



**RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**30 NOVEMBER 2020**

**DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**UPDATE ON THE 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 of webcasting and recently completed 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 County Borough Council, in line with the potential proposals within the [Local Government and Elections Bill \(Wales\)](#), 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 [8<sup>th</sup> 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;
  - 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 months, part of our 'normal' operating arrangements into the future.

#### **4. PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 4.1 Following a mini competition process Public-I Group Limited were appointed to undertake the webcasting provision which includes providing the hardware, software as well as the support and maintenance package for the full duration of the webcasting contract. The webcasting solution would also be fully integrated with virtual meeting software including 'Zoom' and 'Teams'.
- 4.2 The installation period commenced on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020 and was initially envisaged to be completed by the end of October 2020. However, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and various lockdown restrictions the work is now due to be completed towards the end of November 2020.

- 4.3 As requested at the Democratic Services Committee held on the [1<sup>st</sup> October 2020](#) the Chair and Vice Chair will undertake a site visit to the Chamber to view the webcasting facilities on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 2020 and provide their feedback to members of the Committee.
- 4.4 Officers from the Council Business Unit who will be responsible for operating the system will be required to receive training to progress a number of trial meetings to ensure the final product is a professional webcast stream of Council meetings. For this reason, it is proposed that the introduction of live webcasting be rolled out to all Elected Members on an incremental basis in the New Year to allow for experience to be gained with the live system operations.
- 4.5 This technology will provide the chance to 'lock-in' the opportunity we have created, as a temporary measure currently, for Members to engage virtually via Zoom.
- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 A comprehensive programme of training will be developed over the coming weeks to provide the opportunity for members to familiarise themselves with this technology.
- 4.8 In the short to medium term, the Council's standing order and rules of procedure will need to be adapted for this new environment, and consideration may be required 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 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 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.

## **6 CONSULTATION**

- 6.1 Following the previous discussions of Council and the Democratic Services Committee an Officer Working Group continue to meet regularly to discuss proposals. The Chair and Vice Chair of Democratic Services Committee continue to be updated regularly on developments.

- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 The opportunities offered by web-casting continue to be 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.
- 6.4 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.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 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.

## **8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The [Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Bill](#) outlines a mandatory requirement for Local Authorities to provide a webcasting service.
- 8.2 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.

## **9 LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.**

- 9.2 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.
- 9.3 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.

## **10 CONCLUSION**

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 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.
- 10.3 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**