

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**CABINET
MONDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2003 AT 2.00 P.M.**

Agenda Item No.

7

PUBLIC ACCESS TO CABINET AND COUNCIL MEETINGS

Report of the County Secretary

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1. Purpose of report

To enable Cabinet to respond to decisions of the Council about questions at Cabinet meetings and the webcasting of Council meetings.

2. Summary

Currently, members of the Council and the public can question Executive members at full Council meetings; and members of Scrutiny Committees can question them at Committee meetings. The Cabinet can choose to introduce a question time procedure at its meetings if it wishes to do so.

Webcasting is the showing of pictures and sound on the Internet. Other authorities, notably Cambridgeshire County Council have begun webcasting meetings. Webcasting Council meetings has the potential to give wider public access to these meetings, although there are risks and costs associated with the proposal.

3. Conclusion

The Cabinet needs to decide

- a) whether to adopt a question time at its meetings and if so how it would work
- b) whether to propose to the Council that meetings of the Council are webcast

4. **Background**

At its meeting on 15 July 2003 the Council considered a report from the Resources Scrutiny Committee on public involvement in the democratic process. The Council resolved:-

- 1) that the Cabinet be requested to consider allowing questions to be put at Cabinet meetings by members of the Council and members of the public
- 2) that the Council investigates webcasting of its meetings in order to determine the costs and practicalities of such an exercise, and that the outcome of this investigation be reported to the Council via the Cabinet.

It is worth noting that, since the Scrutiny Committee considered the issue of democratic involvement in the democratic process, the Local Government Act 2003 has given the Council the power to conduct local polls to ascertain the views of the public about the Council's services and budget. The Government will be issuing guidance about the use of this new power. The result of a local poll would not be binding on the Council, but clearly would carry some weight.

5. **Questions at Cabinet Meetings**

At present there is no right for members of the public, and members of the Council other than Cabinet members, to ask questions at Cabinet meetings.

At Council meetings there is one question time for members of the public, and one for members of the Council. Questions are directed to Executive members. Members of the public must give 10 days' notice of the question and are able to ask 1 supplementary question each. Answers to the questions are given at the meeting. Answers to supplementaries may be given at the meeting or within 7 days thereafter. There is no limit on the number of questions per member of the public but public question time is limited to 30 minutes.

The same procedure applies to the question time for members of the Council except that only 5 days' notice is required.

At Scrutiny Committees, there is a question time for members of the Committee to question Executive members about matters which are not on the agenda. The rules are the same as for question time at Council. There is no question time at Scrutiny Committees for members of the public.

If Cabinet did wish to introduce a question time for members of the public and members of the Council at Cabinet meetings it would be necessary to consider:

- Whether the rules should be same for Council and Committee question times
- In particular, whether there should be an overall limit on the length of question time and/or on the number of questions per person
- Whether questions should be allowed on any matter within the Cabinet's remit, or only on items on the agenda
- Whether the introduction of a Cabinet question time should effect the continued existence of question time at Council and Scrutiny Committees.

6.1 Webcasting

Webcasting is the showing of pictures and sound on the Internet. It provides the opportunity for people who are unable to attend meetings, and who have the right connection on their PC, to view proceedings remotely. Webcasts can also be archived so that those unable to view the meeting live can do so later at a convenient time for them.

6.2 The Need

The County Council is looking at ways to introduce and enhance E-Government in the provision of its services.

However, E-Government is not just about services but about enhancing the democratic process and involving local people more in the life of the Council. At the centre of the Council's activities are the democratic meetings. These have traditionally had a minimal attendance by the public, except when debating controversial issues. The only other access people have are the reports and minutes on the County Council website or through the libraries. Involving more people in these meetings is hampered by the demographics of the county which mean that travelling to the meetings is not easy.

Over the past two years 28 councils have invested in developing the ability to broadcast their meetings via the web. While there is still learning to be done, they are considered to have been a success, with John Thornton, Director of E-Government at the IDeA, stating that webcasting offers a 'unique opportunity to increase transparency and bring the democratic process closer to more citizens'.

