

Webcasting Pilot – Evaluation Report

Epping Forest District Council



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Webcasting Pilot – Evaluation Report July 2007

1. In September 2006 the Council commenced an initial one-year webcasting pilot. Webcasting is the broadcasting of meetings or other content directly onto the Internet, live or previously recorded. This report seeks to evaluate the pilot project and the potential issues for the continuation of the project.

2. The webcasting project ran from early 2006 following an exploratory meeting in January 2006. 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, some of the cabling work was carried by our own contractor to ensure that no wiring was visible in the chamber.

3. The post installation phase began on 3 August 2006. Officer training was completed and testing took place from September 2006 with a 'hard' launch beginning with the full Council meeting in that month.

4. Since that date, with help from officers in Research and Democratic Services, the Council has been able to webcast at least five meetings per month together with other content. Webcast operational duties have been split between Committee Officers and Public Relations on an agreed rota. This has been on a volunteer basis, not as part of regular duties.

5. In November 2006, officers reported to the IT and Customer Services Panel on the initial pilot period. Consistent with the officer view that it was, at that time, still too early to evaluate the success of the system, it was proposed that a formal evaluation should wait until after the election period i.e. June/July 2007. The benefit of this approach was that the Council would have a better idea of take up following a greater period of integration with the Council's work. At that meeting members decided to extend this pilot until 31 March 2008 by using IEG Revenue Budget provision that was otherwise uncommitted during this period.

6. It was further agreed that officer would report further to the Panel on:

- (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;

Implementation and Evaluation of Pilot Period

How the system works

7. The webcasting system comprises a fixed installation of three cameras in the Council Chamber. Images from this system are combined with existing audio from the microphone system in the chamber (Speech reinforcement system) and encoded (compressed and formatted by computer) and then streamed (broadcast) through the Council's network to viewers watching on the Internet. At the same time, the webcast is recorded by the service provider and then made available for repeated viewing after a short period. The 'archived' webcasts also allow the viewer to skip to the part of the webcast they are interested in.

8. The system is leased from a company called Public-i, now based in Hove in Sussex. Their service 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 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 ensured. The annual contract also includes annual service charges, leasing costs and maintenance/fault resolution Service Level Agreement (SLA). Costs of the system are detailed in the costs section.

Technical and Operational Issues

9. 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. No problems have been encountered with the technical elements of the webcasting except:

- (i) The use of the microphone system in the chamber; and
- (ii) A software file failure in April

10. At some meetings audibility has been affected as some members forget to switch on their microphones before speaking. Due to the age of the system (now approaching 20 years) parts are now impossible to source. Additionally the microphone system tends to pick up other extraneous sounds in the chamber. This seems to be caused by the lack of any isolation mounting on the microphones. This is very noticeable when compared to those webcasts where the purchased Bosch microphone system has been used. Audio on these webcasts is significantly better.

11. In April 2007 a file used by the computer to start became corrupted. In line with the Council's contract the webcasting unit was attended by Public-i within two days and replaced. All settings and files were later recovered and there was no loss of data. Two scheduled webcasts were missed during that week.

12. The pilot period has revealed two issues in terms of the Chamber itself. Firstly, the positioning of the current equipment does partially obscure the entrance into the chamber. Following discussions with the supplier it is felt that should the decision to continue be made this equipment would be better either installed permanently rack mounted in the service cabinet in the chamber or the main unit moved to a more appropriate location together with the provision of a permanent work station on the top desk. Secondly, the positioning of the cameras means that people sitting in the bottom of the horseshoe in the Chamber can only be captured in profile view. This could be solved by adding a further camera position near to the top table or by relocating one of the side cameras to this position.

13. The system is not run in-house. The benefit of this approach means 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.

Analysis of Webcasting Events – the pros and cons

14. Over the pilot period officers have attempted to test the functionality of the system and vary content. This issue is explored later in the report. Much help has been received from Steve Mitchell, the Council's Website Officer, who has ensured a great level of integration within the website to webcasts from Council news and content pages. This has involved the insertion of many entry points into webcast content from different website pages and the linking of news

stories to webcast content. This authority has been very successful in its integration of video content.

Meetings of the Authority

15. The pilot scheme has been successful in bringing greater public scrutiny to the work of members of the council. The authority has never sought to record the level of attendance by the public to its meetings. Therefore I have not been able to establish a base line attendance figure for comparison which is unfortunate. There has, however, been a general trend in recent years of lower public attendance at local authority meetings. The project has been successful in increasing awareness in the work of the Council and allowing the public to view meetings that they are interested in their own time.

16. The one area that is the exception to this trend is planning. The likely reason for this is the rights of individuals to address the planning committee introduced in the late nineties which had a positive change in public attendance. No noticeable change in attendances at these meetings has been detected during the pilot period. i.e. people still wish to attend in person when planning matters affect them. The contrary is probably true as planning meetings are amongst the most watched webcasts thus increasing 'virtual attendance'. From those watching it also provides a means for planning professionals to view our meetings.

17. Other reasons for non-attendance by the public can only be speculated about but most of the Council's meetings are held in the evening at a time when people often have other activities and responsibilities. Statistics for the period also reflect a low percentage of people watching live (In the region of 10%). However, many more people use the system to subsequently view our meetings at a time to suit them. The statistics seem to bear this out. Whilst we would wish greater numbers to be watching live, the results show that 'virtual' live attendance has massively grown.

18. The equipment has been used to 'locally webcast' (i.e. not broadcast live but recorded for subsequent viewing) from the Committee Rooms at the Civic Offices. These meetings could be webcast live if the Council's IT data network were extended. This could open up the possibility of having say the Cabinet meeting in the Committee Rooms rather than having the formality of the chamber.

Other Events

19. In early July the Webcasting equipment was used to record the interview process for the Waste Management Contract. Using the equipment in this way obviated the need for an extensive written record of the interviews to be produced. This type of use could be extended where there is no legislative requirement for a written record. A members training course of the revised Code of Conduct for members was webcast in May 2007. This has allowed access to training for District and Parish Councillors who were unable to attend at the time and saved officer time in running repeat sessions.

20. 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 the Council. The PCT were recharged for the event at cost. The event was not effectively publicised by the PCT and therefore attended by very few people. It was also held at a time when the Council's own focus was on the elections. The webcast has been subsequently viewed by over 200 people so can be seen as having reached significantly more people than could have been accommodated at a public meeting here. Although promotion of this event was the responsibility of the PCT, some lessons have been learnt about planning events with third party organisations.

21. Other initiatives currently being pursued include: using the technology to open up proposals for the establishment of a Youth Council for the district; an elections film to encourage voting at future elections (filming for this took place in May 2007); and working with student at the Epping Forest College on a short film on knife crime and other multi-media student projects.

Media Coverage

22. We have received positive press locally about the pilot period. Details of the press coverage are contained at Appendix 1 to this report. The work carried by Public Relations has meant that our media communications have been successfully mixed with webcast content. Good examples of this are media releases linked to content at meetings and projects.

23. More work could be done to raise the Council's profile in a national context particularly given that we have been successful in gaining a good base of viewers. A recent Audit Commission report commended the scheme. Members need to take a decision on the future of the pilot before this is done.

24. Officers see that the main benefit of the system from a public relations point of view is the ability to use visual and direct communication to residents not filtered by the local media. It has an almost immediate availability rather than waiting until Thursday each week. Officers from Research and Democratic Services are proposing to facilitate an officer awareness session on the potential uses of both the webcasting system and the website.

Using the equipment off site

25. Officers have taken the equipment to other locations. Examples include Area Plans Subcommittee 'A' and The Civic Awards. The equipment is bulky and heavy and taking it off site requires three staff and latterly the use of the Council's Emergency vehicle. This is a drawback in the size of the current equipment. A portable version of the webcaster exists has been demonstrated to officers. Whilst smaller in design, any webcast would need two people to set up and record the event.

26. Some success has been achieved by using video cameras to capture content instead of the main webcast unit. Video cameras are often a more viable option for less formal events. Capturing events in this way does mean that an element of editing will be required to ensure that content uploaded to the website is of a good standard. Some further minor investment in software could be required to facilitate this. The Council should consider how multimedia projects can be best supported particularly existing editing equipment.

Other Issues

27. At present officers have to enter the agenda item headers and book meetings using the Public-i Content Management System. It is however anticipated that this information entering will be automated to allow information held on the Council's Committee Management System (COMS) about agenda items to be transferred automatically to the webcasting system.

28. Officers are now beginning to receive requests from the public for copies of recordings of meetings. These requests are considered to be Freedom of Information requests. CD's of the meetings have been sent to those requesting them with a letter asserting copyright indicating that copying or commercial use is not allowed without permission. No charge has been made to date as the cost of the CD's (20 pence) and officer time (10 minutes) is not sufficient to make it cost effective to charge given low volumes being requested. However, were this to change, the authority should have a policy for any charges that meets legislative requirements.

Staffing

29. All of these activities have been undertaken voluntarily by staff in Research and Democratic Services in addition to their existing duties. There has been a very high level of commitment from staff in this section and support from colleagues in ICT and Environmental Services to make sure that the pilot has been successful. It is a good example of a multi-service project. If the project is to continue staff responsibilities for the service should be formally integrated into job descriptions as necessary.

Public-i Financial Position

30. Public-i was established in 2001 in order to develop webcasting solutions specifically for the Local Government sector. They operate a quality management system (QMS), certificated to ISO9001: 2000 standards. Significant funding for the company is provided by means of private share holders. Due to the infrastructure and start-up costs they have operated in deficit with the support of these share holders. Significant increases in client numbers in the last one-two years mean that deficit levels are decreasing. The company does not have any debt and have indicated that the operational deficit position should change this year. Officers consider that given the level of contract likely, the company will be able to provide the services proposed if selected.

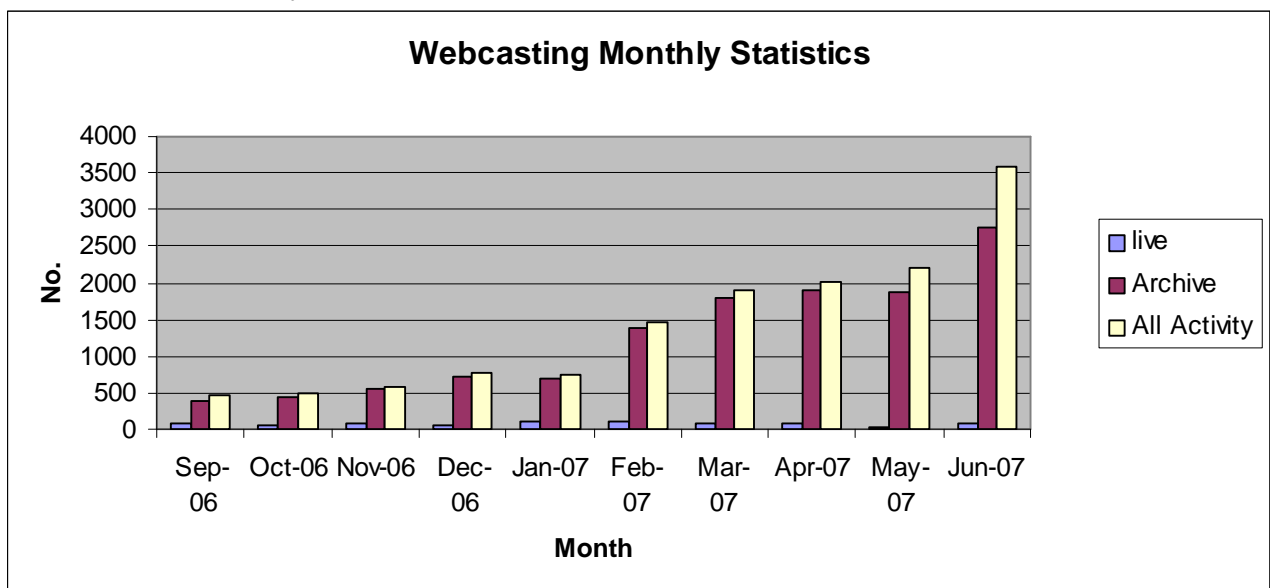
Qualitative and quantitative data for the initial period September 2006 – June 2007

