



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE

13th MAY 2021

VIRTUAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**JOINT REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL SERVICES & SERVICE
DIRECTOR OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND COMMUNICATIONS**

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide members with the opportunity to consider proposals which seek to support the implementation of the Local Government & Election Wales Act (2021) and to support the implementation of hybrid meetings and live broadcasting in the new municipal year.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Consider the content of the report and the matters identified in 5.13.
- 2.2 Consider recommending the introduction of an indicative time allocation for Council agenda items.
- 2.3 Subject to recommendations 2.1 and 2.2 above, instruct the Proper Officer to propose a suitable amendment to the Council Procedural rules for consideration by Council at the twenty sixth Annual Council Meeting on the 26th May 2021.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide the opportunity for members to consider making recommendations for consideration at the Council AGM.
- 3.2 To support the future implementation of hybrid meeting arrangements and the roll-out of live broadcasting during the 2021/22 Municipal year.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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.
- 4.3 As a result of the pandemic the Council sought to utilise the ability provided through the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations, to deploy virtual meetings arrangements across the democratic functions of the Council and afford the opportunity for all members to come accustom to working virtually.
- 4.4 The Council quickly resumed all its democratic functions by the end of July 2020. This was made possible thanks to the engagement undertaken with all political groups to manage the discharge of business during this period, through a focus on business critical matters.
- 4.5 Over this period the level of information provided to all members has significantly increased, despite the frequency of Council meetings increasing over the same period. This has presented challenges in managing business within the prescribed three-hour period.
- 4.6 In response to the experiences of members over the last year, the Presiding Officer has requested the introduction of a time-allocation for full Council agenda items over the course of the next municipal year.
- 4.7 A similar arrangement to manage business is utilised in other democratic organisations, such as the Welsh and UK Parliament and many other local authorities.
- 4.8 Welsh Government have commissioned a Discovery project, which will consider how the democratic procedures of local authorities may adapt in response to news ways of working which have been accelerated as a result of the pandemic.

4.9 Following swift adaption to virtual meetings over the last twelve months and with the impending implementation of broadcasting and hybrid arrangements, it is believed that now may be an opportune time to consider how we may better manage business.

5. PROPOSAL

5.1 A report will be considered by the Democratic Services Committee on the [10th May 2021](#), which sets out the next steps in respect of the introduction of Webcasting and the steps being taken forward to enable hybrid meetings moving forward.

5.2 This report references the well-being issues associated with lengthy periods spent at one location and participation in virtual meetings. It is noted that 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.

5.3 The Presiding Officer has recognised the increased challenges faced during virtual meetings of Council, in particular which relate to managing the volume of business presented to members in productive way.

5.4 It is often the case that Council meetings 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. Subject to Members comments, a proposed change to the constitution to reflect this practice is considered in agenda item 5.

5.5 In addition to the above and to efficiently manage business moving forward it is also proposed that discretion be provided to allocate a published indicative time-allocation to agenda item of business tabled for considered at a Full Council meeting. Any Chair already has the ability to allocate a time to each matter of business as part of their leadership and management of a meetings agenda. This proposal seeks to place the allocation of time on record to enable all political groups to better respond and participate moving forward.

5.6 This indicative duration would not be prescriptive and flexibility would continue to be available to the Presiding Officer, to enable him / her to respond to the flow of

the debate and representations made by members to contribute. Identifying an indicative time for each items seeks to provide focus when determining business and is aimed at promoting the smooth discharge of business when broadcasting commences early in the new municipal year.

- 5.7 In discussion with the Head of Democratic Services, the Presiding Officer has indicated that this arrangement would not restrict participation in business to group leaders, but would instead require co-ordination by the respective groups to enable a cross spectrum of members to be able to contribute to business.
- 5.8 It is proposed that the determination of any indicative timing arrangements, would be undertaken in consultation with the proper officer. These arrangements would not over-ride prescribed time arrangements for matters such as questions.
- 5.9 The constitution is currently silent on this matter, with the discretion in terms of managing business efficiently already resting with the Chair of individual meetings. Should members be minded to support this proposals the Council's Procedural Rules could provide the following:

BUSINESS OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

- i. The agenda and timings for items of business for any Council Meeting shall be agreed in accordance with these Rules by the Presiding Officer (Or deputy Presiding Officer in his / her absence) in consultation with the Proper Officer at least 7 Working Days prior to the date of the Council meeting.*
 - ii. Any time limits on agenda items may only be extended at the discretion of the Presiding Officer.*
- 5.10 As part of this arrangement, it is proposed that advance notification is provided by the Head of Democratic Services to Group Leaders or their nominated Group Business Manager or Whip to enable individual groups to co-ordinate their contributions in advance of each meeting.
- 5.11 If members were minded to recommend this arrangement to full council, it is advised that this new approach be reviewed by this committee later in the Municipal Year, when practical experience of its operation and most importantly new hybrid and broadcasted meetings had been enabled.
- 5.12 During the course of this municipal year members may wish to consider further reviews to the Council's procedure rules to respond to new committee arrangements and the publication of future guidance by Welsh Government in respect of the promotion of public participation in democratic proceedings.
- 5.13 To determine any subsequent recommendations to the Annual General Meeting of the Council, Members may wish to consider the following issue:

Should an indicative time-line be introduced in advance of hybrid meeting arrangements and the broadcasting of committee proceedings?

Should a wider review of procedures be considered as the Council moves towards broadcasting meetings and responding to the requirements of the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021?

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no Equality and Diversity implications arising from this report and no Equality Impact Assessment is deemed necessary for the purposes of this report. The proposal to introduce a time allocation to agenda items would hopefully assist a more focussed approach to Council meetings and an opportunity for greater inclusion by all Members in the debates

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 Members of the Council's current political groups will be consulted in advance of this matter being considered by Full Council.
- 7.2 Group Leaders have been invited to attend this committee meeting to inform discussions on these matters.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

9. CONCLUSION

This report advises members of the proposal to introduce an indicative time allocation for individual matters of business with the aim of supporting the smooth discharge of business within a virtual environment.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

as amended by

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS