Webcasting – discussion paper

What is webcasting?

'Webcasting' means transmitting a video signal ('streaming') out to the Internet in real-time via a specialised website. Anyone with access to the Internet, an appropriate viewing tool (Real Player or Windows Media Player), and speakers/soundcard on their PC can then view such events 'live'.

In addition because the video signal is digital, such events can also be captured on disc (archived) and viewed at any later date. Webcasts can be viewed via the Internet or an Intranet. The actual picture is only about 3" square, but the movement is smooth and, more importantly, the sound quality is good[1]. Although access to webcast events would be via the Councils website (or the Intranet for staff / Members), this would simply provide a link to the specialised site from which the video would be streamed.

The two main key features of webcasting is firstly the ability to stream both live and archive (on demand) content. This makes this an extremely effective communication tool as it enables viewers to look at content where and when they want rather than needing to attend the council at a set time. Secondly by using the internet as the transmission medium it is also possible to 'attach or link' related information to the webcast to enhance the viewing experience.

Why webcast?

There are a number of arguments in favour of webcasting which break down as follows:

1. Webcasting is a tool for e-democracy
   The e-democracy landscape is still being defined however webcasting is being consistently mentioned as part of the emerging picture and a number of leading Councils are already using the technology. Key points are:

   - Seamless transmission of meetings/events/briefings makes the council more accessible and transparent to its citizens
   - There is a clear case for showing that webcasting encourages e-participation by giving citizens access to core council business without the intermediary of Council minutes or media coverage
   - Most people receive most of their information from words and pictures – not by reading it. Webcasting communicates with people using a medium that they are familiar with and that they trust

2. Webcasting has a wide application within the communication strategy than just supporting an e-democracy agenda. Webcasting can be a useful internal communication tool to enable officers and members to keep up to date with current debate and can also be a simple way of adding multimedia content to the website – something that users are increasingly interested in seeing.

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[1] It should be noted that, sometimes, organisations claim to be webcasting if they have one or more fixed cameras at a variety of locations showing a particular view which is updated every 15 to 60 minutes. This is normally known as a webcam. This report does not cover this style of webcasting

3. Webcasting is not limited to formal meetings and as such can deliver excellent value for money. Other content that has been webcast by local authorities includes:

- Events
- Internal and external briefings
- Promotional content (e.g. tourism videos)
- Training content

4. Implementing leading edge technology enhances our reputation as a forward thinking and innovative authority.

It should also be noted that councils that have commenced webcasting have received a positive rating from the Audit Commission (within the CPA process) on the contribution to communication of webcasting.

What are the different approaches to implementation?

There are a number of issues to consider with respect to implementation. Chiefly these are:

Content capture
Minimum disruption to meetings – we don't want to build a requirement for intrusive cameramen or technology into our meetings. The solution we choose needs to be discrete and not distract from the main business of the events and meetings we are webcasting. We also need to ensure that any webcasting project has the most minimal impact on staff resources as possible and can be serviced from our current skills base.

Value added information
On examination of what other authorities are doing it is clear that just streaming audio/video content is not enough. In order for webcasting to be effective the content needs to be communicated with additional contextual information such as speaker names and agenda items to ensure that the viewer can make sense of what they are seeing. It's also extremely important to index archived meetings to ensure that viewers can go straight to the content that they need. To ensure maximum value from this cross department support on considering and proving access to relevant information will be important.

Infrastructure requirements
We need to minimise impact on our IT infrastructure. We have assumed that we do not want to increase our IT overhead with streaming servers etc and that we want a solution that has a small footprint on our environment.

Service and support
Given that a number of other Council's are already webcasting we want to be able to learn from their experiences rather than developing systems and processes from scratch ourselves.

Promotion and communication
To ensure value is achieved it will be essential to incorporate a suitable promotion and communication strategy not only at the launch of the webcasting facilities but also on an ongoing basis.

Who else is webcasting?

There are currently 14 Councils webcasting regularly and up to 50 Councils who have webcast at least one event. There are also an increasing number (currently in excess of 50 Councils) actively considering webcasting. You can see specific examples of Local Government webcast content on the following Council's websites:

- http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/webcast/index.php
- www.lancashire.gov.uk
- http://www.wakefield.gov.uk/CouncilAndDemocracy/OnlineServices/Webcasting/default.htm
- http://www.london.gov.uk/webcasts.jsp

What can it be used for?

To achieve the best value from the project and good take up of the technology a planned programme of other meetings and events should also be considered. These events should be based on those likely to engage citizens, boost use of the service, and create a positive PR for the organisation.

Use in internal communications should also be maximised to realise value; for example, webcasting and archiving Staff Briefings for those who cannot attend would be one way to use webcasting to enhance and improve communication with staff.

Nearly all councils that are currently webcasting have experienced a significant enhancement to their internal communications abilities through allowing access to meetings for staff and more specific staff briefings. There are also potential internal training and induction courses benefits which should be considered for Members/Officers

Who is providing the service – potential suppliers?

There are a large number of 'webcasting' companies within the UK who could provide encoding and hosting abilities, however only one - UKCouncil which offer a more complete service to match the required services. This includes not only the hardware and software required to webcast with value added content but also training and process support to assist the Council in rolling out the technology in the most effective way possible. Their system meets the key criteria listed and is constantly being updated to reflect evolving webcasting best practise.

