EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

Wednesday 25 March 2015

Report by Deputy Chief Executive

WEBCASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.   The purpose of this report is to seek approval to introduce webcasting of Council meetings and install a compatible microphone system in the Council Chamber.

RECOMMENDATION

2.   Council is asked to approve:-

(a)   the introduction of webcasting of Council meetings in the Council Chamber; and

(b)   the lease and installation of a webcasting service in the Council Chamber for an initial period of 3 years; and the renewal of the microphone system.

BACKGROUND

3.   Across the United Kingdom, over 70 local authorities have invested in webcasting technology to enhance the democratic process and to give members of the public and others who may not otherwise be able to attend Council meetings, the ability to view proceedings and maximise public accessibility and transparency to Councils' decision-making processes. In Scotland, currently City of Edinburgh Council, Glasgow City Council, Highland, Moray and Renfrewshire Councils are webcasting meetings of the Council and increasingly have extended that service to include committee meetings held in their Council Chambers. Argyll & Bute, Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, Falkirk, North Ayrshire, Perth & Kinross Councils and the Scottish Government are in the process of assessing the feasibility of introducing webcasting for their locations.

REPORT

4.   Webcasting allows meetings to be streamed live over the internet with relevant contextual information (agendas, reports, presentations, speakers' names, etc.) also being displayed. Any meetings that are streamed live are also archived to allow the proceedings to be viewed after the event. Looking at the information obtained from those authorities where webcasting is already in place, public viewing statistics have been impressive, with the majority of viewers taking advantage of the recorded archive facility to catch up on meetings missed from the live webcasting.

5.   Webcasting of meetings encourages engagement and helps to address issues of exclusion. On a more practical level it also helps to address criticisms where there is a lot of public interest in an issue and where demand for space in the public gallery of the Council Chamber outstrips the number of spaces available. It is a cost effective way to reach a large audience on key issues. It is widely accessible via a range of electronic devices, such as:

desktop computer; laptop computer; tablet device; and smartphone. It will strengthen the Council's democratic accountability to the public, both directly and via the local media and enable audiences to:-

- replay meetings after they have taken place, which may be helpful when the meeting time is inconvenient.

- search for and view particular speakers or items of business.

- hear meetings more clearly.

- gain additional contextual information from, e.g., speakers' names, agenda documents, PowerPoint presentations, etc., appearing with the webcast.

- obtain a better understanding of the workings of the Council.

- better engage in local democratic political processes.

Further benefits of the system are:-

- it will enable local media to more readily access and report information regarding Council meetings.

- it will introduce greater equality of access to Council meetings

  - it can be used as a training resource (e.g., in relation to citizenship lessons in schools), induction training and other learning opportunities for both Elected Members and officials.

6.   Feedback from Moray Council suggests the introduction of webcasting has been of benefit, enabling many more public witnesses to the democratic process than could be accommodated in the Council Chamber. Feedback from Edinburgh City Council is that viewing figures have been encouraging with extra effort being made to publicise the service through social media such as Facebook and Twitter as well as the Council's website.

7.   An assessment of East Renfrewshire's Council Chamber confirms that it is a suitable location for a webcasting installation. However, the microphone system will require to be renewed to enable integration into webcasting camera tracking technology. This reduces the amount of manual intervention required in the operation of the system.

FINANCE AND EFFICIENCES

8.   Costs associated with the initiative are as follows;

The installation of a microphone system in the Council Chamber at a cost of £19,800 will be funded by the Corporate and Community Services budget.

- A first stage one-year lease arrangement for the installation, operation and support of a webcasting service in the Council Chamber - £13,567.

- Second and third year provision of a continued webcasting service - £12,192 per annum.

- A broadband communication link between the Council and the Contractor, isolated from the Council's corporate network - £3,800 per annum.

9.   First year revenue funding for leasing and support will be met by the Council's Modernisation Fund with the broadband communication link being met by the Corporate and Community Services budget. Future year revenue funding will be reflected as a spending pressure as part of future budget setting.

10.   Council Meetings are recorded by way of the notes taken. With the introduction of webcasting there would be a verbatim record of proceedings which Members and others could view after the event. The introduction of webcasting provides an opportunity for the style of Minutes that are produced to be reviewed and for them simply to include some descriptive information relating to the item under consideration and to record only the decision or any motions / amendments / votes that took place.

11.   In addition the introduction of webcasting will improve efficient working as it allows those members of staff who are scheduled to attend a meeting, particularly those based in HQ, to monitor the progress of the meeting and to arrive in time or their particular items.

GUIDANCE AND RELATED MATTERS

12.   Based on the discussions that have taken place with officers from other authorities where webcasting has been introduced, subject to the Council approval of webcasting, it will be necessary to develop a protocol as well as training on participation in a webcast environment.

13.   Subject to all the technical considerations being met it is proposed to install webcasting equipment during recess 2015. The intention would be to host a practice run of webcasting recorded for in-house viewing only to enable Elected Members and Officials to familiarise themselves with the system at the Council meeting in September 2015 with a view to going live as soon as possible thereafter. Elected Members will be kept informed of timescales for going live once installation is complete.

CONCLUSIONS

14.   In conclusion, the introduction of webcasting in the Council Chamber will help to encourage engagement in the democratic process. It will allow people who are either physically unable to attend meetings of the Council, or are unable to attend due to demand for limited places in the public gallery, to view proceedings as they happen. The archive facility will also allow any interested parties to view a meeting after the event.

RECOMMENDATION

15.   Council is asked to approve:-

(a)   the introduction of webcasting of Council meetings in the Council Chamber; and

(b)   the lease and installation of a webcasting service in the Council Chamber for an initial period of 3 years; and the renewal of the microphone system.

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