

Scrutiny Standing Panel Agenda



Customer Services and ICT Scrutiny Standing Panel Monday, 27th November, 2006

Place: Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping

Time: 7.30 pm

Democratic Services Officer: S G Hill - Senior Democratic Services Officer
Tel: 01992 564249 Email: shill@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Members:

Councillors Mrs M McEwen (Chairman), Mrs P K Rush (Vice-Chairman),
Councillor Mrs D Borton, R Church, M Cohen, P McMillan, Mrs C Pond, Mrs P Richardson,
Mrs P Smith, Mrs L Wagland and J M Whitehouse

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. NOTES OF THE LAST PANEL MEETING (Pages 3 - 8)

To consider and approve the notes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 14 August 2006 (attached).

3. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

(Head of Research and Democratic Services) To report the appointment of any substitute members for the meeting.

4. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

(Head of Research and Democratic Services). To declare interests in any items on the agenda.

In considering whether to declare a personal or a prejudicial interest under the Code of Conduct, Overview & Scrutiny members are asked pay particular attention to paragraph 11 of the Code in addition to the more familiar requirements.

This requires the declaration of a personal and prejudicial interest in any matter before an OS Committee which relates to a decision of or action by another Committee or Sub Committee of the Council, a Joint Committee or Joint Sub Committee in which the Council is involved and of which the Councillor is also a member.

Paragraph 11 does not refer to Cabinet decisions or attendance at an OS meeting purely for the purpose of answering questions or providing information on such a matter.

5. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME (Pages 9 - 10)

(Chairman/Lead Officer) At the last meeting it was agreed that the Terms of Reference would be revised. This is attached.

6. WEBCASTING PILOT (Pages 11 - 26)

(Head of Research and Democratic Services) To consider the initial report on the pilot.

7. CORPORATE CONTACT CENTRE - PROGRESS REPORT

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

To consider which reports are ready to be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting.

9. FUTURE MEETINGS

The next scheduled meeting of the Panel is on 7 February 2007 at 7.30 p.m. in Committee Room 1.

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER SERVICES AND ICT SCRUTINY STANDING
PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 14 AUGUST 2006
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.25 PM**

Members Present:	Mrs M McEwen (Chairman), Mrs P K Rush (Vice-Chairman), Councillor Mrs D Borton, R Church, P McMillan, Mrs C Pond, Mrs P Smith, Mrs L Wagland and J M Whitehouse
Other members present:	Mrs D Collins, R Frankel, Mrs J Lea and S Metcalfe
Apologies for Absence:	M Cohen and Mrs P Richardson
Officers Present	A Scott (Head of Information, Communications and Technology), R Palmer (Head of Finance), V Evans (Customer Services Manager, ICT) and S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer)
Also in attendance:	-

1. NOTES OF THE LAST PANEL MEETING

The notes of the meeting held on 12 June 2006 were agreed.

2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

No substitutes had been appointed.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were made.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Terms of Reference and Work Programme were noted. New Terms of Reference would be prepared for the next meeting.

5. WEBCASTING PILOT

The Panel noted that the Council had decided that, in order to increase public access to its democratic process, a webcasting pilot had been agreed as part of its 2005/6 e-Government Strategy.

The Council was about to begin a one year pilot scheme by entering into a service contract with a specialist webcasting company. The value of this leasing contract was £17,000.

Officers had now:

- (i) negotiated and completed a contract for the pilot;

(ii) oversee the technical installation of the webcasting system including its fixed installation in the Council Chamber;

(iii) implemented officer training for webcast operators;

It was noted that the system is now live and ready to use. It was the intention that "soft" testing would commence in August with a publicised launch in September at a Full Council meeting.

Simon Hill, Senior Democratic Services Officer, attended the meeting to explain the system to members and to talk through some of the implications for the council in introducing this technology.

Protocol and Advice to the Public

As part of the preparation for the beginning of the webcasts a draft protocol had been developed to set out the main provisions including suspension of webcasts.

Research and Democratic Services would agree with the Chairman that a meeting would be webcast. This was then "booked" with the service provider Public-i. the webcast would then proceed with suitable warning notices placed on the agenda for that meeting and inside and outside the meeting room. Additionally, the Chairman would make an announcement at the start of the proceedings.

The Chairman would have the discretion to terminate the webcast as set out in the protocol. Additionally, the Monitoring Officer would have a role in determining whether webcasts were subsequently removed from the archive of available meetings.

