Agenda Item No:

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny (Resources)
Date of Meeting:	10th March 2009
Report Title:	Motion to Council: Webcasting
Report By:	Mark Bourne
	Head of ICT Services

Purpose of Report

Council referred the Cabinet decision on webcasting public meetings to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Recommendation(s)

1. **The provision of an accessible Committee Room and its associated audio-visual links from the council chamber should be noted and welcomed.**

2. **A DVD recorder should be introduced into the link to Committee Room 3 and meetings recorded to provide a historical archive.**

3. **Key high-interest issues should be taken from the DVD archive and published to the web by the e-communications team after the meeting.**

4. **The Working Arrangements Group should consider any amendments required to permit the recording and broadcasting of council meetings.**

Reasons for Recommendations

There is a low take-up of viewing real-time broadcasts of county council meetings.

The cost of real-time broadcasting of council meetings is considered too high in the current financial climate.

An affordable alternative will allow us to achieve the principle benefit of the East Sussex County Council webcasting system, namely archived broadcasts, and enable us to guage local interest for the future.

Recording meetings will give Hastings Borough Council a verbatim record that will improve minutes and help deal with factual disputes, erroneous reporting and substantiating any complaints.

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

History

1. Councillor Daniel tabled the following motion to council:

   'Hastings Borough Council believes that it is important that the residents of the Borough are able to engage with the democratic workings of the Council. Following the success of East Sussex County Council in webcasting its meetings, Hastings Borough Council acknowledges the limited capacity of the Town Hall and resolves to investigate the feasibility of webcasting its meetings with the aim of improving public access to the decision making process.'

2. Cabinet responded to this motion on the 5th March 2007 and asked that 'officers be requested to investigate the feasibility of webcasting public meetings, including the costs and benefits of doing so'.

3. A paper was presented to Cabinet on the 5th November 2007 and Cabinet resolved that:

   a. Webcasting public meetings be not proceeded with on the basis that it does not represent value for money within the current financial climate; and

   b. In order to facilitate larger meetings within the Town Hall, officers are requested to investigate the provision of improved communication links from the Council Chamber to an accessible room within the Town Hall.

4. Council of the 19th December 2007 resolved that 'Motion to Council: Webcasting Public Meetings be referred to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.'

Overview and Scrutiny Team and Process

5. A team comprising Cllr. Andrew Cartwright, Cllr. Dominic Sabetian, Cllr. Eve Martin and Mark Bourne was formed to carry out the review.

6. The broad process followed by the review team comprised four key stages:

   a. Review the Cabinet report.

   b. Review East Sussex County Council webcasting arrangements.

   c. Consider alternatives.

   d. Make recommendations.

Review of Cabinet Report

7. Review team members considered the original cabinet report of the 5th November 2007. The background and sources of information for the report were explained and discussed.

8. Progress on the creation of Committee Room 3 was noted, including the provision of live audio visual links. This has created an 'accessible' room that allows meetings in the council chamber to be viewed in real-time.

East Sussex County Council Webcasting Arrangements

9. The review team watched a sample ESCC webcast, visited East Sussex County Council to view the equipment and discuss webcasting with ESCC staff, and interviewed a representative of the company providing the ESCC webcasting system.

10. It was noted that the 'technical' quality of the webcasts had improved over time.

11. The system was currently averaging 1500 views a month. This figure includes both live meetings and the historical archiving.

12. It was still not possible to say how many of these viewings were by staff and members as opposed to members of the public, nor was it possible to say how many of these views were unique.

13. Live viewings do not generally exceed 10% of the total viewings in any month. Based on 215,000 households, this equates to a take-up of 0.07% for viewing live meetings and 0.62% for viewing the archive. This assumes that each viewing is made by a unique household.

14. Meetings are available on-line for a period of six months. After six months, a DVD of a meeting is available for reference.

15. The most popular meetings are the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Planning Committee.

16. ESCC believe that the system is of particular value to them due to the large geographical area that is covered. This makes attending a meeting in person quite difficult. Meetings are also held during the day, which adds further barriers to attendance.

