

REPORT OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

The Governance Committee met on 13 November 2018. Attendances:

Councillor Glazier (Chair)
Councillors Godfrey Daniel, Elkin, Simmons and Tutt

1. Notice of Motion: Webcasting of Scrutiny Committee meetings

1.1 The following Notice of Motion has been submitted by Councillor Ungar:

"That this Council will, from the date of agreeing this motion, live webcast all its Scrutiny Committee meetings with the exception of when dealing with confidential/exempt items as directed by the Council's Monitoring Officer."

1.2 In line with County Council practice, the matter was referred by the Chairman to the Governance Committee for consideration to provide information and inform debate on the Motion.

1.3 The County Council currently webcasts a range of meetings to increase accessibility to the public, particularly in relation to the decision making process. The meetings which are currently webcast on a regular basis are:

- County Council
- Cabinet
- Planning Committee
- Health and Wellbeing Board
- East Sussex Better Together Strategic Commissioning Board
- Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)

1.4 The Council recently undertook a review of its scrutiny arrangements and introduced a new committee structure from May 2018 comprising People Scrutiny Committee, Place Scrutiny Committee and HOSC.

1.5 During the review of scrutiny arrangements Member feedback was sought to inform a range of possible changes to the scrutiny process as well as changes to the committee structure. Feedback received with regard to webcasting of scrutiny meetings fell into two themes:

- some Members felt that webcasting of meetings would restrict an open and frank debate and would potentially result in some Members and officers feeling inhibited;
- some were of the view that webcasting of these meetings would result in them becoming more politicised.

1.6 No members expressed support for webcasting Scrutiny Committees in their feedback.

1.7 A report to Governance Committee and subsequently to County Council in March 2018 proposing the new scrutiny arrangements summarised the feedback from Members in relation to webcasting and set out the proposed way forward:

"Some Members have suggested that webcasting Scrutiny Committees can hinder effective Member participation. Cabinet and Full Council meetings are webcast and it is at these meetings where the outcomes of scrutiny work are visible and the discussion itself of greater

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public interest. There is therefore a good case against the automatic webcasting of meetings of the Place and People Scrutiny Committees.”

“HOSC, on the other hand, undertakes an important role in holding the health service to account and doesn't report to Full Council. On some occasions, its meetings have attracted thousands of webcast views. The media and external partners regularly view HOSC webcasts due to the public interest in the subject matter. It is therefore recommended that HOSC meetings continue to be webcast.”

1.8 The report also commented on the potential for using digital technology to support scrutiny in a more flexible and targeted way within the new scrutiny arrangements:

“Given the now widespread access to fast broadband in the County there is now an opportunity to rethink the use of technology to assist and speed up some aspects of scrutiny work. For example, webcasting technology can be used efficiently to solicit public views as part of a scrutiny review, as can judicial use of social media. Web based surveys can now be deployed quickly and easily using applications such as Survey Monkey. Such technology has already been used to good effect elsewhere.”

1.9 The issue of webcasting was also discussed at a meeting of the Scrutiny and Audit Chairs and Vice-Chairs in July 2018. The note of the meeting records the outcome of the discussion as follows:

“A majority of the Group was satisfied with the current webcasting arrangements whereby the Scrutiny and Audit Committees (apart from HOSC) are not webcast but the technology is available and could be useful under certain circumstances. The current position flows from the Member comments received in the consultation for the new scrutiny arrangements which were in turn reflected in the Governance Committee report to Council.”

1.10 As anticipated by the review of scrutiny arrangements, the new People and Place Scrutiny Committees are undertaking most of their detailed scrutiny work through sub-groups and Review Boards with the focus of the main Committee meetings shifting towards the management and oversight of the wider scrutiny work programme. Scrutiny Committee scrutiny review reports are submitted to the Cabinet and Full Council for consideration and, where required, decision. Cabinet and County Council meetings will continue to be webcast providing the opportunity for the debates on the issues which have been considered by the Scrutiny Committee to be viewed by interested parties.

1.11 A review of the websites of other top tier local authorities in the south east indicates a variety of approaches to webcasting scrutiny meetings, ranging from no webcasting to webcasting all committees. There does not appear to be a consistent approach and the availability or otherwise of webcasting does not provide any indication of the effectiveness of the scrutiny process at these authorities.

1.12 Webcasting all Scrutiny Committee meetings would be possible within the existing webcast service contract without additional cost. There would be a limited resource implication arising from webcasting more meetings as an additional member of staff would be required to attend the meeting to operate the system, along with associated preparation time. This would have some, but not a significant, impact on the time available to support wider scrutiny activity, such as Scrutiny Reviews. Unless webcasting facilities were made available in other Council rooms (which would have resource implications), it would be necessary to hold all Scrutiny Committee meetings in the Council Chamber as this is the only room currently equipped for webcasting.

1.13 The Notice of Motion requests the live webcasting of all Scrutiny Committee meetings (with the exception of confidential/exempt items). The use of webcasting has been kept under review over a number of years with changes made in response to Member feedback. The current approach to webcasting scrutiny flows from Member feedback received during

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the recent review of scrutiny arrangements as set out in this report. It also reflects the current majority view of the Scrutiny and Audit Chairs and Vice-Chairs. Webcasting technology can be used flexibly to support effective scrutiny work and its use will continue to be subject to review in response to the changing needs and views of Members.

1.14 The Committee recommends the County Council to:

- ✧ reject the Notice of Motion set out in paragraph 1.1 of this report.

13 November 2018

KEITH GLAZIER
(Chair)