

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: WEB CASTING COUNCIL MEETINGS
Meeting: FALKIRK COUNCIL
Date: 11 December 2013
Author: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide further information on the potential introduction of web casts of Council meetings. This is in response to a decision at the meeting of Falkirk Council on 25th September where it was agreed that officers should provide further information about the costs and technical requirements of implementing a web streaming package for all principal Council meetings. This service would include the facility to archive all 'streamed' Council meetings for reference at a later date, with archive access from the Council's website.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 As outlined in previous reports to Council, web casting is the live or recorded transmission of video over the web. Three Scottish Councils currently have web casting arrangements for their meetings in place, City of Edinburgh Council, Moray Council and Highland Council, as do a number of English and Welsh authorities. A number of other Scottish Councils are currently considering the introduction of a webcasting service.
- 2.2 Web casting enables members of the public to access content, in this case Council meetings, where and when they want. Council meetings can be viewed live but most Councils have found that around 80% of web cast visitors view the archive at the time of their choosing rather than the live feed. Archived meetings are automatically indexed by agenda item and speaker which allows viewers to watch just those specific items they are interested in. The number of people viewing the footage, either live or via the archive, is generally low, with more contentious items attracting the most viewers. Information from other Councils suggests that the average amount of time a viewer spends viewing a Council webcast is around nine minutes, roughly the length of a typical agenda item.
- 2.3 To enable web casting of Council meetings to take place, cameras require to be installed in the Council chamber and in any other rooms where meetings to be filmed and webcast would take place. These capture live information from Council meetings and send it, via a web casting provider, to anyone who would wish to view the meeting. The public can view live meetings remotely and access the meeting archives via an internet connection.
- 2.4 General information has previously been obtained about the implementation, support and technical arrangements for the web casting projects in City of Edinburgh, Moray and Highland Councils. In addition, historic web casts can be viewed for each Council via their websites.

- 2.5 It should be noted that Falkirk Council does not have the necessary technical expertise or resources to provide this service in-house, therefore would have to procure this service from a specialist supplier. As well as the filming itself, the broadcasting of meetings via the web requires to be supported by a portal providing the necessary functionality for indexing, archiving, loading supporting paperwork etc. Even if the necessary skills were available, it would not be cost-effective for the Council to try to build this in-house when tried and tested webcasting services are available from specialist providers. A procurement exercise would therefore be required.

3. WEB CASTING IN ACTION

- 3.1 City of Edinburgh, Moray and Highland Councils use the same supplier to provide the web casting equipment and service - Public-i. Public-i is the market leader in web casting in the public sector, with over a decade of experience, and provides a suite of digital tools aimed at supporting the democratic process. The company provides a web casting service to over 70 Councils throughout the UK including Birmingham City Council, Belfast City Council and Cardiff City Council as well as the three Scottish Councils.
- 3.2 Public-i provides the equipment and hosts the content on a micro site, with links from the Councils' own websites. The micro sites have an element of standard functionality, therefore giving economies of scale, with the level of sophistication dependent on the package of services procured. In the majority of cases the projects are led by Democratic Services or their equivalent, with their staff being trained to operate the cameras and also being responsible for loading the relevant Committee paperwork on to the webcasting portal.
- 3.3 The features offered by the web casting services vary depending on the specification and the resources committed to the project. For example, some Councils' web casts include details about the current speaker and meeting attendees and have links to agendas and reports. The level of sophistication of the archive service also varies from Council to Council.
- 3.4 Costs for the service vary depending on what is specified by individual Councils. It was noted in the report of 25th September that exact costs for implementing a similar project in Falkirk were not available as costs are obviously variable depending on the scale and scope of the coverage, including levels of functionality, and the number of hours broadcast.
- 3.5 It was agreed at the meeting of 25th September that further work, including a site visit by Public-i, should be progressed so that a more accurate estimate of costs and resources could be provided to Members. This site visit has now taken place and further information obtained about the technical requirements involved in installing a system. The assumption during these preliminary discussions has been that all meetings being webcast would be held in the Chambers. Should other venues, e.g. Committee Rooms, be used then there would be additional costs as mobile cameras would need to be installed, along with a suitable sound system. For the purpose of this report principal meetings are deemed to be those of Falkirk Council, the Executive and Scrutiny Committee.

4. TECHNICAL ISSUES

- 4.1 Based on the site visit, it is suggested that a four camera system would be required for the Chambers to ensure adequate coverage of debate taking place. An operator would be based in the Chambers behind a small control desk through which individual cameras would be pre-programmed to activate when a Member switches on his or her microphone. Cameras can also be moved around manually. In terms of making the webcast more dynamic, it is usual for the operator to use a mixture of both. The operator would receive initial training from Public-i or another provider.
- 4.2 The current microphone system within the Chambers is unlikely to usefully maximise the camera system as it does not offer the level of sophistication needed (e.g. multiple alerts for Members wanting to speak). The current system is near the end of its lifespan and a replacement would better enhance the experience. Governance has previously obtained indicative costs for the replacement of the microphone system in the Chambers and estimate that costs for a basic analogue system would be around £23k, with the cost of a digital system in the region of £60k. If filming was also to be carried out from within a Committee room then this would require the installation of an additional sound system at an approximate cost of £10k.
- 4.3 For webcasting any meeting, current wifi would not be adequate. A network point would require to be installed in the Chambers to support a dedicated link. There is no minimum requirement for bandwidth, however there can be high demand at peak times within the Council so this would need to be reviewed.
- 4.4 An examination of the lighting appeared to indicate that it would be adequate for webcasting purposes.
- 4.5 Prior to operation, around three days of cabling work would be required beforehand to erect the cameras. This would be covered by the initial set up costs, however would mean that the availability of the Chambers would be restricted during that period.
- 4.6 Prior to any meeting a content management system is 'loaded' with the information/images of members so they can be identified when in operation – agenda papers etc would also be made available on the content management system beforehand so that it can seamlessly sync as each item is discussed. The content management system could provide analytics regarding the most popular sessions etc.
- 4.7 Training for Members would be provided as would training for the staff operating the equipment and this would be included as part of the package price.
- 4.8 Indicative for a webcasting project costs were discussed:

The costs for four cameras, hardware and training for staff would be approximately £18k per annum. Should an additional mobile camera be required costs would rise to around £21k per annum. This would also include online support staff, maintenance and any future upgrades to software etc and includes around 100 hours of archival storage for 48 months. This is based on a one year contract.

The estimated requirement of 100 hours of storage is based on the average length of the meetings being recorded. For the purposes of this report it is assumed that the meetings to be recorded would be Falkirk Council, the Executive and Scrutiny, however Members may wish to review and revise the scope of the project. Any additional meetings would incur additional costs.

If meetings held within a Committee Room were to be filmed then a further unit and two mobile cameras would be required for that room, at additional cost of c£4k plus sound system costs of £10k.

- 4.9 Public-i advise that they could offer a trial of the full system for around £2k to allow the Council to see the system in practice.
- 4.10 Should the Council decide to proceed then, as noted at 2.5, a procurement exercise would be required.
- 4.11 No funding has been allocated for a web casting project so should the Council decide to proceed, funding would have to be identified within the Council's own resources.

5. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 While web casting may open up Council meetings to more people, the total number of people accessing Council web casts tends to be very low, therefore the cost per view could be considered to be relatively high. Some Councils in England have had negative media coverage about the benefits of this expenditure at a time when public budgets are under pressure.
- 5.2 There is no record of any requests from the public for the Council to web cast its meetings and as yet no work has been undertaken to estimate the likely uptake of this service. Falkirk Council's meetings are not generally attended by many members of the public, although they are held during the day so it may be difficult for some people to attend.

6. OTHER ISSUES

- 6.1 In terms of the legal position, Elected Members are governed by the Code of Conduct and meetings of the Council take place according to the Council's Standing Orders. The web casting of meetings would also be governed by these standards and rules. Members would participate in meetings which are web cast, as they would in meetings which are not web cast, with due regard to the constitutional requirements of the Council.
- 6.2 The Council is a Data Controller in terms of the Data Protection Act 1998 and if it were decided that web casting of meeting should be taken forward then a protocol should be agreed prior to the first Council meeting to be web cast. This will assist the conduct of web cast meetings and discharge the obligations of the Authority under the Data Protection Act 1998.
- 6.3 As noted at 4.7, training would be provided to Members prior to the live introduction of the service by the webcasting provider.

7 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Three Councils in Scotland are currently broadcasting their public meetings. All three use the Public-i service but with a differing range of technological sophistication. Costs for the service vary depending on what is specified by individual Councils, e.g. the number of hours broadcast.
- 7.2 Based only on the site visit carried out by one provider of this service, Public-i, the indicative costs of webcasting would be in the region of £18k per annum. Additional costs would be incurred to bring the sound system in the Chambers up to the required standard to deliver a webcasting project and these could range from c£23k for an analogue system up to £60k for a digital system. Costs would also be incurred for the installation of a network point and the Council's bandwidth capacity would also have to be reviewed. If meetings held in a Committee room were also to be filmed then there would be additional costs of c£14k.
- 7.3 As noted at 4.12 there is no budget for this service therefore funding would need to be found from Council budgets.
- 7.4 As well as the financial costs, staff time would be required. This would involve a member of staff being trained to operate the cameras at all the meetings being webcast, currently estimated at 100 hours per annum, plus any set up time required. Staff time would also need to be allocated to prepare material such as reports and agendas and to load it on to the portal prior to the meetings.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Council is asked to:

- 8.1 **Note the information provided about potential costs for a web streaming package with archive facilities;**
- 8.2 **In the light of the above, decide whether it wishes to web cast meetings of Council and the principal Committees;**
- 8.3 **If it does wish to provide this service, agree that that a procurement exercise should be carried out to select a suitable supplier.**

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