

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER SERVICES AND ICT SCRUTINY STANDING
PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.30 - 8.50 PM

Members Present:	Mrs M McEwen (Chairman), , Mrs D Borton, R Church, P McMillan, Mrs C Pond, Mrs P Smith and J M Whitehouse
Other members present:	S Metcalfe and Mrs D Collins
Apologies for Absence:	Mrs P K Rush and Mrs P Richardson
Officers Present	A Scott (Head of Information, Communications and Technology), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), V Evans (Customer Services Manager, ICT) and Z Folley (Democratic Services Assistant)

Also in attendance:

11. NOTES OF THE LAST PANEL MEETING

The notes of the meeting held on 21 November 2005 were agreed.

12. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

No substitutes had been appointed.

13. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were made.

14. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel considered their new terms of reference.

In relation to item (1) it was noted the Portfolio Holder had agreed to temporality suspend the Customer Services and Transformation Programme (CSTP) in order for the Council to give the necessary resource priority to the waste management project. As an interim measure the Panel would consider feedback from the Customer Services Working Group on current customer service activities across the Council.

The Panel asked if the recent discussions on the Single Non - Emergency Number Programme would affect the CSTP? The Head of ICT clarified that despite the decision to abandon the project due to the financial costs of the Essex wide bid, the Council still intended to go ahead with its plans for a local scheme.

The new Terms of Reference was endorsed and referred to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny on 9 November 2006 for consideration.

15. WEBCASTING PILOT

The Senior Democratic Services Officer presented a progress report on the web – casting project. The report asked the Panel to consider the proposal to extend the existing pilot contract period until 31 March 2008 and subject to this receive a full evaluation of the pilot in the new municipal year. The Panel were also asked to consider whether the Portfolio Holder should be asked to seek the inclusion of a bid for the Chamber Speech Reinforcement system in the final capital programme and express views on potential new uses of the system.

It was reported that on 4 September 2006, the Council had commenced a one year webcasting pilot with an end date of 3 August 2007 with funding provision from the Government IEG Budgets. The contract had been due to commence in July 2006 but this had been put back to August 2006 due to negotiations about its content particularly the end date and action to ensure installation of equipment in the Council Chamber was of the highest quality during installation.

It was reported that the introduction of the system had gone very smoothly with public and member acceptance. No problems had been experienced with the technical elements of the webcasting except with Members forgetting to switch their microphones on before speaking. A bid for a replacement microphone system had been included in the draft Civic Office planned maintenance budget for 2007/08 which would very much determine the success of continued webcasting. The Panel requested the inclusion of the bid in the final Cabinet Programme for next year.

The system was leased from a company called Public – i which ‘hosted’ the system minimizing the impact the system had on the Council’s IT system. At each meeting monitoring was undertaken by the staff at the company which ensured that the continued streaming of the webcast.

Officers currently had been able to webcast at least one meeting a week and envisaged continuing this until contract expiry. Operational duties had been split between Committee Officers and Public Relations who were enthusiastic about the project and currently engaged in operational training. The intention was to train as many officers as possible.

The Panel noted an analysis of visits to live and archived meetings showing that the levels of web - cast viewing was equal to that of a number of London Boroughs, and greater than neighbouring Districts using webcasting. To date 1500 visits had been received averaging about 500 a month. Only 7% of this was from internal officer viewing. The Senior Democratic Services Officer gave a short presentation showing the main pages on the site including the section for feedback.

The scheme had been publicised by press releases, the Forester and through a page on the website. Local coverage in the press had been broadly positive. Extracts of which were before Members.

In terms of future projects it was noted that there was a number of types of webcasts that officers wished to trial including:

- (a) Using the webcast equipment outside of the Chamber; (i.e. In the Committee Rooms for Panel meetings)
- (b) Using the webcast equipment off site – plans included Area Planning

Subcommittee A in December 2006; potential use during the May elections; and Civic Events;

(c) Use for other than our meetings: Ideas included the potential for direct member communication with the public e.g. Leader broadcasts, Overview and Scrutiny evidence, work with schools (link with the recent appointment of a new young persons officer and the national curriculum on Citizenship) including an idea for a webcast live debate; and member webcasts.

In response to the presentation, a member asked whether the internet homepage provided a direct link to the webcasting page? It was reported that this initially had been provided however the space available on the homepage for direct links was limited. It was clarified that the page however still provided links to webcasts as the issues featured offered links to any relevant webcasts.

Members felt that the system had worked well and should be continued. The only issue was the need to follow the prescribed seating arrangements for the project. It was reported that so far this had been determined by officers however Members were welcomed to express a preference regarding their own place in the seating plans.

