



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

10th MAY 2021

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN DEMOCRACY

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

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 the engagement opportunities to improve public participation in the democratic process.

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 requirements of the Local Government & Elections Wales Act, 2021.
- (ii) Support the development of webcasting to further assist with the promotion of public engagement and transparency of decision making by the Council;
- (iii) Consider the meetings that are proposed to remain as virtual meetings and those that will be facilitated through a future hybrid approach.
- (iv) Consider the meetings that will be webcast and live streamed through the Council website.
- (v) Note the move to the Modern.Gov system to publish information to the Council website, including Member attendance details.
- (vi) Consider the wellbeing proposals in respect of formalising comfort breaks at meetings and agenda setting.
- (vii) Note the funding received via the Digital Democracy Fund to further support the developments needed to be taken forward with webcasting within the Council Headquarters.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 At the Democratic Services Committee on the 9th January 2020 Members agreed to take forward changes to the facilities within the Council Chamber through the procurement of equipment to facilitate webcasting and to further assist in the hybrid meetings requirement.
- 3.2 The Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act places a duty on principal councils to put in place arrangements for the broadcast of council meetings so that members of the public who are unable to attend are able to see and hear proceedings as they happen. Recordings of meetings should also be publicly available for a reasonable period after the meeting.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 The Democratic Services Committee have received numerous updates in respect of the development and implementation of the webcasting equipment, which has been significantly delayed due to the covid pandemic. On the 15th April, the webcasting equipment within the Council Chamber was signed off for completion and the Council Business Unit, along with colleagues from ICT and the Welsh Language Unit will undertake socially distanced training on the new equipment during this week (11th May 2021).

4. WEBCASTING GOING FORWARD.

- 4.1 The introduction of a webcasting service will require the Council Business Unit 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.
- 4.2 It is intended to adopt the same incremental approach as was utilised for the roll-out of virtual meetings during the summer of 2020.

- 4.3 This approach would initially prioritise Cabinet, Planning and Development and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
- 4.4 The next phase would see the adoption, on an incremental basis by thematic scrutiny committees following the schedule of the committee calendar, with a hybrid Council meetings being enabled at the end of this process.
- 4.5 This technology will provide the opportunity to 'lock-in' the opportunity already created, through the virtually meetings arrangement via Zoom and the publication of meeting recordings on the Council website.
- 4.6 It will 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 twelve months.
- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 The Council's Rules of Procedure will need to be adapted in this new environment and will be considered by the Corporate Governance & Constitution Committee and subsequently Full Council.
- 4.9 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.

5 COUNCIL CHAMBER AND COMMITTEE ROOM 1.

- 5.1 As well as the introduction of webcasting the Council Chamber has undergone significant amendments to ensure accessibility and to improve the democratic environment. The new webcasting equipment improves the audio within the Chamber, the addition of screens will make it easier for Members to engage in the process and the new furniture arrangements addresses DDA requirements. The pavement outside of the Council Chamber has also been lowered due to accessibility issues. These issues have been identified via the Diversity in Democracy Working Group.
- 5.2 To further enhance the translation facilities provided during Committee meetings the chamber now consists of an integrated translation booth, which will benefit members of the welsh language team to undertake this vital role and further enhance diversity in the democratic process.
- 5.3 In addition to the expansion of webcasting infrastructure equipment the procurement of new headset systems for all Members / Officers and Members of the public when in attendance at meetings will be taken forward, to ensure the translation provided within a meeting is easily accessible for all. The current headsets are no longer compatible with the new system and there is a need for any new headsets purchased to be easily sanitised after each use, as is with

current practice in the Council Chamber and which is even more important in the current climate. The provision of such headsets again ensures equality of provision for those Members / Officers / public that wish to transverse bilingually at meetings.

