

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Committee **Date:** Thursday, 2 August 2007

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.03 - 9.10 pm

Members Present: Councillors R Morgan (Chairman) K Angold-Stephens (Vice-Chairman) D Bateman, R Church, M Colling, Mrs A Haigh, Mrs H Harding, J Hart and D Kelly

Other Councillors: Councillors S Murray, D Stallan, C Whitbread and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Apologies: Councillors R D'Souza and Mrs P Richardson

Officers Present: D Macnab (Deputy Chief Executive), I Willett (Head of Research and Democratic Services), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and Z Folley (Democratic Services Assistant)

23. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman made a short address to remind all present that the meeting would be broadcast on the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings. The Committee noted the Council's Protocol for Webcasting of Council and Other Meetings.

The Chairman welcomed Derek Macnab to his first Overview and Scrutiny meeting as the lead officer.

24. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute Members for the meeting.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct no declarations of interest were made.

26. WEBCASTING EVALUATION

The Senior Democratic Services Officer took the Committee through a presentation based on his report on the webcasting pilot review. He started off with the history of the pilot, how it emerged from initial discussions in January 2006 through to the installation in the council chamber of the cameras and equipment in July 2006. The first full webcast meeting was full Council in September 2006, which led to an initial report going to the ICT Scrutiny Panel in November 2006. This led to an extension of the pilot that was agreed to last until 31 March 2008.

He then went through the technical aspects of the system including how the system works and who hosted the website. There were some problems experienced, one being members not turning on their microphones and one instance of software failure (fixed and all information fully recovered within two days of the failure).

Currently the webcast box tends to obscure the entrance to the chamber and if it were to be made permanent a more discreet position would have to be found. Also, the microphone system of the Chamber would need to be updated and renewed, as it is currently inadequate to the task.

He explained how outside webcasts were undertaken and the effort involved in moving the bulky equipment off site. A lighter, portable set of webcasting equipment was available if the council decided to go ahead with the project.

The meeting noted that over fifty webcasts had been undertaken over the last year, including non-meeting events. It was noted that the virtual live attendance was fairly constant, but that archive viewing has increased over time. The top five webcasts viewed were:

1. Celebration of Faith
2. Finance Committee
3. Cabinet in February 2007
4. PCT Consultation event
5. Area Planning Committee South

EFDC is now the most watched Local Government webcaster in England and had fourteen and a half thousand viewers in total over the last twelve month period. To keep on the cutting edge of this medium and to keep the public informed and interested a varied content should be included on the website. The use of webcasting could be extended to other services of the council so that they can produce their own informational features. Major Civic events could be webcast, and outside agencies could be granted access for their meeting if held on Council property. With the setting up of the Youth Council, webcasts could be used to increase public interest, especially among the younger, Internet savvy, generation.

If the Council wished to continue with the scheme then a further report on contract procurement would be required together with the setting of wider objectives for the project. The Cabinet would need to consider the chamber installation, the use of the Committee Rooms, how multimedia could be supported and the possibility of upgrading the microphone system. There was also a need for greater officer awareness of the potential of the system, by way of an officer awareness session. The use of webcasts was also a means whereby the views of the Council could be given directly to the public without going through the filter of the media.

It should be noted that not everyone has access to broadband - webcasting should be used as a complimentary way of communicating with the public and not replacing the current means.

Public-I was established in 2001 in order to develop webcasting solutions specifically for the Local Government Sector. Their funding is provided mainly by means of private shareholders. Due to infrastructure and start up costs they have operated in deficit with the support of the shareholders. But they are now expanding rapidly, both nationally and internationally and their deficit levels are decreasing. The company does not have any debt and have indicated that the operational deficit position should change this year. EFDC's Internal Auditor has looked into the background of Public-I

and has found that they are growing quickly, both nationally and internationally and the economies of scale should keep them competitive.

The report initially stated that there were three options available to the council, they were:

- i) Cease webcasting;
- ii) Seek to tender an new contract; or
- iii) Seek a negotiated contract.

However, since publishing the report a fourth option has presented itself. The Senior Democratic Services Officer had contacted the Essex Procurement Hub who was willing to seek expressions of interest for this contract in various journals from which a further report would be presented to the Cabinet.