17. The prices paid by ESCC for the system are comparable to the terms offered to Hastings Borough Council.

18. ESCC highlighted that the cost of running their system was very small in relation to the overall council budget.

19. ESCC highlighted that operating the system required a high-level of concentration and that for larger meetings two members of staff were required for operation.

20. Whilst the idea of making the decision making process more transparent and the creation of a historical video archive of decisions was attractive to all, the review team considered the cost of providing a similar webcasting system for Hastings Borough Council too high in the current economic climate, particularly in light of its low take-up.

21. The group was keen to explore if some of the benefits of webcasting could be achieved without incurring such significant costs.

Review of Alternatives

22. The interest in viewing County Council meetings 'live' on the internet is very low. The group were therefore keen to explore options around creating a video archive of all meetings, and the limited publication to the internet (after the meeting) of items of high public interest.

23. Various options were considered, but the general feeling of the group was that the solution should be kept in-house so that staff 'owned' the arrangement and that costs should be minimised.

24. Of the options, the group concluded that the simplest arrangement would be to install a DVD recorder as part of the Committee Room 3 feed and record meetings as they occurred.

25. This would create a historical archive that the Democratic Services team and members could refer back to. The archive would bring a number of benefits:

    a. Minute-takers could refer back to the recording to produce more accurate minutes.

    b. Recordings would help deal with factual disputes, erroneous reporting and substantiating complaints.

26. For meetings containing items of high public interest, extracts could be taken from the archive DVD and published to the website as whole unedited agenda items.

27. The group considered where responsibility for identifying which issues were of high enough public interest to warrant publication to the web should rest. After extensive debate, it recommended that the issue should be considered more widely and passed to the Working Arrangements Group for decision.

28. The e-Communications Team should be responsible for producing and publishing the content.

29. The technical aspects of how content is published to the website should rest with the technical implementation team.

30. The Working Arrangements Group will need to consider any constitutional amendments required to facilitate the recording and broadcasting of council meetings. It is also suggested that this group considers whether copies from the DVD archive could be sold to the public and/or press.

Freedom of Information and Data Protection

31. Were the archive DVDs to be made available as purchasable items and included in our Publications Scheme they would be exempt from Freedom of Information requests.

32. The location of the camera at the back of the council chamber will ensure that members of the public in the gallery will not be identifiable.

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

POSITIVE ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE

33. The Working Arrangements Group will need to consider if members of the public participating in meetings should be offered an opt-out from being recorded.

Financial Implications

34. The costs of implementing the same system as East Sussex County Council was £20,000 per annum for the basic system providing 5 hours of live webcasting per month plus the cost of up to two members of staff's time to operate and run the equipment. The group concluded that this cost was too high in the current economic climate, particularly in light of the low take-up at East Sussex County Council.

35. The revised approach has minimal costs that can be met from within existing resources.

Risks

36. By limiting the publication of high-interest items only to the web, we can meet the overhead of producing the video extracts and publishing them on our web server within existing resources. If we were to significantly expand the number of items that we wanted to publish on the web, further investment in staff time and computer storage would be required.

Recommendations

37. The provision of an accessible Committee Room and its associated audio-visual links from the council chamber be noted and welcomed.

38. A DVD recorder should be introduced into the link to Committee Room 3 and meetings recorded to provide a historical archive.

39. Key high-interest issues be taken from the DVD archive and published to the web by the e-communications team after the meeting.

40. The Working Arrangements Group should consider any amendments required to permit the recording and broadcasting of council meetings.

Wards Affected

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

Area(s) Affected

Central Hastings, East Hastings, North St. Leonards, South St. Leonards

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

POSITIVE ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	No
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	No
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	No
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	No

Supporting Documents

Cabinet Paper 5th November 2007 - Motion to Council: Webcasting Public Meetings

Officer to Contact

Mark Bourne
MBourne@Hastings.gov.uk
01424 451414

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

POSITIVE ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE