RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

1st OCTOBER 2020

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS TO THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

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1. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

   The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an update in respect of the introduction arrangements to enable the broadcasting of committee meetings and access and accessibility improvements to the Chamber.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

   2.1   It is recommended that the Democratic Services Committee:

       (i)   Note the development of the provision of webcasting within Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, in line with the potential proposals within the Local Government Elections Bill, which deliver upon 'in principal' support provided by members previously to broadcast Council meetings;

       (ii)   Support the development of webcasting to further assist with the promotion of public engagement and transparency of decision making by the Council;

       (iii)   Note the improvements technology and accessibility which can support diversity and engagement in local government moving forward.

3. **BACKGROUND**

   3.1   Members will recall the update provided to Committee on 8th January 2020 which outlined the need to upgrade the facilities available to members in the chamber and the proposal to take forward procurement exercise in relation to webcasting facilities.

   3.2   Technological advancements and the benefits to be gained from increased public engagement mean that the provision of webcasting has been discussed by members in Council, Scrutiny Committees and Democratic Services. Members have previously provide in-principle support for its introduction, albeit recognising that its introduction requires capital investment and ongoing

revenue requirements. The introduction of virtual meetings has also highlighted the benefits to be gained from having the ability to stream live meetings.

3.3   Councils are not currently legally required to webcast meetings, although it is strongly supported by Welsh Government and is linked to goals in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to strengthen local democracy and encourage public participation. [The Local Government and Elections Bill (Wales)](#) includes promotion of webcasting and the requirement for this provision to be mandatory across all public meetings.

3.4   There is potential that the Bill also includes the requirement to facilitate remote attendance at meetings of the Council and this would not be possible through the technology currently available in the chamber.

3.5   Most Local Authorities in Wales are already webcasting Committee meetings and RCT is therefore in the minority.

3.6   There are a number of benefits achieved through webcasting which include:

- A positive demonstration of accountability and transparency;
- Encouraging engagement and debate, by creating more opportunities for the public to access meetings;
- Accuracy of recording of meetings including recording of decisions, voting and attendance;
- The opportunity to raise the profile of the work of Councillors, and the discussions behind the decisions of Council and its committees.
- Assists in supporting our paper light approaches to meetings moving forward as some facilities in the Council chamber are currently inhibiting the role-out of a paper-light approach.

3.7   Since the Democratic Services Committee considered this matter previously, there has been significant changes to how we operate, in response to current circumstances. The implementation of these proposals, provide the opportunity to make the virtual meeting arrangements we have employed in recent weeks, part of our 'normal' operating arrangements into the future.

4.   PROGRESS TO DATE

4.1   A desktop exercise had been undertaken with officers identifying requirements to deliver upgrades to the council chamber and implement a webcasting provision. This included hardware and software to deliver a webcasting service and improvements to the facilities available in the Council Chamber.

4.2   Details on the progress of the project are outlined below:

Project Task	Work to date
Provision of hardware / software to deliver a webcasting solution to the Council Chamber.	It was identified that new equipment would be required to deliver a webcasting service. This will include cameras, audio visual support

	equipment, new delegate units and an upgraded audio system. Officers held discussions with potential suppliers and have received demonstrations on the preferred equipment to ensure it provides the solution required. This includes simultaneous translation integration, electronic voting and integration with the virtual meeting platforms. A key consideration was the portability of any solution invested in by the Council. The equipment that has been included as part of the procurement exercise can be transferred to another location with planning time. The additional acquisition of wireless audio units for committee room 1 would also ensure a fully portable system that would be able to support meetings away from Clydach Vale if required.
Chamber Facilities.	Meetings undertaken with Corporate Estates identified work required to improve the facilities available to Members in the Chamber including ensuring the Chamber is DDA compliant. USB Charging points and improved use of the space available were also identified as being key requirements. As a result, the Chamber will benefit from refurbishments to the lay out, dedicated translation booth and increased desk space with charging points available for all Members. A key consideration was the portability of any solution invested in by the Council. The furniture that has been sourced is fully portable and all equipment can be transferred to another location with planning time.

5. **PROCUREMENT PROCESS**

5.1 A mini competition process was undertaken via a suitable framework. The 2 suppliers under this Framework (Public-I Group Limited and Stream UK Media Services Limited t/a StreamAMG) were invited to tender via eTenderWales on 24th July 2020.

5.2 One tender response was received from Public-I Group Limited. This was the company identified by the Council as being a market leader with vast experience in this sector. The tender response was comprehensively evaluated by the Project Team and as a result Public-I Group Limited met the high standard set by the Council as part of the evaluation criteria.

5.3 Public-I Group Limited confirmed as part of their tender response that they could provide the required hardware and software required for a webcasting service as well as providing support and maintenance packages for the full duration of the webcasting contract. The webcasting solution would also be fully integrated with virtual meeting software including 'Zoom' and 'Teams'.

6. <u>FUTURE STEPS</u>

6.1 Following the award of the contract for the webcasting provision the installation period commenced on 28th September 2020 and subject to restrictions in relation to the Covid-19 Pandemic and the completion of works in the chamber it is envisaged the project completion to be near end of October 2020

6.2 The introduction of a webcasting service will require Democratic Services Officers to receive full training in the use of the system and to conduct a number of trial meetings to ensure the final product is a professional webcast stream of Council meetings. For this reason, it is recommended that the introduction of live webcasting be rolled out on an incremental basis to allow for experience to be gained with the live system operations.

6.3 This technology will provide the opportunity to 'lock-in' the opportunity we have created, as a temporary measure currently, for members to engage virtually via Zoom.

6.4 Once the technology is operational, it will be important to take a phased approach to roll-out, similar to the approach adopted for virtual meetings in recent months. It will also be important to maintain flexibility in our approach to each specific committee, between full attendance, hybrid and virtual, to maintain and build upon the positive enhancements, which have been achieved over the last six months.

6.5 A full programme of training will be needed to be developed for members over the coming weeks to provide the opportunity for members to familiarise themselves with this technology.

6.6 In the short to medium term, how our standing order and rules of procedure will need to be adapted in this new environment, may needed to be considered by the Corporate Governance & Constitution Committee and subsequently Full Council.

6.7 Alongside the discussions of this committee, the Head of Democratic Services will continue to engage with Group Leaders in respect of these developments and future roll-out plans.

7   EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

7.1   The provision of a webcasting service would promote democracy and encourage public engagement. By removing potential barriers for members of the public to attend meetings at the chamber, webcasting opens up opportunities for wider public engagement and transparency.

8.   CONSULTATION

8.1   Following the previous discussions of Council and the Democratic Services Committee an Officer Working Group has been established, comprising a number of different directorates who meet regularly to discuss proposals. The Chair and Vice Chair of Democratic Services Committee are updated regularly on developments.

8.2   A desktop review has been carried out with other local authorities to identify the level of webcast provision currently. This has identified that 18 out of 22 Local Authorities currently webcast.

8.3   The opportunities offered by web-casting have been considered by members as part of the business of full Council, Cabinet, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, the Corporate Governance and Constitution Committee, formal meetings of Chairs & Vice-Chairs.

8.4   Promoting public engagement in the democratic processes, including webcasting, has also been discussed in the recent introduced meeting between the Chief Executive and Political Group Leaders, which the Head of Democratic Services attends.

9.   FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

9.1   The associated funding to deliver these improvements were included as part of the Council's 2020/21 Budget, following support provided previously by the Democratic Services Committee.

9.2   There is no indication yet, if any financial support will be provided by the Welsh Government to support the delivery of the priorities for reforming local government identified with the Local Government Elections Bill Wales. However the Welsh Local Government Association is pressing the case that the mandatory introduction of webcasting across all public facing meetings, should be supported by the necessary funding.

10.   LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1   The [Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill](#) outlines a mandatory requirement for Local Authorities to provide a webcasting service.

10.2 The implementation of webcasting will require amendments to the Council's Constitution. Therefore a report will be presented to the Corporate Governance and Constitution Committee for consideration, before endorsement by Council.

11. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

11.1 The provision of webcasting would link to the Corporate Plan priorities with particular reference to 'living within our means' and an 'efficient and effective Council', ensuring transparency with our decision making process for the benefits of our residents.

11.2 Ensuring that there are greater opportunities for public engagement through webcasting links to the Wellbeing of Future Generations goals of a more equal Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities. This proposal would further support the ability of this council to involve communities in key decisions.

12 CONCLUSION

12.1 Although Councils are not currently legally required to webcast meetings, it is strongly supported by Welsh Government, and is linked to goals previously identified in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to strengthen local democracy and encourage public participation. In addition the new Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill includes proposals for mandating of webcasting and remote attendance in the future.

12.2 The provision of webcasting, has received cross-party support in the Council for the reasons set out, in particular for supporting positive engagement with the public going forward.

12.3 Further work will be necessary to consider amendments to the Council's Rules & Procedures and wider constitution to facilitate the introduction of webcasting into the democratic business of the Council.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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BACKGROUND PAPERS - Democratic Services – Support for Members