- 5.4 In December 2020, the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James announced funding opportunities of £500,000 to support the digital transformation of democracy required to underpin many of the provisions contained within the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act, 2021. RCT Council submitted 3 bids to the fund:
- Expansion of the Webcasting infrastructure (Bid 1)
 - Strengthening of the Members Portal and voting Apps (Bid 2)
 - Support framework to further assist Town and Community Councils with the implementation of the Local Government & Elections Wales Act.(Bid 3)

Expansion of the Webcasting infrastructure (Bid 1)

- 5.5 Our first bid recognised that the Council's current investment in the webcasting infrastructure would will only support webcasting of Council proceedings, with this facility supporting full Council and planning meetings. The bespoke set-up used for scrutiny proceedings, which as Members will be aware is often better facilitated within our smaller committee rooms. It is was therefore proposed that funding be ascertained to take forward a further purchase of webcasting infrastructure within our smaller committee room settings. The bid also recognised the importance of the provision to provide a hybrid platform for most meetings to support Members whether they attend remotely or in person at a meeting. The Council recognised there was a strong need to plan for future hybrid meetings for the benefit of all Members, ensuring meetings are accessible and Members are treated equally. There are always significant accessibility risks for hybrid meetings and enabling use of the smaller committee room settings in the first instance, learning where possible from other successful organisations who conduct hybrid meetings would increase the scope of engagement, not just formal committee meetings, but in terms of pubic and partner engagement and participation. It was therefore seen as essential that the smaller committee rooms were equipped with the webcasting facilities in the first instance.

Strengthening of the Members Portal and voting Apps (Bid 2)

- 5.6 The Second bid looked to further improve the facilities within the Members portal which is being developed for the benefit of Members. Through the current virtual meetings arrangements taken forward by the Council it has become apparent that the Members Portal could also serve as an important area for a voting system to be developed, integrating the system with the Modern.Gov system, utilised by the Council. The need for an online voting system will be instrumental to the continuation of Council business in a timely and proficient manner, preventing a role call basis as currently utilised. This system will ensure accessibility and equality without any discrimination for those outside of

the Council Chamber. The placing of the voting system within the Portal will again promote the Members Portal and ensure ease of access for all Members.

- 5.7 On the 10th March, the Head of Democratic Services received notification that RCT had been successful with each of the bids submitted. Going forward this means, that the Council will look to procure additional equipment to support the webcasting provision and future hybrid meetings. In respect of the voting app the Council Business unit will work with the Head of Business Support and Customer Care to take forward the creation of such an app.

6 **WEBCASTING RECORDINGS.**

- 6.1 A webcast is a transmission of audio and video over the internet. The webcasting equipment within the Council Chamber and going forward Committee Room 1 captures the live information of a Committee meeting and sends it to a central server, which in turn sends it to anyone that would like to view the meeting. Through the use of a persons internet connection (either broadband or via a dial-up modem) and [Windows Media free player](#) Members of the public can view Council meetings live from the comfort of their own home.
- 6.2 The system also allows viewers to watch / re-watch meetings following closure of the meeting through the publication of such materials on the Councils website. The archives allow viewers to view the meeting at their leisure and, through the use of the index points, allow viewers to jump to a specific agenda point or speaker.
- 6.3 The webcasting system is fully integrated within the Modern.Gov system, which further enhances a viewers understanding of a meeting. Through such integration agenda items are easily accessible and in addition viewers can find out further information about a member speaking by linking to a Members profile page in the Modern Gov system.
- 6.4 For such information to be available, it will be necessary for RCT to push the Modern.Gov system 'public'. Currently the Council have been utilising a 'restricted' version of the system. This means only RCT members / co-opted Members and Officers have access to its content. When the system becomes public the information published on the system will be pushed to the Council website and the Modern. Gov app, therefore in the public domain, unless a report is an exempt item, where system parameters are in place to prevent public view. The benefits of this publication prevents the duplication that is currently being undertaken by the Council Business unit (Officers publish agendas within the modern gov system and then further have to publish through the contensis system on the Council website); The Modern. Gov system will populate the Council website in respect of a Members profile data, including extra features such as party logos. The system will also capture details in respect of Member attendance and details such as Member training. The recording of Member attendance will become a seamless and real-time public-facing record of members attendance. Attendance will be 'live' with the information being made available a few days after a meeting. Currently the recording and updating of Member attendance records is input manually by the

Council Business Unit which often requires an updating period before up-to-date attendance is subsequently published on the web. Another benefit of the system is the timely notifications of Member Attendance to the Council Business unit if a Member has not attended a meeting for a four month consecutive period.

