

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of the Corporate Director of Support Services
to
Cabinet
on
6th November 2012

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Agenda
Item No.

Replacement of Audio Equipment in the Council Chamber
Economic & Environmental Scrutiny Committee
Executive Councillor: Andrew Moring
A Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to outline a proposal to upgrade the audio system in the Council Chamber. This investment is in accordance with the New Ways of Working (NWOW) Programme.
- 1.2 Further, to inform Members of Cabinet that the act of updating the audio system affords the Council the opportunity, as a simultaneous event and for a marginal additional cost, to introduce the 'webcasting' of Council meetings for public viewing in real time or from archive via the Council's website.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members consider the options outlined below and advise their preferred option(s) to be progressed**
- (i) to upgrade the audio system within the Council Chamber**
 - (ii) to introduce webcasting into the Council Chamber for 12 month trial period with the intent of webcasting the 6 Council meetings and the Youth Council meetings.**
- 2.2 Members to note that, if approval is given for the audio system, then there will need to be an amendment to the Capital Programme for an additional £62,000.**

3. Background

- 3.1 The audio system in the Council Chamber is now in excess of 20 years old and past its prime. There is a need to replace and improve it for the benefit of Councillors and the public alike. This work is planned as part of the NWOW Programme but the act of upgrading this system presents the Council with the opportunity to purchase an audio solution which could be used to guide cameras located within the chamber to the person speaking and webcast Council meetings in the Chamber viewable in real time or recoverable for viewing through an archive.
- 3.2 Webcasting is a means of using the internet to broadcast live or delayed audio/visual transmissions much like traditional television. Users who log into the webcast would do so through the Council's website and be able to watch and listen to proceedings as they occur.
- 3.3 The concept of webcasting Council meetings is not new. Democratic webcasting of formal live content is a well established, proven medium, with over 50 Local Authorities and other Public Sector organisations regularly webcasting and with many more using the technology for specific events. In support of open government, webcasting may be considered to build trust through transparency by showing the public the decisions as they are made and enabling accessibility by permitting citizens to choose when and where they watch the webcast be it live or on demand. Webcast providers are also able, alongside video screen options, to provide access to the agenda, papers and presentation documents. Some sites also encourage and facilitate discussions via email and social media such as Twitter.
- 3.4 The opportunity to introduce webcasting into the Council Chamber in Southend is perhaps very timely given that in August 2012 Eric Pickles (the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government), announced that members of the public who want to report on Council meetings will be offered the same privileges enjoyed by accredited press. Although not specifically advocating webcasting, the new regulations, which came into force in September, seek to ensure greater public scrutiny and give bloggers and users of social media much more access to Council meetings. Webcasting will support the transparency principle in that it supports the following requirements in pending regulations:
- (1) Councils will be required to ensure "all meetings of the executive, its committees and subcommittees are to be held in public unless a narrowly defined legal exception applies." This exception, it stated, is "A meeting will only be held in private if confidential information would be disclosed, or a resolution has been passed to exclude the public because exempt information is likely to be disclosed, or a lawful power is used to exclude the public in order to maintain orderly conduct at the meeting."

- (2) Councils must make available “reasonable facilities for members of the public to report the proceedings as well as accredited newspapers.” The CLG release explained: “This will make it easier for new ‘social media’ reporting of Council executive meetings thereby opening proceedings up to internet bloggers, tweeting and hyperlocal news forums.”

3.5 Other benefits include

- Support access to the decision making process to people who have difficulty in travelling to attend the meeting or who would prefer to watch from another location
- Relay meetings after they have taken place which may prove helpful to those for whom the meeting time or location is inconvenient
- Search for and view particular items on the agenda
- Allow the viewer to review points which may not have been immediately clear to them as formal meetings may sometimes be alien to the casual observer
- Hear meetings for people with visual impairment
- Track debate
- Provide wider opportunity for young people to engage in the democratic process using a medium with which they are very familiar

3.6 There is no definitive source of statistics for viewing figures but quoted viewing figures range from 30 to 1,400 people. However, typically Councils using webcasts report that the number of people watching live is considerably higher than the number of people who actually attend meetings, and that significantly higher numbers of people watch archived material as opposed to those who watch live.