It was noted that the recommendation from this meeting would go to the Cabinet in October. The ballpark figure for continuing to webcast would be about £20 to £25k, including the purchase of portable equipment. At present there is no budget for this project.

Questions (Q) and Comments (C) were then sought from members.

Q. How many other councils currently webcast their meetings?

A. Public-I has over 70 councils and this is increasing.

Q. Why was there no growth from March to July in the viewing figures of archived material?

A. During that period we were working towards elections so had fewer meetings.

Q. What were the contractor's reactions to our recording of the Waste Management Contract interviews?

A. There were no complaints; they accepted it as part of the process.

Q. I was not sure about the knife crime film on the website, we are not a TV company, just where should we stop and draw a line under what we put out on the web.

A. The line is moving all the time – five years ago you could not pay your bills on-line. We are not the BBC, but can and should engage the public on what the Council is doing. This should be looked upon as a gentle change in direction in our relationship with the public.

Q. If we do more outside filming, we do need the lighter equipment.

A. Yes we do, but it also depends on how much it would cost.

Q. It would be of value to link in with Secondary and not just Primary schools.

A. The Youth Council is for Secondary schools, and our webcasting of their meetings should encourage them.

Q. There is no way back now; webcasting is what the public expect. We have had good feedback on this from the public. Could Public-I provide a good sound system with backup servicing?

A. It would need to be investigated, but getting value for money is paramount.

Q. Archived webcasts are kept for six months only. Can they be made available for a longer period?

- A. Public-I makes them available for six months, after that they would charge a fee. But information is never lost, they have a copy of all webcasts and a copy of that copy, and so do we.
- C. The audio system in the Council Chamber needs updating, but it is not part of this project, and would be a separate item for the council to address. There is a need for a separate camera to be set up so that it could capture a full face view of someone at the back of the chamber. We need to be careful about the films shown on the site, using college students is a good idea. We can add snippets of film into webcasts to illustrate points made, but we need to be cautious about what we use.
- A. I agree, the microphones are different from webcasting. We do need either an extra camera or to move the existing ones. Inserting films would be useful, for instance when we were bringing out wheeled bins, or got SLM to provide us with a view of the current facilities.
- Q. Who would chose the clips that were inserted?
- A. That would be down to editorial control. As officers, we would promote council policy.
- Q. I could see the gain to have visual images to look at and how it could be helpful at meetings when we know what topics are coming up, especially at full Council meetings.
- A. Council is one of the more popular meetings.
- Q. How did you choose what you took from the on-line consultation?
- A. We did not get a lot of feedback from the on-line survey, so all the responses were reproduced.
- Q. Is there any way of knowing what percentage of your viewing figures are made up of repeat viewers.
- A. These figures are not the number of hits we got, but of the number of viewers. There has been a gradual increase in the viewer base. This month we have had about a thousand viewers, not just a few viewing repeatedly.
- C. You were suggesting officer awareness sessions. Could members attend as well.
- C. It is a great idea to continue taking webcasting to the committee rooms, this opens up the possibility for webcasting O&S Standing and Task and Finish Panels, this would be important for the residents. I hope we could continue with webcasting, but I think it is important we should go out and seek expressions of interest from other companies.
- C. I agree we should look at rival bids, although I know this is a very new area. I recommend that we continue with webcasting.
- C. It is important to get bids.
- C. This morning I hosted a meeting of disabled people from the district – there were problems with access to the building for wheelchair users. They would benefit from council webcasts and so would the majority of elderly people.
- C. We have to get the young people of the district involved and this is a brilliant medium to bring into schools to fire up the young people's enthusiasm. We can put items on DVD and make it available to schools.

- C. I agree, we need to continue to do external events, which means having the portable kit, even if it costs more.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the continuation of Webcasting of Council meetings and events be endorsed and recommended to Cabinet;
- (2) That the Essex Procurement Hub be contacted to seek pre-tender expressions of interest for any future contract; and
- (3) That the report to Cabinet include figures on costs of mobile equipment.

CHAIRMAN