- 6.5 Another benefit of the Modern.Gov system is the availability of a 'live calendar of meetings'. This calendar will illustrate all meetings that are scheduled in line with the agreed Calendar of Meetings and will illustrate all documentation linked to these meetings when such documentation has been published in line with current publication requirements. Any amendments to the calendar will automatically be updated so always providing a 'live' calendar of meetings.
- 6.6 Members must be mindful that the publication of the information to the web via the modern gov system will need to be from a point in time. Therefore it is proposed that the system is pushed live at the start of the new Municipal Year. Committee agenda's, minutes and things such as Member attendance details will be available on the system prior to this start point due to the details already being recorded by the Council Business Unit, but for accuracy going forward the details should be viewed from June 2021.
- 6.7 The newly acquired webcasting system also incorporates the opportunity for recording of Members voting during a meeting through the system, reducing the need for a manual show of hands or roll call of Members.

7. COMMITTEE MEETINGS GOING FORWARD.

- 7.1 Following the need to conduct virtual meetings through the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 and in readiness for the forthcoming requirements of hybrid meetings and remote attendance through the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act the Council already have well established practices in place to conduct such meetings through the zoom platform, with the recording following these meetings being available on the Council website.
- 7.2 Going forward, and with the future steady move (restrictions permitted) to undertake physical meetings for most Committee meetings it is proposed that some of the smaller Council meetings that are undertaken are continued to be held through a virtual meeting setting. The reason for such a proposal is following consideration of:
- The likely duration of the meetings – Consideration of the agenda item content and also using Councillor and Officers time more sensibly by reducing the travel requirements;
 - Promote diversity in Democracy by encouraging the flexibility of remote access to virtual meetings and thereby attracting more people who work and young parents
 - Contribute to the carbon reduction agenda by reducing travelling and reducing travelling costs.

- 7.3 It is proposed that the following meetings are undertaken on a virtual basis only and reviewed annually to ensure the arrangements are fit for purpose:
- LEA Governors
 - VER Panel
 - Llwydcoed Crematorium Joint Committee
 - Ynysangharad War Memorial park Cabinet Committee
 - Community Liaison Committee
 - Pensions Fund Committee
 - Corporate Parenting Board
 - Welsh Language Cabinet Steering Group
 - Arts & Strategic Culture Steering Group
 - City Deal Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee
 - Cwm Taf PSB Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee
- 7.4 In addition, it is proposed that appropriate flexibility is provided for the Head of Democratic Services and the responsible Committee Chair to determine whether a meeting should be convened virtually, through a hybrid set-up or at a physical location. This should be determined by the nature of business being considered.
- 7.5 Subject to the above proposal it is also suggested that where necessary, the Chair of the Committee will be able to hold a meeting with Members present in a specific location if in the interests and benefit of the Committee ...i.e Site visits / meetings on location to assist Members with their role and understanding of work being undertaken.

8 HYBRID MEETINGS

- 8.1 The Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 modifies the provisions in the 2011 Measure with the intention of making it easier for remote attendance to operate. Essentially, the conditions attached to the operation of remote attendance within the 2011 Measure are removed, in favour of leaving the principal council's standing orders to specify the conditions about how it should operate within that council. In addition, the Chair and Proper Officer of the meeting will need to be happy that the conditions for remote attendance are satisfied in the case of any particular meeting before business should proceed. A local authority must ensure that the facilities necessary to satisfy the conditions set out in its standing orders are available where the meeting is being held.
- 8.2 The Council are in a good position to undertake hybrid meetings and working with the webcasting facilitators will enhance the process going forward. Changes to the Council's Constitution to facilitate such meetings will need to be addressed and it is suggested that a 'multi locations meeting policy' is contained within the Council Constitution to address the future workings of meetings. A report will be presented to the Council's Corporate & Constitution Committee outlining the potential new ways of working and the resulting changes needed to the Council's procedure rules. This report will be dependant

on the Welsh Government Guidance in relation to the facilitating of hybrid meetings and the requirements for webcasting, which currently, Councils are awaiting on.