Viewing figures

31. To date (September 2006 – June 2007) the webcasts have been viewed 12,489 times (internal percentage > 5%). Officers have, in addition to webcasts of meetings in the Chamber (number:50), webcast the Celebration of Faith Service, Civic Awards, Plans A remotely at Loughton, PCT Consultation event, hosted Arts Multimedia projects (in conjunction with Leisure Services), Code of Conduct Training, Finance Cabinet Committee from the Committee Rooms, and hosted a special short programme on Energy Efficiency for World Environment Day.

32. Viewing figures for May 2007 placed EFDC first of UK authorities using the public-i webcast system. By the end of the pilot period it is thought that over 14,000 views would have been achieved.

33. A breakdown by month is shown below:



Actual Data:

	Live	Archive	All Activity
Sep-06	89	387	480
Oct-06	51	445	509
Nov-06	76	539	569
Dec-06	54	717	760
Jan-07	121	690	737
Feb-07	107	1383	1467
Mar-07	73	1794	1909
Apr-07	72	1903	2005
May-07	36	1872	2209
Jun-07	83	2759	3596
Totals	762	12489	14241

34. Interestingly, viewing figures for live views remains quite static each month and has only varied significantly during the budget-making period in January. Archive activity has increased particularly post January when officers began webcasting of other types of events. All activity includes document views (for instance linked presentations and agenda documents) and has increased steadily with webcast views.

Cost of meetings and webcasting

35. The funding for the initial pilot period was provided from Government IEG funds. In the first year the costs are:

First year – £17,000

Subsequent period to 31 March 2007 - £11,300

36. The breakdown of the cost of the system is as follows:

Item	£
Cost of lease equipment, monitoring and hosting of up to 15 hours webcasting per month for period August 2006-August 2007, provision and maintenance of council microsite per hour of webcasting:	100.00
Cost of staff per hour*:	23.00
Total costs per hour:	123.00
Notional costs per visit **	1.30

* assumed two hour average meeting.

** assumed 14,000 visits in pilot year

37. A recent study¹ into the democratic cost of meetings found that in a comparative District Council (Waverley) that when all costs related to meetings were considered it cost over £3,800 per hour to hold.

¹ e-Participate Project Evaluation: Webcasting by Local Authorities can be found at:
http://www.eparticipate.org/Repository/eparticipate_Validation-Evaluation_Report_2006.pdf

Consultation

38. Throughout the pilot period an on-line consultation has been carried out. The survey icon has been located on each webcast main page and referenced on our site. The results are shown at Appendix 2. In essence people liked the ability to witness the live debate rather than relying on the subsequent minutes of a meeting. Member and Officer views of the process are also detailed in Appendix 3. It should be noted that during the pilot period access by officers has been restricted to Service Head and above. A theme running through all the comments seems to be the opening up of the Council to external scrutiny and the technical issue about microphones previously stated. Otherwise comments seem overwhelmingly positive.

Options for the future of the scheme post March 2008

39. The viewing figures appear to indicate that public interest exists in continuing webcasting into next year subject to budgetary considerations. From 1 April 2008 the Councils options are:

- (1) Cease webcasting; or
- (2) Seek to tender a new contract from 31 March 2008; or
- (3) Seek a negotiated contract with the current supplier.

Option 1 – Cease Webcasting

40. This option has no further resource implication save some making good to surfaces in the Council chamber. The equipment is leased and would therefore be removed by Public-i. References to the service would be removed from the website. If this were to be the option chosen, an early decision should be made to allow the service to be withdrawn in a planned way.

Option 2 - Seek to tender a new contract

41. The Council could choose to test the current market by means of a tender process. The difficulty with a tendering procedure may be finding other companies that can provide a service in a niche market. Other providers do exist but tend to be providers to very few sites and not comparable in terms of service provision. 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.

42. A project team would need to be set up to oversee the tender process which, of necessity would need to run alongside the bid for further funding that would be required. The Council could still decide not to accept any tender. Another possibility could be that this tender work is undertaken and ultimately not funded by the Council next year. Timescales for this process are tight but achievable. The Council would use the Essex Procurement Hub (EPH) to develop a framework agreement that could provide a basis of new contracts across the County.

Option 3 - Seek a negotiated contract

43. Contract Standing Orders allow for a negotiated contract when “the subject matter of the contract is of such a specialised nature that no advantage would accrue by inviting competitive tenders”². However, without an assessment of the market by way of tender or seeking expressions of interest it is difficult to assess whether other viable suppliers will present themselves. Further advice on this issue is being sought from the EPH.

44. Public-i do have more than 70 sites and proven track record of service provision to the council. If a negotiated tender were to be contemplated, future requirements for the system would include:

² Contract Standing Order C10 (1)(b) applies

- (a) a 'out-hosted' solution – this means that we would not need ICT to support the system either through direct management/support or server infrastructure.
- (b) a permanent installation in the Chamber together with more portable equipment for other locations.
- (c) webcasting software developments to be agreed and included in the contract.
- (d) a scaleable framework contract, which would allow increases in content in the future.

Conclusions

General

45. Officers' view is that Public-i has provided a good standard of service to the Council. Fault resolution has been very good. The company seems responsive to ideas for improvement and has a clear roadmap for future improvements to the product. As a company, they are expanding quite quickly with a wide variety of webcast clients both nationally and internationally. The software and hardware have proven to be robust. They remain the main market leader in the supply of web casting facilities to local authorities.