6.3 Cambridgeshire's experience

Cambridgeshire currently broadcasts Cabinet meetings live on its website (not full Council meetings their Council Chamber is not technically equipped to do so). Broadcasts are stored for viewing at any time, using a Webcasting service provided by UK Council (UKC) who are the leading providers of this facility in the country. Some 20 authorities round the country currently buy the service from UKC.

a) UK Council Service

Before agreeing to take the service from UKC Cambridgeshire considered other suppliers, plus an in-house provision of the service. Although other suppliers were prepared to supply equipment, none offered the hosting service of UKC. An in-house option was investigated but it quickly became clear that the cost of the equipment, including a server, would be in excess of the UKC contract. They also did not have the expertise to deliver this service in-house.

The service provided to Cambridgeshire covers:

- Provision of cameras in a mobile unit, which can be kept in a secure area when not in use, and used in any room with a network link.
- Provision of a control PC plus software, which allows control and focus of the cameras.
- Provision of software to update the web page on which the webcast appears.
- Storage of the recorded video streams, plus hosting of the service, thus enabling past meetings to be viewed up to a year later.
- Training for County Council staff.
- Support and maintenance.
- Upgrades to the service as they are released. Hosting the recordings at UKC's server means that the County Council do not need to have an Internet server of the power or storage size necessary to provide the service. It also means that the performance of the Council's own web server and network is not affected by people viewing the video stream.

The service does however require input from Council staff at meetings to operate the cameras. (UKC operated the cameras initially until the Council's own staff were trained to do this themselves.)

In Cambridgeshire the cost of the UKC service works out at £7,500 per quarter (£30,000 per year) based on a population formula.

There is an additional cost, since Cambridgeshire's own staff are used to operate the equipment.

b) Reliability / Quality

The viewing quality of the broadcast is very much dependent on the speed of the viewer's own connection to the Internet. It is fair to say that an acceptable quality can only be achieved with a broadband connection. The picture quality has improved since

Cambridgeshire's own staff have been controlling the cameras – they are more familiar with the meetings and can therefore follow the speakers more swiftly. However, the sound quality remains an issue, and is still very much influenced by the position of the speaker and the pitch of the voice. (Since we in Hertfordshire have just replaced our Council Chamber system hopefully that wouldn't be a problem in that room.)

c) Viewing figures

Viewing figures for Cambridgeshire's Cabinet meetings have remained static; at around 20 'hits' per day with the majority of users viewing between 20 and 30 minutes of the total broadcast.

On average there are between 600 and 800 persons accessing broadcasts per month though this depends on what meetings are taking place and what issues are being discussed. Some users may be repeat users. The highest number of hits on any one day has been 200.

d) Possible Future Developments

Cambridgeshire are looking to extend the number of meetings covered (currently they only webcast their Cabinet meetings).

They are also developing facilities in public libraries so that broadcasts can be accessed over fast network links.

Once schools are connected to broadband, Internet opportunities would exist to use the webcasts as part of the National Curriculum citizenship courses. Key Stage 4 targets for citizenship include viewing a Council meeting as a target, and the webcasting could help this by bringing the meeting to the school.

Several districts in Cambridgeshire also expressed an interest in the webcasting service, and the County Council is looking to provide a 'Community Portal' so that Cambridgeshire citizens could select meetings to view from either County or Districts.

As well as broadcasting formal meetings, there has been demand for broadcasts of marriage ceremonies over the Internet so that relatives who cannot attend in person can still be part of the ceremony, and Cambridgeshire are investigating the feasibility of this with their service provider.

6.4 The Risks

The key risks would be:-

- That the medium does not take off to the degree to justify the investment, i.e. people don't watch. Therefore there would need to be a budget for a promotional campaign.
- Members might feel constrained in their debates and there would therefore need to be high-quality training to overcome this and equip them to take advantage of this new means of communicating with the public.
- A reputational risk due to the robustness or otherwise of the technology which means that we need to seek out a supplier with proven experience in this area.
- A reputational risk if people perceive that behaviour at council meetings is influenced by the presence of the cameras. However, the experience of those councils already broadcasting has not been negative.

6.5 Financial Implications

The cost of the service from a supplier would be in the order of £80,000 for a 24 month contract, plus £10,000 for sound and video card in PCs for all councillors and JMT (if members and senior officers are to be wired up to view the meetings on their PCs).

Other costs would include:-

Training of officers and members £6,000
 Promotional budget £10,000

There is currently no budget provision for these items.