It was also noted that as part of the pilot would webcasting of Planning Subcommittee(s) a revised advice sheet had been developed particularly aimed at avoiding defamation at meetings.

Members queried:

(i) What announcement the Chairman would make. It was noted that the statement was set out in full in the protocol.

(ii) Whether the cost in future years would be the same. In reply S Hill indicated that the contract would conclude in August 2007 unless extended and would be subject to further negotiations.

(iii) How long webcasts would be stored and who owned the intellectual property. It was noted that webcasts were stored for a period of six months on the public-i server and then returned to the Council. Officers agreed to review intellectual property issues.

Agreed:

(1) That the progress report on the Webcasting Pilot be noted;

(2) That the proposed protocol on the Webcasting system be adopted;

(3) That the proposed measures to be introduced for planning meetings be

agreed; and

(4) That the Panel receive an evaluation of the pilot at the Panel meeting on 12 December 2006 with view to considering options for any continuation of the webcasting contract for further periods.

Members were also invited into the chamber at the conclusion of the meeting for a demonstration of the webcast system.

6. REPLACEMENT OF THE LOCAL TAXATION AND BENEFITS ICT SYSTEM

The Panel received a draft report to the Cabinet on proposals for the replacement of the Local Taxation and Benefits ICT System. B Palmer reported that the agreed Corporate ICT Strategy required the systems replacement. The current system did not meet Government requirements and Epping Forest was now the only English authority using the software.

The existing contract expired in 2008 and officers were now actively considering its replacement using Catalist, a catalogue based procurement scheme that had been originally established in 1997 to provide public sector organisations with a simplified means of procuring a wide range of ICT services from a variety of providers. This system was managed by the Office of Government Commerce. This process would provide a quicker and more efficient way of procuring a system than traditional tender processes.

It was noted that it was proposed to utilise £240,000 of IEG Grant Budgets to assist in the procurement of the new system whose cost was thought to be in the region of £800,000. Following the 'tendering' process through Catalist it was proposed to report further to members on the award of the contract.

Members queried:

(i) Whether there was a 'value' to the current system and if so, could it be sold on? It was noted that the Council had a specific licence agreement for a fixed term for the current system and this could not be sold on.

(ii) Was this therefore a complete replacement? Yes and included software procurement, data conversion, staff training and purchase of hardware.

(iii) Did Catalist provide quotes? It was noted that there were only four main providers of such systems but that they worked through a number of companies to provide solutions. There were 12 such companies in this category on Catalist.

Agreed:

That the following recommendations to Cabinet be supported:

(1) That, in accordance with the Corporate ICT Strategy, an in principal decision is made to replace the ICT system for the Local Taxation and Benefits service;

(2) That, quotations be obtained using the Catalist system that is managed by the Office of Government Commerce; and

(3) That a detailed report covering the financial implications of replacing the ICT system is submitted to Cabinet after quotations have been obtained.

7. E-GOVERNMENT

The Panel noted that the Government e-Government initiative had originally commenced in October 2001. The main focus for this initiative was to use modern information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the quality, efficiency and accessibility of public services.

Central Government, in order to monitor progress with the e-Government initiative and assess the required level of capital grants to support it, had placed a duty on all local authorities to produce an annual IEG Government return that set the Council's current status for electronically enabling 100% of all interactions with the Public by March 2006. The return process was completed electronically online in a prescribed format.

The IEG Government return had in the past been the mechanism that allowed all local authorities to gain access to Central Government funding by way of the IEG capital grant. These grants and the e-Government initiative had now come to an end at the end of the 2005/6 financial year and the Council would not be required to submit any further IEG returns. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was now using the IEG6 return as a key reference document in the audit process for assessing how related grant funding had been used.

The two major elements of the IEG return were the Best Value Performance Indicator 157 (percentage of e-enabled interactions) The number of interactions now measured under BVPI157 totaled 550.

The Council had, as of the 31st March 2006, electronically enabled 98% of these interactions. The remaining 2% (13 interactions) that remained outstanding were being considered for enabling by the service areas responsible for delivery.

The second major element of monitoring was the "Priority Service Outcomes" for e-Government. This was a list of some 78 e-Government priorities that were focused on direct outcomes. This list set out how Central Government saw e-Government being implemented in Local Authorities.

This list was broken down into 3 categories; Required, Good and Excellent. The DCLG expected Local Authorities to deliver all the "required" and "good" categories by December 2005. The Council had made good progress in addressing many of these priority outcomes. However, with the e-Government initiative coming to end it was unclear if any further monitoring of priority outcomes would be undertaken by central government.

The Panel noted the current IEG6 Government return which included the Councils current progress with "Priority Service Outcomes" and the BVPI 157 performance indicator.

Transformational Government

In November 2005 the Cabinet Office had published a report entitled 'Transformational Government (TG) enabled by Technology' (previously circulated). Transformational government was effectively about transforming public services as citizens received them and demonstrating how technology could improve the corporate services of government so more resources could be released to deliver 'frontline' services. This central government vision was almost identical to the e-

Government vision introduced 4 years ago. However the focus had changed from introducing new technology, to using the now established technology to deliver a real improvement of both service delivery and the efficiency of administrating the whole organisation. Also, there was clear message within the strategy that the real benefits would only be achieved through more joint delivery of services and the use of other service providers such as voluntary 'third sector' services.

In March 2006 the Government had also published the implementation plan to support the TG report. The plan included a timetable for various actions to be undertaken by central government departments as well as other public bodies including Local Government. Although at this stage it was unclear what the direct impact this would have on District Councils, it was clear that the TG agenda would have direct links to the Local Government White Paper due for publication in the autumn.

To support the main service improvement aims of TG the DCLG had been working closely with the IDeA to produce a set of Local Government e-Service Delivery Standards (NeSDS). The DCLG and IDeA believed that any Local Authority that was able reach the 'excellent level' defined in the NeSDS would have taken their organisation through a 'transformation programme' to achieve it and would be ready to engage fully with the TG agenda.

The first draft of the NeSDS's had now been published and was being considered by the Council's Website Development Board (Officer group) that reported to the Management Board. The date for the final version of these standards had not yet been confirmed. The Head of ICT would report back to the panel with an impact assessment of adopting these standards after the final versions were published.

Agreed:

That the following be noted:

- (i) submission of the IEG 6 Government Return to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on 10th April 2006;
- (ii) the Council's progress in delivering the requirements of the priority service outcomes and the BVPI 157 as reported in the IEG return;
- (iii) the outstanding 'priority service outcome' and BVPI indicators;
- (iv) the Council's e-Government Strategy; and
- (v) the introduction from Central Government of the National e-Service Delivery Standards and the introduction of the recently announced "Transformational Government" strategy.

8. CORPORATE CONTACT CENTRE - PROGRESS REPORT

Councillor Metcalfe reported that the Customer Services Transformational Programme Board would be meeting on 16 August 2006 to consider actions following consideration of the main report by the Cabinet. Specifically the Board would be looking the staffing implications of the programme, the Boards response to issues raised previously by the Panel, the new timescale for the programme and proposals for identifying the individual savings aspects and programme 'chunks'.

The Panel asked that the portfolio holder provide written reports for future meetings.

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

None for report

10. FUTURE MEETINGS

Noted that the next scheduled meeting was now scheduled for 27 November 2006 at 7.30 p.m. in Committee Room 1.

Agenda Item 5

Draft Terms of Reference – Standing Panel

Title: Customer Services and ICT		
Status: Standing Panel		
Terms of Reference:		
<p>(1) *To consider the introduction of a Customer Services Transformation Programme (CSTP) on behalf of the Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT Portfolio Holder and to make any resulting recommendations to the Portfolio Holder or Cabinet as appropriate.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">a) To consider the specific ICT role within the CSTP and agree which elements of this project should be monitored and reviewed by other O&S panels/committee.</p> <p>*The Portfolio Holder has agreed to temporarily suspend the CSTP in order for the Council to give the appropriate and necessary resource priority to the waste management project. Therefore the panel, as an interim measure, will consider feedback from the **Customers Services Working Group to ensure that the panel is kept up to date on current customer service activities across all service areas.</p> <p>(2) To consider the business case and technical proposals for all major ICT systems on behalf of the Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT Portfolio Holder prior to consideration by Cabinet.</p> <p>(3) To monitor and review progress on the implementation of all major ICT systems.</p> <p>(4) To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Council and the Cabinet with recommendations on matters allocated to the Panel.</p> <p>** This is a new Officer group that is due to be established during December 2006</p>		
Work Programme 2006/7		
Item	Priority	Report Deadline
1. Review of the Web-casting system	High	November 2006
2. To consider the Revenues and Benefits ICT system.	High	November 2006
3. To consider the Microsoft Enterprise software arrangements.	Medium	February 2007
4. To consider the desktop software deployment strategy	Medium	February 2007
5. To consider feedback from the officer based Customer Services Working Group	Medium	April 2007
Chairman: Councillor Maggie McEwen		