46. The pilot period indicates that there is a good level of interest in the workings of the Council and in viewing multimedia content through our website. However, the Council could seek to exploit the technology more widely as a means of communication. This system should be a means of thinking creatively about how EFDC communicate and consult with the public. As an example, currently none of the consultations proposed under our plan include web based multimedia communication processes. This could mean that existing processes may need to be reviewed and modified.

47. That a further report should be made on tendering/negotiation proposals together with the overall objectives for the project if it becomes a permanent feature.

48. Using a mix of content generates greater interest from the public than just webcasts of meetings alone. The public interest in multimedia and its presence on our homepage are linked to the number of visits the system gets. Our work with Arts and Environmental Services is an example of this.

49. There seems to be good public interest in the system although live viewing remains quite static. Further promotion in advance may increase live views but the authority's meetings are competing with other activities in the evening.

50. If the pilot period is to continue past 31 March 2007 the Project Board should consider:

- (i) permanent or other alternatives for installation in the Chamber together with more portable equipment for other locations as part of any new contract.
- (ii) network extensions to the Committee Rooms to allow live webcasting from those rooms.
- (iii) how multimedia work can be supported by the authority and formally recognised within staff responsibilities.

51. The audio system within the Chamber requires replacement or substantial upgrading. This should be included in the Council's Planned Maintenance Budget for 2008/09.

52. That an 'out-hosted' solution (i.e. one run by the service provider) is crucial as it means that the Council would not need ICT to support the system either through direct management/support or costly server infrastructure.

53. That Research and Democratic Services facilitate an officer awareness session on the potential uses of both the webcasting system and the website.

Recommendations:

- (1) To consider the conclusions of the report of the Pilot period, namely:
 - (i) the sustained and growing interest in the webcasting service;
 - (ii) how could the Council seek to exploit the technology more widely as a means of communication;
 - (iii) the success of using the system to promote non-meeting content
 - (iv) the need for multimedia work within the authority to be supported and recognised within officer responsibilities;
 - (v) that subject to option 2 or 3 being chosen further work is required to the Council Chamber microphone system and to facilitate more permanent use from both the chamber and the committee rooms;
 - (vi) that subject to option 2 or 3 being chosen to pursue an 'out-hosted' service on cost and resource grounds; and
 - (vii) the need for a officer awareness session to demonstrate the potential of the system;
- (2) To recommend to Cabinet one of the three options for the future set out in the report, namely:
 - (i) Cease webcasting with effect from 31 March 2008; or
 - (ii) Seek to tender a new contract from 31 March 2008; or
 - (iii) Seek a negotiated contract with the current supplier subject to Contract Standing Order conditions being met.
- (3) To consider any further recommendations to be made to the Cabinet arising from the report.

Appendix 1 Media Coverage

Forward Plan

If you would like to know what major decisions are coming forward for debate at Cabinet and Council meetings over the next six months, you can see a full list by logging on to www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk and following the links to 'Local Democracy' and 'Plans'.

Councillor Mrs Diana Collins Leader of Epping Forest District Council said: "Items may be added to or removed from the list as circumstances change but the Forward Plan still provides a very good route map for the major decisions the Council and Cabinet need to take in the next few months. You can then find out much more information about individual items by

downloading the appropriate agenda from the website. Agenda are usually published at least five working days before the scheduled meeting."

Councillor Mrs Collins continued: "Most items are discussed in public and residents are most welcome to listen to the debate from the Council Chamber's Public Gallery. A small number of items have to be held in private session and the agenda should usually tell you if this is likely to be the case."

Webcasting

If you can't come to a meeting but still want to see the debate - check the Council website for news on an initiative designed to bring Council



meetings directly to your PC. The Council will soon begin to pilot webcasts of selected meetings. The service is being funded for 12 months by the Government. Councillors will decide whether to continue funding following analysis of

Forester Magazine Autumn 2006

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



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

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

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.

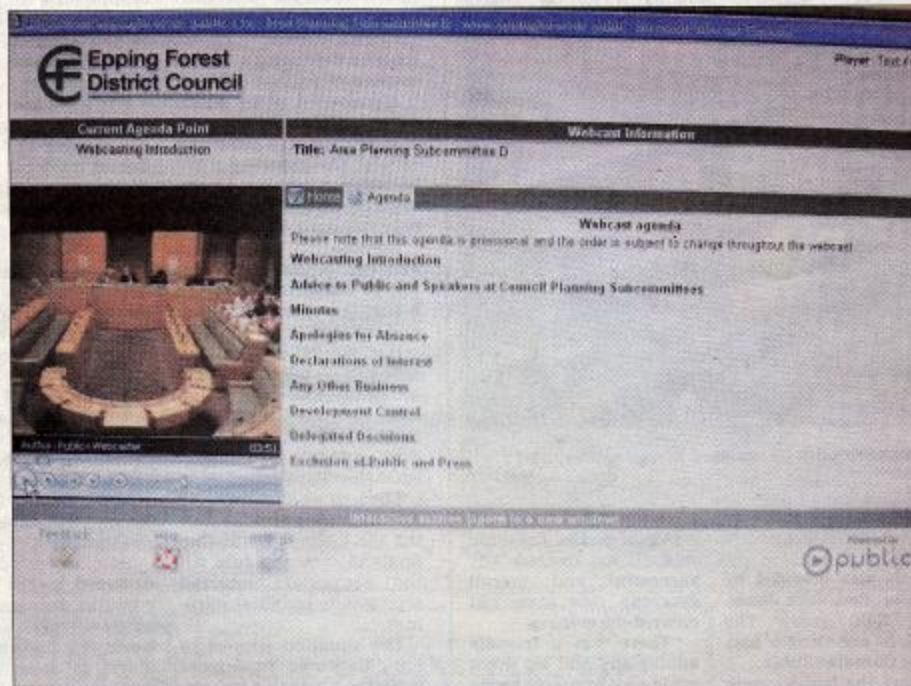
And for those who missed last week's episode, or who want to watch their favourite moments again, just log-on to the council website where meetings are archived.

