Corporate Priorities

30. The introduction of webcasting as a way of allowing the public to access of decision-making process is in line with our the following direction statements:

    'Our ambition is to be clear about what we will do to meet the needs of our communities, and then to deliver the best quality services that we can afford'

    'We will be an outward looking council, working across boundaries for the people of York'

31. It is also in line with our value statement – 'Encouraging improvement in everything we do'.

## Implications

32. **Financial** – In order to introduce webcasting, an ITT Development  bid would need to be made.  The bid would need to be rated against other bids in order to guarantee the availability of the necessary funding.  It should be noted that the first round of bids has already taken place.   Alternatively, it may be possible to acquire funding through the provision of a growth bid as part of the forthcoming budget round for 2009-10.

33. An outline of the costs of a webcasting system are outlined in Annex B.  If a decision is taken to install a static system in Committee Rooms 1-4 then there will be further costs incurred for the additional cameras and cabling work.

34. **Legal** – The electronic record may stand as evidence in a court or tribunal.

35. **Information Technology** – there will be ITT implications associated with Options (ii) & (iii) in the report to a greater or lesser extent.  These will need to be explored in more detail at tender stage, should a decision be taken to proceed.

36. **Equalities** – The introduction of a webcasting system would benefit those members of the public who are otherwise unable to attend a public meeting due to physical disability and/or issues of accessibility.

37. **Other** – There are two issues that will need to be addressed:

    - Data Protection -  Annex C contains an extract from an agenda which shows how another Council has dealt with this issue.

    - Freedom of Information - Some Councils have received requests from the public for copies of recordings of meetings. These requests were considered to be Freedom of Information requests and CD's of the meetings were sent to

those requesting them with a letter asserting copyright, indicating that copying or commercial use was not allowed without permission

37. There are no known HR, Crime & Disorder or Property implications associated with the recommendations within this report.

## Risk Management

38. If a decision is taken not to proceed with webcasting of council meetings the opportunity to further improve transparency in our decision-making and our equality aims may be missed.

## Recommendations

39. Members are asked to:

- Note the contents of the report

- Identify their preferred option as outlined in paragraph 10 and refer the motion and this report to the meeting of Full Council in September 2008.

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**Wards Affected:**                                                    **All**        ☑


**For further information please contact the author of the report**

**Background Papers:** None

**Annexes**

**Annex A** – Information on other Authorities using webcasting
**Annex B** – Costing Comparison Figures
**Annex C** – Extract from another council's agenda front sheet showing data protection information