3.7 Examples of Local Authorities which already webcast include:-

Cornwall County Council <http://www.cornwall.public-i.tv/core/>

Surrey County Council <http://www.surreycc.public-i.tv/core/>

Castle Point Council <http://www.castlepoint.public-i.tv>

3.8 Should the introduction of webcasting be agreed upon, then the intentions would be as follows:

- To broadcast to the internet 6 Council meetings per year with the option of also broadcasting the Youth Council meetings. The acquisition of 30 hours of streaming is suggested.
- To enable an archive of meetings available for public viewing.
- To deliver a solution which is intuitive, allowing for easy publication and viewing.
- To deliver a solution which is secure.

3.9 The delivery mechanism would involve a tendered solution for the works to the Council Chamber.

4. Other Options

4.1 Continue with the failing audio equipment or, replace this equipment but not seize the opportunity to trial webcasting.

5. Reason for Recommendation

5.1 The intention to open up the democratic process to a wider audience is keeping with the ambitions of Government. New technologies facilitate this permitting both rapidity in information transfer and opinion. Clearly, the introduction of webcasting supports national ambition as it will open up Council executive meetings and proceedings to internet bloggers, tweeting and local news forums.

6. Corporate Implications

6.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

Clean: • Environment preserved and improved

Prosperous: • Improved access to services
 • A more cohesive community

Excellent: • Improved capacity through partnership working
 • Improved customer satisfaction

6.2 Financial Implications

Subject to tender the total cost of the solution for year 1 would be approximately £82,000 split between a £62,000 one off capital cost (for the provision of the audio equipment) and an annual recurring revenue implication of circa £20,000 which includes the leasing of the cameras (including maintenance and upgrades), software licensing, project and account management, full hosting of all content, and SBC staff time.

Currently there is no Capital Budget for the proposal in this report. If Members are to approve the proposal for the provision of audio equipment then the £62,000 capital cost would need to be added to the Council's Capital Programme and to be funded by borrowing.

6.3 Legal Implications

There is no legal requirement to obtain permission before webcasting public meetings. However, it would be good practice to ensure that notices are available to inform people attending meetings that the meeting is being webcast.

6.4 People Implications

The recommendations, if both accepted, will lead to greater engagement in the local democratic process by the local community. Evidence would suggest this is particularly true for younger people where engagement through the broadcasting of the Youth Council is well received.

6.5 Property Implications

The Council Chamber's audio system requires replacing. This will require carpets being raised, new cabling and microphones being installed to each Councillor pod. Additional power may have to be provisioned.

6.6 Consultation

The proposal to upgrade the audio system in the Council Chamber and the potential to introduce webcasting as simultaneous event were considered by Members of the Economic & Environmental Scrutiny Committee as a 'pre-scrutiny' item on 20 September 2012. At this meeting, while there was support for the upgrade of the audio system in the Council Chamber, there was not universal support for the introduction of 'webcasting' due to the cost in the current economic climate and poor viewing figures recorded at other Councils.

Members of scrutiny also asked that Officers be charged with investigating whether there was a role for the local college / university in delivering 'webcasting' and this has been actively pursued.

Regrettably, the specification which needs to include live broadcasting through integration with the audio system, archive hosting with provision for public accessibility and integration with the Council's minutes system is too demanding for this third party at present.

6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

Web casting will deliver greater inclusion for all Southend communities as Council meetings can be attended "virtually" by anyone with a computer. For example:

- Individuals with mobility issues could virtually attend the meetings
- People who work evenings/nights could view the meetings retrospectively

6.8 Risk Assessment

The leasing of the equipment (other than the audio equipment which will be purchased by the Council) and the use of a managed service, using expert webcast providers to provide an end to end solution, is a tried and tested approach that has been adopted by many Local Authorities and presents the least risk.

6.9 Value for Money

The audio equipment which will replace the existing and enable webcasting through interoperability with cameras will be tendered. The provision of camera, the hosting of the 'broadcasts' and licensing costs etc. will be subject to competitive quotes.

6.10 Community Safety Implications - not applicable

6.11 Environmental Impact - not applicable

7. **Background Papers**

7.1 There are no background papers associated with this report