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.

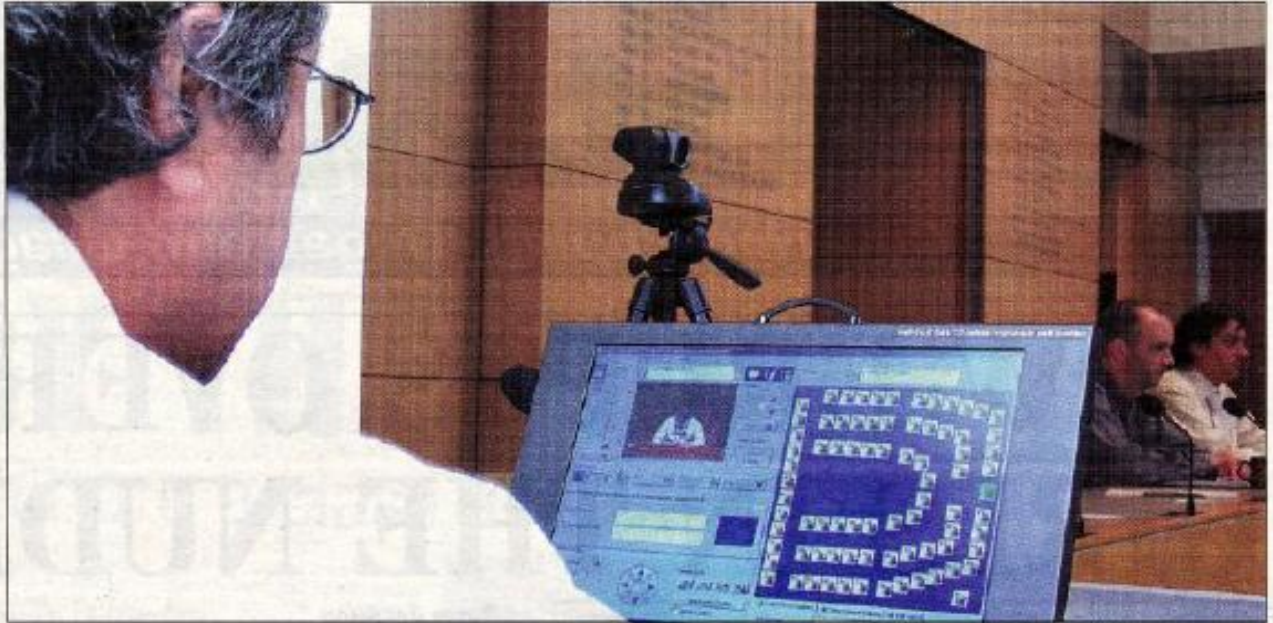
Take a look.

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

djackman@london.newsquest.co.uk



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



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 SHAPE**



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 RNP 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 Siggers, 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 Siggers: "Money well spent!"



Rod White: "I wouldn't use it"



Mark Adams: "It sounds like a good idea"

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.

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.

U5PP

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.

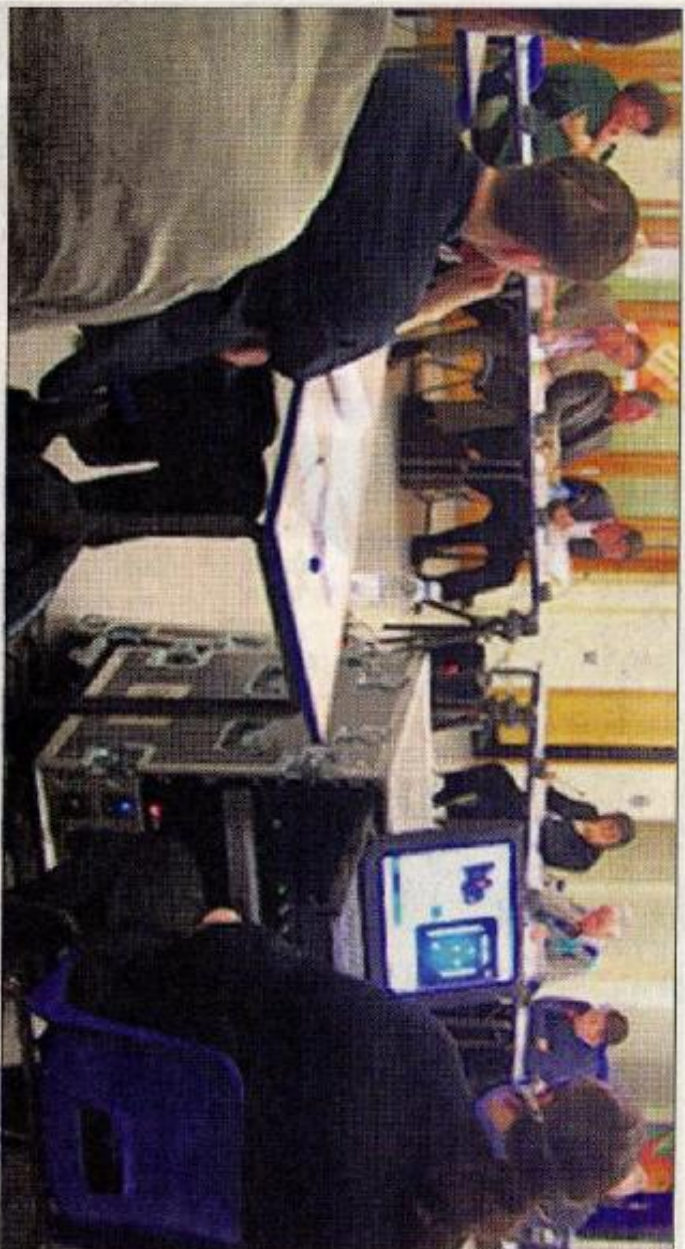
Mrs Collins said: "We didn't quite know what we

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 views 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".
v.durham@london.newswest.co.uk



OUTSIDE BROADCAST: Equipment was brought in to record the goings-on at the area plans sub-committee held at Rodling Valley High School, Loughton

Breaking news as council goes webcast

COUNCIL officers have undertaken the first webcast of a council meeting at a venue away from the Civic Offices, Epping.