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**Report to Customer Services and
ICT Standing Panel
Date of meeting: 27 November 2006**

SCRUTINY



**Portfolio: Customer Services, Media,
Communications & ICT**

Subject: Webcasting Pilot – Initial Report

Officer contact for further information: Simon Hill – Research and Democratic Services

Committee Secretary: S Hill (Ext 4249)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the report of the initial webcasting pilot period be noted and endorsed;
- (2) That the Panel express their views on the proposals for extension of the existing pilot contract period until 31 March 2008 funded by IEG revenue budgets as an interim measure;
- (3) That subject to recommendation (2) above, 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 subject to recommendation (2) above, 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 Panel express their views on potential uses of the system proposed within the report.

Report:

Introduction

1. On 4 September 2006 the Council commenced a one year webcasting pilot. The project currently runs until 3 August 2007, funding being provided by the Government IEG Budgets.

Progress to date

2. Since that date, with help from officers in Research and Democratic Services, the Council has been able to webcast at least one meeting per week and officers envisage continuing this until contract expiry.
3. It was originally hoped that the contract would have started around July 2006 but negotiations and installation took more time to organise. The reasons for this were twofold: Firstly the form of contract demanded by the Council was not the usual form the contractor was

used to and meant that a number of drafts were needed. Secondly officers paid particular attention to the installation of the system in the Chamber. Our Chamber is of a high quality and much effort was taken to avoid any surface mounted wiring. In the event contracts and installation were not completed until early August 2006. Officer training was completed and testing took place from 4 September with a 'hard' launch beginning with the full Council meeting. Webcast operational duties have been split between Committee Officers and Public Relations on an agreed rotational plan of about one webcast per week.

4. The introduction of the system has gone very smoothly with public and member acceptance. The discreet nature of the installation in the Council chamber has aided this. No adverse reaction has been received. The system is leased from a company called Public-i, based in Lewes in Sussex. Their service includes the hosting of the system thus minimizing the impact the system has on the Council's IT resources. At each meeting help and monitoring is undertaken by staff at Public-i and the operator has messenger contact with them during the meeting which means that the continued streaming of the webcast can be monitored.

5. No problems have been encountered with the technical elements of the webcasting except the use of the microphone system in the chamber. At some meetings audio has not been able to be heard as members have forgotten to switch on their microphones before speaking. The Cabinet has already considered the Civic Office planned maintenance budgets for next year that contains a bid for the replacement of the system. If the microphone system bid was unsuccessful and the system were to fail obviously webcasting would stop. The success of continued webcasting is very much linked to the acceptance of the Capital bid for 2007/8. The potential for a new system may also give the opportunity for officers to be able to override microphones at the top desk. Officers are seeking a view from members as to whether they should request inclusion of the bid in the final Capital Programme for next year.

Statistical Analysis

6. To date we have completed 15 webcasts. Analysis of visits (i.e. viewers) is shown at Annex 1. The most popular meeting was the full Council meeting in September that had both the most live and archived viewers. Cabinet meetings are also popular. In the two months for which data is available over 1300 visits have been made to the microsite. Up to date figures will be presented at the meeting.

7. Members can be assured that these figures are not as a result of officers watching and re-watching webcasts. Access to this system is restricted internally. Officers have also received details from the provider which show that levels of webcast viewing is comparable here to that of a number of London Boroughs; County Council's and greater than neighbouring Districts.

Publicity

8. The scheme has been publicised in a number of ways. Press releases have been issued to keep local reporters apprised of the pilot, an article has appeared in the Forester magazine, as part of the project the Council officers have also developed a website page giving information about the system and have configured the webcasting microsite for the system. The Leader has talked about the opening up of the democratic process in a positive way that reflects well on the Council. Local coverage in the press has been broadly positive. (see attached extracts at Annex 2). Comments mainly relate to the cost of the system.