- 8.3 Going forward, any member attending a meeting remotely (“remote attendee”) must, when they are speaking, be able to be seen and heard by the members who are attending the meeting at the place where the meeting is held (“members in actual attendance”) and the remote attendee must, in turn, be able to see and hear those in actual attendance. In addition, a remote attendee must be able to be seen and heard by, and in turn see and hear any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting and who exercise a right to speak at the meeting. If there is more than one remote location, all the members attending remotely must be able to hear – but not necessarily see – the other remote attendees.
- 8.4 Practicalities surrounding confidential, or “exempt” issues in consideration at a meeting – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 – will need to be considered. It would be important to ensure that there are no members of the public at remote locations able to hear or see the proceedings during discussions of such confidential items. Any member in remote attendance who failed to disclose that there were in fact persons present who were not so entitled would be in breach of their Code of Conduct responsibilities.
- 8.5 The Council will have to build into its Council Procedure Rules arrangements to provide for voting to take place simultaneously at the main and remote location(s). It is suggested for all hybrid meetings Members utilise the voting app that will be developed within the Members Portal. Council Procedure Rules will need to cover this issue so that chairs of meetings are aware of the correct procedure to follow.

9 MEMBERS WELLBEING

- 9.1 Attending meetings virtually brings with it many benefits for Members, allowing them the flexibility to attend meetings while balancing different priorities with work / home or additional Councillor duties. The ability to attend meetings virtually will play an important role in promoting greater diversity of representation on the Council. However, it can often lead to both Members and Officers being in front of visual display screens for prolonged periods over the course of a day.
- 9.2 As we seek to embed the positive aspects of virtual working and the progress we have made over the last twelve months, it is important to recognise how our meetings operate and the importance of time – management, which needs to be considered as part of any virtual or hybrid approach. The Welsh Government has commissioned proposals to reconsider how democratic processes and procedures might operate consistently across Wales in a digital-first way.

- 9.3 It is often the case that Council meetings within RCT and some other meetings of the Council can exceed the 3-hour meeting duration. To ensure the wellbeing of Members and officers during meetings, especially in relation to screen time for those attending virtually, it is suggested that the Presiding Officer / Chair shall have the discretion to call an adjournment at an appropriate time in order to facilitate a 10-minute comfort break. In accordance with the Council's Display Screen equipment policy short frequent breaks should be taken from visual display equipment and if possible, breaks should be taken away from a workstation to allow the user to stand up, move about and/or change posture. Such breaks would ensure the wellbeing of all Members in attendance. Although this practice is undertaken informally for Council meetings, a change to the Council constitution would enforce these wellbeing breaks going forward.
- 9.4 In addition, to try to manage the duration of meetings it is proposed that timings are placed against agenda items to promote appropriate time-management and afford appropriate priority to each business matter. This approach is already facilitated at other levels of government including the Welsh Parliament and UK Parliament. This is also the case in other Welsh local authorities. It is envisaged that this method would assist with agenda setting, to ensure agendas are not overloaded with reports and also assist with the focus of debate. Any time limits on agenda items may only be extended at the discretion of the Presiding Officer / Chair. This proposal will be considered by the Constitution & Corporate Governance Committee later in the month.

10 **TRAINING.**

- 10.1 Members have taken forward training in respect of the zoom platform to assist them in undertaking virtual meetings. Future training will need to be taken forward on the equipment within the Council Chamber, when safe to do so, to allow for hybrid meetings to take place.
- 10.2 Training to Chairs and Vice Chairs of Committees will also be provided to assist in the chairing of hybrid meetings.
- 10.3 Once developed, training will also be provided on the voting app that will be available for Members to utilise in the Members Portal.

11 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 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. The aspect of hybrid and virtual meetings also promotes the democracy agenda, allowing the undertaking of Council business by Members to be more accessible and manageable.

12 **CONSULTATION**

- 12.1 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.
- 12.2 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.

13. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 13.1 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. Additional funding has also been sought from Welsh Government in respect of further advancements with webcasting equipment as outlined within the report.

14. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 outlines a mandatory requirement for Local Authorities to provide a webcasting service.
- 14.2 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.

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

- 15.1 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.
- 15.2 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.

16 CONCLUSION

- 16.1 Through the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 Councils will be legally required to webcast meetings to strengthen local democracy and encourage public participation.
- 16.2 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.

- 16.3 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.
- 16.4 A report on the way forward with future Committee meetings will also need to be reported to Cabinet and full Council.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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