The last meeting of the area plans sub-committee which meets at Rodling

Valley High School, Loughton, was recorded and later available for viewing on the council's website - www.eppingfor.eside.gov.uk. The special mobile video unit was set up by a team of officers led by senior demo-

cratic services officer Simon Hill who was assisted by public relations officer Steve Mitchell. Unlike meetings at the Civic Offices that can be viewed live, remote webcasts are dependent on high-quality Internet connections. The sub-committee was recorded onto DVD and uploaded to the website early the next morning. The council hopes to provide live remote webcasts in the New Year.

Webcast show is a top watch

By **DAVID JACKMAN**

djackman@london.newsquest.co.uk

WEBCASTS of Epping Forest District Council meetings and civic events are proving so popular that the authority is currently the second most popular of the 70-plus councils in the country which operates a webcasting service.

Only the London borough of Croydon has seen more visits to its webcasting broadcasts out of all the local authorities that use Public-1, the council's webcast provider, according to the viewing figures for April.

Last month figures for the district council's webcasts, which are accessible via the council website www.epping-forestdc.gov.uk, show they were visited by 1,539 viewers.

More than 1,000 people have watched the webcast of the Celebration of Faith Civic Service held at Theydon Bois Village Hall, while other 'outside broadcasts' have included the civic awards presentations at the Prince Regent Hotel, Woodford Bridge, and the My Place Arts Project.

Since its launch, when only

meetings held in the council chamber at the Civic Offices were broadcast, web cameras have recorded meetings in committee rooms and planning meetings at Roding Valley High School, Loughton.

They have also been used as part of a Citizenship programme involving schools.

The council's webcast project manager, Simon Hill, is delighted with the response to the webcasting which was launched as a trial initiative last year.

He said: "The 'live' views account for ten per cent of the total, which may not sound a lot but with meetings starting at 7.30pm we're competing with Champions League football and EastEnders! Most of our viewing seems to be done during the day and early evening."

Council leader Di Collins said: "It's very encouraging that we obviously have a lot of people who want to see what is happening."

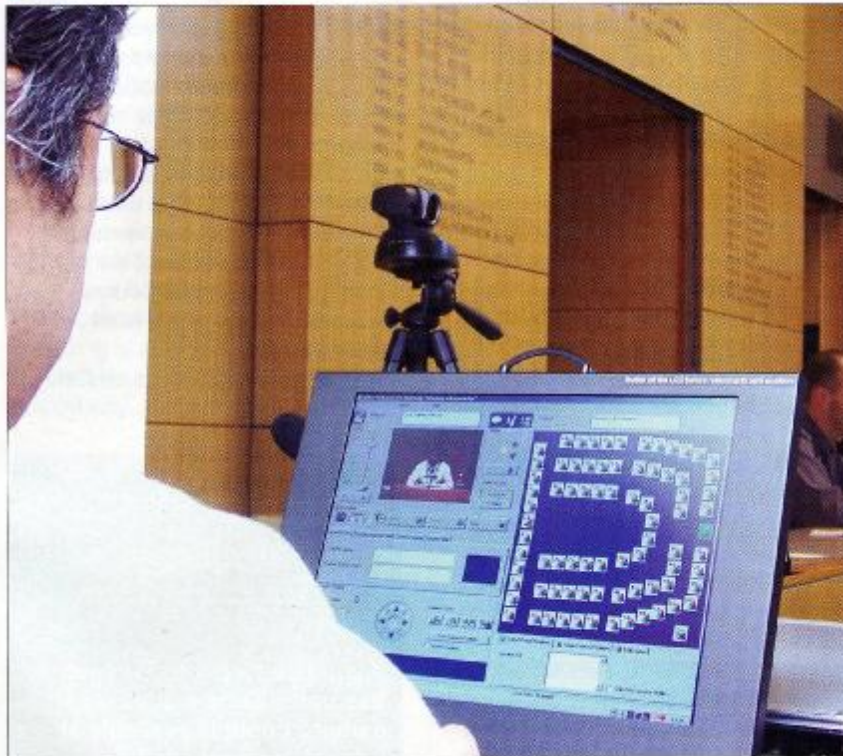
The council is now preparing a short film on the local elections with the aim of raising the profile of the elections and encouraging more and younger people to turn out and vote.

Mr Hill said: "We're trying to webcast the things that we think the public will want to watch."

One of the cameras which focuses on goings-on in the council chamber at the Civic Offices, Epping (c)



▶ Invite the Council into your home



Webcasting the Council's meetings

Council meetings are live on camera now for residents to watch from the comfort of their own homes.

Three small, unobtrusive cameras have been set up in the Council Chamber in Epping and a single member of staff directs the cameras from a computer. Sounds and images are sent over the Internet to a company that converts them for streaming to home computers.

Councillor Mrs Diana Collins Leader of Epping Forest District Council said: "People often say that they are out of touch with Local Government. People lead busy lives and attending evening meetings isn't usually high on the list of priorities when they settle down to rest at the end of a hard day. Webcasting should open up the work of the Council for everyone."

Councillor Stephen Metcalfe Portfolio Holder responsible for webcasting added: "Anyone with a computer connected to the Internet should be able to view meetings as they happen. You can also tell us

what you think of the meetings using the feedback button. Meetings will be archived and remain available for viewing at any time over the following six months. If you don't want to sit through a whole meeting, the system lets you download the specific item you are interested in. If people show an interest in the work of the Council, webcasting could revolutionise our relationship with the public."

To watch a webcast, log on to www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/local_democracy/webcasts.asp



One of the webcams in the Council chamber

00152

Events may go 'live'

by **DAVID JACKMAN**



CIVIC events could be broadcast live over the internet if the district council's webcasting pilot scheme is extended.