Proposal for future Projects

9. The interest in webcasts is directly linked to the items on the agenda. This is borne out by the viewing figures. Webcasting of Area Planning meetings is useful but could the Council webcasting resources be better employed? The driver needs to be the expected content of the meeting. Officers have attempted latterly to choose those meetings where interesting or contested items are to be discussed. Additionally with help from public relations we are seeking

to integrate the webcasting with our regular communications and issues. A good example of this is the recent presentation to Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the North East London SHA which has been integrated into a press release and website pages to provide people with the opportunity of viewing a debate linked to the issue. PR has also worked with the Waltham Forest PCT to promote our role in the proposed joint review. There is no doubt that webcasting does give the Council the opportunity to address the lack of public awareness of its issues and work, particularly the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny without the filter of local or national media. It also gives the opportunity to provide an archive of evidence to aid the engagement of the public thus encouraging more interaction with the community. The visual media also gives the opportunity of giving access to council issues where there is significant public interest but not access to the meetings in the chamber. An example might be state of the district debates, debates about the budget or East of England Plan.

10. There are a number of types of webcasts that officers wish to trial. These include:

(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 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.

11. Obviously, much of these proposals will require officer time to bring together but the technical infrastructure now exists to enable them to happen.

Proposals for Evaluation

12. Consistent with the officer view that it is still premature to fully evaluate the systems success or otherwise and together with the ideas for other uses it is proposed that a formal evaluation should wait until after the election period i.e. June 2007. The benefit of this approach is that we will have a better idea of take up following a greater period of integration with the Council's work. It is proposed to ensure that during the intervening period both quantitative and qualitative information is kept to give the Panel the fullest picture of the pilot period. Officers would also have the opportunity to consider the options for the future that might include a formal tender process.

Options for Future Contracts

13. There are three main options available to members:

Option One – decide not to extend the current contract and/or call a halt to the pilot system now

14. Members could take the view that the pilot should either end now or at the contract termination date in August next year. There is no contractual commitment past that date.

Option Two – seek funding for next year for a longer period; or

15. Members could seek funding for say a further three-year period that could be negotiated with the current supplier. Given the current uncertainty in the Council's overall budget position next year any bid would need to be agreed by Cabinet and then be considered against all bids

for next year.

Option Three – seek to extend the pilot in the short term to allow full evaluation

16. This option would give officers time to provide a fuller evaluation in the new municipal year. It is suggested that the current scheme could be extended until 31 March 2008 (i.e. a period of eight months), which would bring any renewal in line with the Council's financial year and other IT project renewal dates. As part of the provisions made by members under the IEG scheme provision was made by the Council to ensure the funding of ongoing revenue requirements of those systems paid for by IEG grant. The Webcasting system is one of those systems.

17. It is anticipated that this revenue budget could fund the extension for the eight month period (i.e. a short term period) giving the Council enough time to extend the contract or source an alternative supplier. Alternatively, if members considered that the pilot should not be extended (past August 2007), on receiving the full evaluation no additional monies would have been set aside in the budget for 2007/08 and ultimately not called on.

Reason for decision:

18. The proposed solution has the benefit of giving more time for evaluation without recourse at this stage to seeking a growth bid.

Options considered and rejected:

19. Members could recommend to Cabinet to adopt option One or Two but this is thought premature given the short period of the pilot period that has elapsed.

Consultation undertaken:

20. The Portfolio Holder for ICT and Communications has been consulted on this report and is agreeable to the proposals.

Resource implications:

Budget provision:

Cost of pilot period - £17,000 funded from IEG budget

Cost of proposed extension 3 August 2007 – 31 March 2008 £11,750 funded from IEG

Revenue Budget provision.

Personnel: Existing RDS and PR staff to operate the system. Attendance at evening meetings attracts attendance allowances.

Land: Nil

Community Plan/BVPP reference: No specific reference.

Relevant statutory powers: none

Background papers: Letter of Public-i dated 10 November 2006

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: Webcasting protocol applies to all meetings – previously agreed by members.