A Member referred to a recent broadcast of a planning committee where there had been problems with matching the name captions with the pictures and capturing fully the discussions and voting. She stressed that this be addressed. It was reported officers were still learning how to use the system and their skills would improve with practice which should resolve any problems currently being experienced.

The Portfolio Holder expressed support for the continuation of the project. In terms of publicity, he stressed that focus and resources should be placed on covering issues of public interest such as the recent presentation to OSC on Whipps Cross and discussions about the budget setting process. Items could be included in the Forester to publicise forthcoming web – casts. Archived broadcasts could also be used to show representatives from external bodies and the public the process for meetings. It was questioned whether there were any plans to web – cast Licensing Sub – Committee meetings? The system could be used as a means of providing information and raising awareness of issues such as recycling.

The Leader of the Council suggested measures to identify the value of the system for local residents. It was questioned whether this could be measured by looking at public attendance levels at meetings to see whether any changes had occurred which might be attributable to web – casting? It was reported that the website included a polls and survey page for public feedback. Qualitative data had been gathered for the first period of the pilot and further qualitative information would be obtained to identify the impact of the system including the implications for public awareness and understanding of the Council services. The Portfolio Holder stressed that consideration be given to this data as part of the full evaluation process to take place next year.

It was reported that the costs of filming any off site broadcast would be met by the existing and proposed funding provision for the project, however this did not cover the officer operational support at meetings for which officers claimed a committee attendance allowance. The costs of removing the equipment should the system not be pursued would be covered by the current funding for the pilot.

The Panel considered the proposal to extend the pilot and agreed that the present pilot expiry date of August 2007 would not allow officers time to undertake a full evaluation of the system and carry out any tender evaluation process felt necessary should an external provider be sourced. The Senior Democratic Services Officer advised that the exercise could take about 6-9 months.

In view of these concerns, the Panel agreed that the current scheme should be extended to 31 March 2008 to give officers time to provide a fuller evaluation in the new municipal year and any preparatory work for the continuation of the contract. This would bring any renewal in line with the Council's financial year and other IT project renewal dates. It was reported that funding made available from the provision in the revenue budget for ongoing revenue requirements for systems paid for by IEG grant could fund the extension. The proposed solution would also avoid the need for a growth bid at this stage and mean, no additional monies would have to be set aside in the budget and ultimately not called on should the pilot not be extended.

AGREED:

- (1) That the report of the initial webcasting pilot period be noted and endorsed;
- (2) That the existing pilot contract period be extended to 31 March 2008 funded by IEG revenue budgets as an interim measure;
- (3) That the Panel receive a full evaluation of the pilot at their first meeting in the 2007/08 municipal year to include:
 - (a) Qualitative and quantitative data for the initial period September 2006 – June 2007;
 - (b) Options for the future of the scheme post March 2008;
 - (c) Results of consultation undertaken; and
 - (d) Examination of alternative providers and other authorities experience;
- (4) That the portfolio holder be asked to seek the inclusion of the bid for a replacement of the Chamber Speech Reinforcement System (microphone system) in the final Capital Programme for 2007/08; and
- (5) That the following potential uses of the system be considered further:
 - (a) Using the webcast equipment outside of the Chamber; (i.e. In the Committee Rooms for Panel meetings)
 - (b) Using the webcast equipment off site – plans TO include Area Planning Subcommittee A in December 2006; potentially use during the May elections; and Civic Events;
 - (c) Use for other than our meetings: Ideas include the potential for direct member communication with the public e.g. Leader broadcasts, Overview and Scrutiny evidence, work with schools (link with the recent appointment of a new young persons officer and the national curriculum on Citizenship) including an idea for a webcast live debate; and member webcasts

16. CORPORATE CONTACT CENTRE - PROGRESS REPORT

Councillor Metcalfe reported on progress with the Customer Contact Centre which was a key element of the Customer Services Transformation Programme. At present the programme had been put on hold until the uncertainties about the Councils overall budget position had been addressed. Despite this, steps were still being undertaken to take forward the customer service elements of the programme through proposals to establish a Customer Service Working Group. These proposals were still at an early stage but the discussions would focus on the involvement of all services in improving customer service.

It was clarified that one of the main aims of the working group was to ensure that there was EFDC representation on the Pan Essex Regional Group on customer service issues. The group would be funded through existing resources and would report progress to this Panel.

It was reported that the next meeting of the Regional Group to be held this week was to consider the future of cash halls. It was important that the District views were fed into this discussion given Members had opposed the move to close local cash hall which the group supported.

17. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

- (i) E-Government returns – Progress; and
- (ii) Customer Contact Centre – Progress.

18. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next scheduled meeting was on 7 February 2007.