Council officers are also looking at using the set-up, which has been showing council meetings live since September, during the May elections and also in partnership with local schools.

A report on the webcasting will be given to the customer services and ICT scrutiny standing panel on Monday when council officers are due to report on the success of the broadcasts to date.

Officers who have been working on the project are looking for councillor approval to see the broadcast contract extended until March 31, 2008.

The only real problem encountered so far is the occasions when councillors forget to switch on their microphones when speaking in the council chamber. A budget item is being drawn up for the system in the Civic Offices chamber to be replaced.

A report to Monday's meeting states: "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. 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."

Fifteen meetings have been broadcast live over the internet with the September full council meeting the most popular in terms of live and archived viewings.

The report adds: "Cabinet meetings are also popular. In the two months for which data is available over 1,300 visits have been made to the microsite."

Council officers now want to trial the system at meetings away from the council chamber, such as the area planning sub-committee meetings held at Roding Valley High School, Loughton. Officers are also investigating the possibility of webcasting the May elections and civic events.

It has also been suggested that the equipment could be used for leader broadcasts and work with schools, including the idea of a webcast live debate.

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WEBCAST VENUE: The chamber at the Civic Offices, Epping, above, from which 15 council meetings have been broadcast live over the internet (c)

RECORDING: One of the webcams which form part of the council's £17,000 webcast pilot scheme (c)

Appendix 2 – Results of Online Consultation

What did you find useful on this microsite?	How do you think that our webcasts or this site could be improved?	Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?	Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?	Please give us any other comments on this pilot project	Are you?
I was able to see how the local councilors had taken local issues and their approach as apposed to non locals who did not have local knowledge of the area. The way Council Officers were bias toward the applicant and objected to any anti points raised.	First I have watched on a local issue and would hold judgment on any change	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	I agree, but not to exclude other forms as not all residents have access to the internet and is not a substitute for face to face and could become too impersonal	A resident of Epping Forest District
accurate information	sound quality	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	a great way to see local democracy at work	A resident of Epping Forest District
this is a great step forward with the capability to share the live debate, much better than a dry reprint of a debate.	There are a lot of background booms and bangs there needs to be some means to reduce the background noise. Are people kicking the mics of the desks.	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	Be good to have edited highlights	A resident of Epping Forest District
All of it.		I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	Excellent facility for the public to see and hear what our representatives are saying and voting for.	A resident of Epping Forest District

What did you find useful on this microsite?	How do you think that our webcasts or this site could be improved?	Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?	Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?	Please give us any other comments on this pilot project	Are you?
The ability to watch the meeting live or a recording. Also you can watch the items that you are interested in. The information about the speakers and who is talking.	It works very well as it is.	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	The sound and video quality was very good.	A resident of Epping Forest District
Easy access to information		I viewed a recorded webcast	No		An officer from another authority
Everything.	I have noticed that when you open a webcast the title of the meeting is displayed but not the date! Can the date be displayed next to the meeting title as will make it much clearer which meeting I am viewing.	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	Love it!	A member of the Council
Er... the webcasting	No sound for me (Safari on a Mac)	I haven't yet viewed a webcast	Yes	Good idea.	A resident of Epping Forest District
Not a lot from this webcast. Found others much more of interest	Members speaking up and remembering that there are microphones to use and also to speak clearly to an invisible audience.	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	Far too much background noise being picked up which sometimes covers what is being said	A resident of Epping Forest District
Excellent web casts but volume not loud enough.		I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes		A resident of Epping Forest District
		I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes		A resident of Epping Forest District

What did you find useful on this microsite?	How do you think that our webcasts or this site could be improved?	Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?	Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?	Please give us any other comments on this pilot project	Are you?
To see how our elected representatives disport themselves in an official capacity To see Ms Millership being grilled and how skillfully she evaded questions Very good pickup of location and people	Very distracting 'booming' probably due to people putting items down on desks close to microphones. Inaccurate captions over picture describing who is being shown. Not switching on of mic; e.g. Cllr XX at 20.50, who was heard mumbling incomprehensibly. By adding sound!!!!!!	I viewed a live webcast	Yes		A resident of Epping Forest District
Context of committee decision.		I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	Works for me.	A member of the public from outside of the district
Watching Democracy in action - these are brilliant	The sound has a lot of bangs and other noises. The councilors sometimes forget to put their microphones which is not helpful	I viewed a live webcast	Yes		A member of the public from outside of the district
The ability to watch the Overview and Scrutiny Committee without having to travel to Epping Forest.	Some of the technical camera work and perhaps make it full screen option.	I viewed a recorded webcast	Yes	A very good effort to improve openness and public information	An officer from another authority
Live webcasts	I cant access past webcasts although I know others can	I viewed a live webcast	Yes		A resident of Epping Forest District
Live webcasts	Better access to past webcasts. I am unable to view them at all	I viewed a live webcast	Yes	Past webcasts don't work for me using either Microsoft Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox	A resident of Epping Forest District

Appendix 3 - Other Consultation Comments:

Members:

Councillor. Brian Sandler:

In response to you request for views on the Council webcasts.

I am aware of many residents who have watched various meetings and they have found them very helpful. I have also used this service, both live and recorded and I am very impressed.

I believe that this is a very worthwhile project for the council to continue with and an excellent way to keep the public informed.

You should be very proud of your achievements.

Councillor Angold Stephens:

Have I viewed webcasts? Yes (parts)

What did I find useful?

Being able to review statement made at meetings I attended or to pick up on Cabinet or O & S issues that I am interested in when I was unable to attend.

How can it be improved?

Some way of quick access to items in a recorded webcast – like a DVD index but not sure if that is possible

Do I view live or recorded? Recorded

Should Council use the Internet to keep public informed? Yes

Should Council continue to fund the project after March 2008? Yes, judging by the number of hits.

Any other comments? none

Councillor Janet Whitehouse:

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts?

Once

What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite?

Housing debate

How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved?