Key Decision reference: (if required) none

Activity Summary Sept and Oct 2006

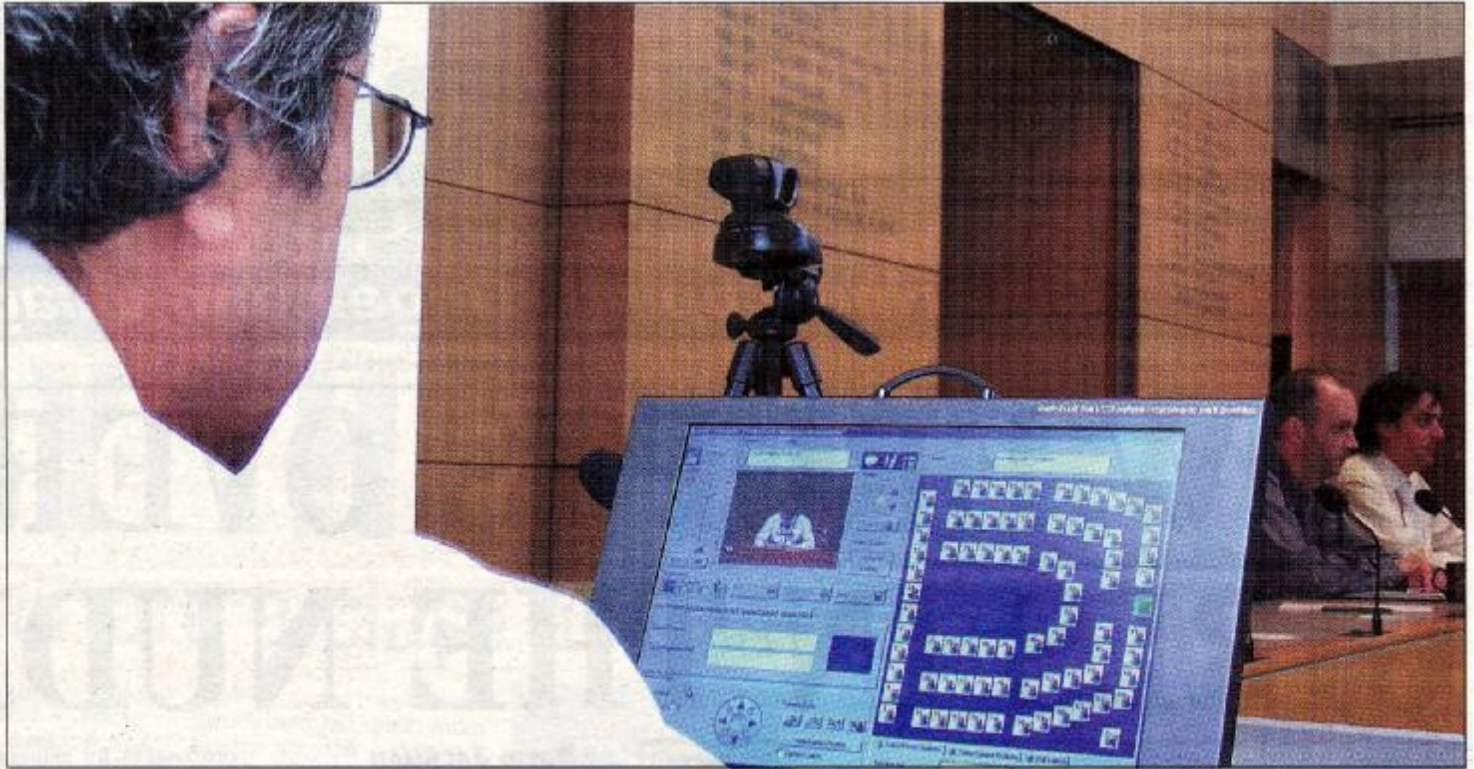
September 2006

	Activity ID	Activity Type	Title	Live Date	Activity	Live	Archive
1	6042	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee D	06 Sep 2006	179	17	162
2	6123	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee B	20 Sep 2006	148	28	120
3	6154	Webcast	Full Council	26 Sep 2006	116	35	81
4	6160	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee C	27 Sep 2006	33	9	24
5	6375	Document	Agenda for Area Plans Sub C - 27-9-2006	26 Sep 2006	3		
6	6296	Weblink	Link to Development Control and Agenda 20 September 2006	20 Sep 2006	1		
Total					480	89	387

October 2006

	Activity ID	Activity Type	Title	Live Date	Activity	Live	Archive
1	6304	Webcast	Cabinet	09 Oct 2006	112	17	95
2	6163	Webcast	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	05 Oct 2006	91	7	84
3	6161	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee D	04 Oct 2006	67	11	56
4	6154	Webcast	Full Council	26 Sep 2006	61	0	61
5	6160	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee C	27 Sep 2006	49	0	49
6	6164	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee B	18 Oct 2006	41	5	36
7	6227	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee C	25 Oct 2006	40	11	29
8	6042	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee D	06 Sep 2006	22	0	22
9	6123	Webcast	Area Planning Subcommittee B	20 Sep 2006	13	0	13
10	6565	Survey	Webcasting Survey	16 Oct 2006	13		
Total					509	51	445

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COMING SOON: Democratic services officer Adrian Hendry with the mobile unit which will be used to broadcast council meetings held at venues away from the Civic Offices, Epping (c)

Democracy at any cost?

by **DENISE SNAPE**



READY TO RECORD: One of the webcast cameras (c)

COUNCIL tax payers have questioned the £17,000 price tag for a new "democratic" scheme that is broadcasting district council meetings direct from the Civic Offices and other meeting venues across the district into people's homes via the internet.

The council's one-year pilot web-casting system, which was launched with the 'screening' of the area plans committee at the Civic Offices, Epping, last night, is aimed at "increasing public access to its democratic process".

Some people question the cost while others believe it is a good idea.

● Jenny Scott, 22, of Thornwood Road, Epping, said: "It's a good idea, but I wouldn't be interested. The money should go to more deserving things."

● Rod White, of St John's Road, Epping, said: "The council always spends money on things we don't need. I wouldn't use it."

● Full-time mum Esther Smith, who moved to the area a year ago, said the system would make it much easier to catch up on local issues: "I'm concerned about how the BNP councillors have got on. I think this is a good idea, you'll be able to see what happened even though you can't always get there."

● Kim Baxter-Larsky, 49, from

Waltham Abbey, does not believe the scheme is money well spent. She said: "I wouldn't bother, it wouldn't change the outcome anyway. Although I can see why people would use it."

● Student Tom Payne, 21, from Epping, said: "It's a good idea but young people don't care, and it could be a lot cheaper."

● Mark Adams, 40, a sponsorship agent from Epping, said: "I would use it. It sounds like a good idea as it would be hassle free."

● Travel agent Jackie Saggars, 50, from North Weald, said: "You can't always get to the meetings, so it's an excellent idea. I think it's money well spent."

djackman@london.newsquest.co.uk



Kim Baxter-Larsky: "I wouldn't bother"



Jackie Saggars: "Money well spent!"



Rod White: "I wouldn't use it"



Mark Adams: "It sounds like a good idea"

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GET the beers in, order the pizzas, draw the curtains, switch on, sit back and enjoy. Guardian editor **David Jackman** watched from home as Epping Forest District Council beamed its first meeting to a potential worldwide audience of millions

Welcome to EFDC TV

IT goes out live and give the potential 58-strong cast time to grow into their roles and for the plots to develop and it could become a thrilling, nail-biting series of dramas.

There are no scripts and all those appearing on our screens should be household names, after all they were elected by their viewers.

Welcome to what could be dubbed EFDC TV.

Last Wednesday's opening episode had the snappy title 'Epping Forest District Council area planning sub-committee D'. It was the first district council meeting to be broadcast live over the internet.

And it was up against stiff competition.

There was a repeat of Open All Hours on BBC One and an episode of Comedy Doubles featuring clips from bygone comedy classics on BBC Two. Viewers

also had the option of Channel Four News, a history programme on Channel Five and Coronation Street on ITV1, as well the miscellany of digital channel options.

But <http://www.eppingforest-dc.public-i.tv/site> was the only place for me.

The channel title is not easy to remember and the viewing not quite as entertaining as the goings-on at the bar in the Rovers Return.

But the latest in 'public service broadcasting' is here for at least for a year while the council runs a £17,000 pilot project webcasting its main committee and council meetings.

There were no opening titles and no catchy theme tune. Instead viewers were greeted with a view of the council chamber and its lettuce-coloured seats as councillors arrived.

And then came the history-

making moment.

The first words will not go down in broadcasting history nor will they become as famous as Sir David Frost's "Hello, good evening and welcome" greeting but just for the record the first webcast words came from committee chairman Peter McMillan. "Okay, I think it's time," he said. "Evening members, and welcome to the members of the public who are here tonight."

And so 'EFDC TV' was launched.

The chamber's web-cameras showed councillors and council officers, each with their names captioned on the screen as they spoke. Members of the public also had starring roles as they were shown speaking for their allocated three minutes.