UKCouncil are the current market leaders providing webcasting services to 95% of the Local Authorities that are/have webcast in the UK plus SOLACE, IDeA LGA and all 3 Political Parties. In addition they also manage the only Local Authority webcasting user group which is an ideas exchange and development forum attended by Authorities webcasting within the UK.

In addition there has only been one Local Authority that has gone through a full procurement tender process for webcasting services, being Devon County Council. Details of their evaluation might be available however they appointed UKCouncil Ltd

Conclusions and recommendations

There appears to be sufficient evidence to confirm that as a technology it operates successfully provided it is set up and operated correctly. Measuring what it is used for and viewership is an ongoing exercise and is linked to what a Council is looking to achieve and how. Based on the information our recommendation is ………………………..

Additional information that has appeared in Council briefing documents:

What degree of editorial control should there be (if any) and what protocols would be needed for camera operators?

The Director of Broadcasting for the Houses of Commons and Lords has the longest and richest history of such broadcasting in the UK. Their written standards have the following key points:

- No 'editorial' control of content should be exercised.
- Cameras should focus on the person speaking in a head and torso shot and when no-one is speaking, the Chairperson.
- There may be reasons why a different kind of shot is sometimes appropriate. This will be laid out in written guidelines.

What training is required for staff?

To deliver some of the more innovative and beneficial elements of Webcasting the officer(s) running the project should be skilled in PR and event management to maximise positive media coverage. Staff operating the equipment will need to be trained in its use and will need to receive training on the protocols adopted. This would most likely be supplied by the chosen webcasting company.

What protocols would be needed for members?

Members do not need any specific protocols regarding webcasting. Professional conduct, which is already common to all Council meetings, is all that is required.

It is recommended that guidelines should be adopted about use of microphones and fixed seating plans to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of webcasts.

What training is required for members?

Generally there is no specific training required for members although webcasting should be mentioned in the Members induction. Members should also be made aware of the cameras' presence at the beginning of each meeting.

It is recommended that Chairpersons do receive training on webcasting as although significant changes are not required it makes for a far more effective and accessible record of the meeting if certain verbal techniques for 'signposting' the meeting and explaining proceeding are adopted. This training need only be brief (1 hour) and could be shortened further if assimilated into other training for Chair people.

What happens if certain members do not wish to be filmed? (right to refuse under data protection act)

The importance of adhering to Data Protection legislation is absolutely recognised but it should not be seen as a barrier to webcasting.

Should a Member not wish to be shown this can be achieved – a blank screen and a message explaining the Member does not wish to be shown can appear when they contribute to a webcast meeting. It is important to note that in practice there is only

one instance of this across tens of councils and hundreds of Members working with webcasting of their meetings.

Members of the public attending meetings should be made aware that the meeting is going to be webcast (signage, Chairperson announcement, and information leaflets available on request) but in Councils currently running the system it is not common practice to ask permission to film the public. Although members of the public may be caught on camera incidentally in the course of filming proceedings (depending on seating and room layout), guidelines dictate that the public gallery is not deliberately shown.

For special events permission will be sought from those involved on a case by case basis. This will require particularly careful planning in the case of youth events though there are Councils with experience in this area that are available to advise the Council.

Would it be best to go for a 'pilot' scheme first?

Yes. If webcasting is taken forward a pilot scheme lasting one year is recommended. A period of a year is necessary so the impact and implications of the project can be fully realized.

With the Chamber having listed building status, is it actually possible to install fixed cameras in the Council Chamber?

Yes it is possible, because it is not necessary to fix anything to the fabric of the Chamber in order to have a 'fixed' system.

Risks and assumptions

This project requires significant investment; in services from suppliers and staff time to run the project. The expenditure is justifiable if the benefits of the technology can be realised. The biggest risk the project faces is not leveraging the technology to its full extent and therefore not getting value for money from the expenditure. Hence the recommendation of a full programme of 'other' events webcast combined with full officer support is provided.

Related to the above paragraph is the risk that if only Council meetings are webcast the Authority risks negative publicity because costs of the technology could be perceived as unacceptably high. To date no negative publicity has been received from the Councils currently webcasting indeed in Lancashire County Council specific support and encouragement from the local press has been evidenced

There are always risks related to technology failure however webcasting is well established technology and should not be considered to be at any greater risk of failure than other IT systems.

Legal implications

There are two legal issues raised by webcasting technology: Data protection and privacy and the admissibility of webcasting footage as legal evidence.

On the issue of data protection and privacy please see paragraphs above.

On the issue of admissibility as evidence Members should note that legally webcasting footage can be used by, for example, The Standards Board for England as evidence. In practice there is only one case where this has been tested and it was to the benefit of Members in Camden who were able to demonstrate that in a planning decision due process had been followed and thus avoid a judicial review. In this case the minutes of a meeting were not a clear enough record to settle the matter. There has been a case at Lancs CC whereby an incident due to be reported in the Local Paper on the behaviour of the Leader of the Council was proven to be different to the proposed report.