Haven't seen enough to comment

Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?

live

Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?

yes – but I wonder exactly what is behind the question

Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?

probably – but costs need to be considered

Please give us any other comments on this pilot project

I wonder what effect the considerable staff resources needed for this is impacting on other services – e.g. getting minutes written on time.

Officer Views

Derek Macnab
Head of Leisure Services

I fully support the establishment of Web-Casting as a permanent feature. Anything that makes local decision making more open and accountable, clearly has to be a good thing. The benefits for people who experience access issues either through lack of transport or disability should also be stressed.

As we have discussed, there are also exciting opportunities to utilise the technology with respect to the Arts and Young Peoples Citizenship/Advocacy Agendas. In summary 100% support from Leisure Services.

Lizzy Haines B.Sc. Hons.,
Assistant Landscape Officer & Arboriculturist

After I came on your Cttee Writing course I was inspired to log on to the webcast at home. First, I started with a live planning meeting at 7.30, followed this with an archived meeting, followed by a few more. By 10.45pm I had brought myself up to date. I had found it a most interesting and illuminating evening (yes even better than television).

I believe it is a very valuable tool for members of the public. They can actually see democracy in action at a time that suits them. They can see what their Councillors and their council officers are actively doing for them, or not.

I enjoyed watching the cases that I had been involved in and found it very illuminating listening to the Councillors. By the end of an evening's viewing I had a very good idea of the specific areas of interest of some of the Councillors.

I firmly believe that the webcasting should continue. However, I would recommend that its availability is widely publicised. There are many members of the public who want to be better informed but don't have the time to attend planning meetings. Quite a few people I have spoken to don't know the webcast facility exists. The webcast is an ideal opportunity to update oneself on what is going on. It illustrates how open and democratic EFDC is.

Sorry I didn't use your pro forma.

Name: Alan Hall
Service: Housing

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts? Yes
What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite? The ability to watch archived webcasts and to select the bits of most interest
How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved? A larger screen would be helpful

<p>Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?</p> <p>Recorded</p>
<p>Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?</p> <p>Yes</p>
<p>Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?</p> <p>Yes - definitely</p>
<p>Please give us any other comments on this pilot project</p>

Name: **Nigel Richardson**
Service: **Planning**

<p>Have you viewed the Council's webcasts?</p> <p>Yes</p>
<p>What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite?</p> <p>Accurate recap of what took place at the meeting to answer a complaint</p>
<p>How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved?</p> <p>Volume recording of the meeting</p>
<p>Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?</p> <p>Recorded one.</p>
<p>Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?</p> <p>Yes</p>
<p>Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?</p> <p>Yes</p>
<p>Please give us any other comments on this pilot project</p> <p>Members and Officers could do with presentation training</p>

Name: Jane Boreham
Service: R&DS

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts? Yes
What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite? It is useful to be able to jump to the specific bit you wish to look at, rather than ploughing through the whole lot.
How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved?
Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one? Recorded
Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed? Yes
Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008? Yes
Please give us any other comments on this pilot project It would be helpful to have the equipment 'plumbed in' to save set up time for operators.

Name: KIM DURRANI
Service: ENVIRONMENTAL

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts? YES
What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite? ABILITY TO LISTEN TO DEBATE AND KNOW DECISIONS
How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved? SOUND OR LACK OF IT IS AN ISSUE. I VIEWED ONE CABINET MEETING LAST YEAR WHERE THE MEMBER FORGOT TO SWITCH THE MIC ON. RECENTLY THE INCOSISTENT VOLUME OF SOUND HAS BEEN A PROBLEM.
Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?

LIVE

Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?

YES

Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?

YES, BUT I AM NOT A RESIDENT OF EFDC !

Please give us any other comments on this pilot project

IF BANDWIDTH ON THE NETWORK ALLOWS AND IF THERE ARE MORE THAN ONE CAMERA IN THE CHAMBER THEN VISITORS SHOULD BE GIVEN THE OPTION TO CHAGE VIEWS I.E. LOOK AT THE SPEAKER AT THE TIME AND HAVE A WIDER VIEW OF THE CHAMBER AS WELL.

Name: Gary Woodhall

Service: Democratic Services

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts?

Yes, repeatedly, mainly to confirm details from meetings that I covered as a Comm Sec, or to check my camera work when I am the web caster. Occasionally watch web casts of meetings that I have had no involvement with.

What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite?

Facility to view the most recent web casts without having to trawl through numerous menus.

How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved?

Perhaps we could investigate how to improve the resolution of the web casts, so that we can view them in focus when displayed as full-screen.

Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?

I view web casts live, as I'm there mostly, and watch recorded ones as above.

Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?

Absolutely, the internet is a powerful tool that we have only just begun to utilise.

Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?

Yes. In fact, I think that it is imperative that we do so if we want the public to further engage in local democracy.

Please give us any other comments on this pilot project

I think that it has been successful, our viewing figures are high, and the project should continue.

**Felicity Hall
Arts Officer**

I'm afraid we haven't had a chance to view any of the council webcasts but do want to say that we are very supportive in principle, and think that it is entirely appropriate that the Council utilise technology in this way to ensure accessibility and transparency.

We're also looking forward to collaborating with you in the future as per your discussions with Sonja.

Hope that's helpful

**Name:Melinda Barham
Service:Planning**

Have you viewed the Council's webcasts?

Yes a number of times for Development Control committees

What did you find useful on the webcasting microsite?

1 – I can watch it when I want.

2 – I have other commitments on a Wed eve so can't go to the meetings , by being able to watch them at a later date, I can see how the Councillors react to some of the applications I have been involved with.

How do you think that our webcasts or the website pages site could be improved?

1 – Better clarity for the plans.

2 – Better clarity for the video of who is talking.

(although this could be partly down to the fact that I don't have broadband at home)

Did you view a live webcast or a recorded one?

Recorded

Do you think that the Council should use the internet to keep the public informed?

Yes

Do you think that the Council should continue to fund this project past March 2008?

Yes

Please give us any other comments on this pilot project