One planning application was set aside with no debate taking place and just one other application was discussed. It was not



FIRST WORDS: Planning committee chairman Peter McMillan who broadcast the first words on 'EFDC TV' (c)

exactly an edge-of-your-seat thriller.

And that was it.

"And that's the end of the shortest meeting we've ever had", said Mr McMillan, before viewers noticed a brief moment of camera shake and a picture of the chamber floor before the screen went blank.

After 26 minutes - and no commercial breaks - the first episode of EFDC TV was over, perfectly timed, one could think, to avoid a scheduling clash with England's European Championships qualifier against Macedonia on Sky Sports 1.

For those keen to join the 'EFDC TV' experience the next episode is on Wednesday, September 20, when the spin-off 'Epping Forest District Council area planning sub-committee B' will be screened.

And for those who missed last week's episode, or who want to watch their favourite moments again, just log-on to the council website where meetings are archived.

The indexed system allows web users to click on the name of their favourite councillor to see them in action every time they addressed the meeting.

Take a look.

For those of us opting to watch the broadcasts live, will our evenings ever be the same again?



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? A screen shot of the planning committee on air

(c) djackman@london.newsquest.co.uk

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September 21, 2006

Star

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Log on to view local democracy in action

PUBLIC access to local government has entered the digital age in Epping Forest as the district council launches live webcasts of its meetings.

Residents with internet access can now watch debates as they happen or log on later to watch individual items in which they are interested.

Three cameras have been mounted in the council chamber in the Civic Offices and one member of staff will direct them remotely.

Following a successful trial at a planning meeting, the first webcast of a major meeting will be the full council on Tuesday.

Equipment costs for the first year are being met from a £17,000 Government grant, after which councillors will review the service.

Council leader Di Collins (Conservative) said: "People often say that they are out of touch with local government. Webcasting should open up the work of the council for everyone."

To view a webcast, visit www.eppingforest-dc.gov.uk and follow the link.

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Web scheme boosts access to local democracy

Council meetings live into the home

ANYONE who is a fan of political dramas and reality television is in for a real treat.

Last night saw the start of district council meetings being broadcast straight into the homes of internet-savvy residents.

In a £17,000, one-year webcasting pilot scheme, fixed cameras have been installed in the council chamber at the Civic Offices.

Meetings will be broadcast live through the council website.

The scheme went live last night at a full council meeting after a month of practice.

Material can be viewed live at the time of meetings or watched at a later date thanks to an archive feature on the website.

By Alison Jackson

It will be possible to watch meetings up to six months after the event in a scheme designed to increase public access to local democracy.

The leader of Epping Forest District

“Webcasting should open up the work of the council for everyone”

Council, Diana Collins, said: “People often say they are out of touch with local government.

“Attending meetings isn’t usually high on the list of priorities when they settle

down to rest at the end of a hard day. We seem to be remote.

“Webcasting should open up the work of the council for everyone.”

The service also has the benefit of a selection of services that will make the lives of residents easier.

Rather than watch a whole meeting people can just view the items they are interested in.

There is also the opportunity to give the council feedback on the meetings thanks to a link on the website.

Mrs Collins said: “This is a fantastic opportunity for people to find out what really goes on.

“Webcasting will help bring local democracy right into people’s homes.”

A grant from central government covers the initial cost of setting up the system. A review will take place later in the year.

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UFP

www.guardian-series.co.uk

Webcasts are a 'big hit'

by **VICTORIA DURHAM**

EFFORTS to liven up district council meetings are proving a success, it has been claimed.

Live webcasting and a new version of question time have been introduced to full council meetings.

Council leader Di Collins said she hoped the

changes would encourage more people to become involved in council issues.

"It's anything to get them more interested. We're the people they've elected and we really need them to get more involved in what's going on."

At the Tuesday, September 26 council meeting unscheduled oral

questions were taken from councillors for the first time on portfolio holders' reports and anything else they wanted to discuss.

Usually councillors must give prior notice of the questions they want to ask.

Mrs Collins said: "We didn't quite know what we

were going to be discussing but everyone asked very pertinent and sensible questions."

The council was also celebrating the success of its webcasting programme, with 513 viewings in the first month over three meetings. Mrs Collins said the webcast was particularly useful if

people were only interested in hearing about a single agenda item. Viewers can also go back and watch recordings of meetings.

She said she hoped the new measures would "open meetings up so people get used to coming and seeing what's happening".
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