



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Services Committee held on Monday, 30 November 2020 at 5.00 pm (Virtual Meeting).

County Borough Councillors - Democratic Services Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor M Diamond (Chair)

Councillor M Webber	Councillor M Adams
Councillor J Bonetto	Councillor J Brencher
Councillor G Caple	Councillor J Edwards
Councillor H Fychan	Councillor S Rees
Councillor E Stephens	Councillor G Jones
Councillor S Powderhill	Councillor L Walker

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication

35 WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed all members to the meeting and was advised that no apologies had been received.

36 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, there were no declarations made pertaining to the agenda.

37 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 1st October 2020 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

38 MATTERS ARISING

The Head of Democratic Services advised members that in relation to Minute 34, nominations had been sought and a date for the inaugural meeting of the working group would be advised upon shortly.

39 DRAFT FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

The Head of Democratic Services presented his report in relation to the draft Work Programme for the 2020/2021 Municipal Year and asked Members to consider and agree the rolling work programme attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

The Head of Democratic Services referenced the importance of a flexible work programme in light of the events of 2020 and focussed Members attention on the core items to be presented at future meetings including updates in respect of webcasting provision, members portal and the work to be taken forward in respect of diversity, as well as the statutory reports that need to be considered by the Committee.

Members commented on the need for flexibility within the present climate with the work programme. Clarification was sought in respect of the proposed item in relation to 'extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds' and the Head of Democratic Services advised that the item to be brought forward would concentrate on 'how the Council will work with young people to make informed decisions at future elections'.

The Head of Democratic Services was questioned on the public viewing figures of the recorded virtual meetings and Members were advised that the highest views to date were in respect of a Council meeting attracting 40 views whilst other committees had viewings in single figures, however he added that this take up could be strengthened and improved upon with live broadcasting of meetings through the webcasting system.

Following consideration of the draft Work Programme 2020/2021 it was **RESOLVED** to approve the forward Work Programme subject to the amended wording in respect of 'extending the franchise for 16-17 year olds' for the Municipal Year 2020/2021.

40 SUFFICIENCY OF RESOURCES

The Head of Democratic Services presented Members with his report which provided an update on the provision of staff, resources and accommodation available to support Members in their role as set out within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 (the "Measure"). Members were advised that positive changes continue to be progressed in respect of the Council's scrutiny arrangements, despite the challenges presented by Covid, during the year.

He added that following the initial suspension of meetings during April, the Council's updated approaches to scrutiny continue to enhance committee's ownership of their work programmes. The officer also referenced the Members survey that had been conducted with the feedback providing a positive endorsement of the support provided to members and demonstrated recognition of the improvements delivered over the course of the last year.

The Head of Democratic Services provided an overview of the resources available within the Council Business unit advising Members that permanent funding support had been secured for the graduate research officer adding that the position would continue to provide a scrutiny research resource for Non-Executive Members to support their scrutiny responsibilities and wider elected member roles.

In addition, funding for an additional position of a 'Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer' was secured with the successful recruitment of an officer in early 2020. This role had strengthened the support and expertise available within the Unit taking forward the Council's joint scrutiny approach, outcome focused approaches to scrutiny and also further supporting the Community

Charter agreed at the Community Liaison Committee.

Members were further advised of a further role within the unit taken forward by a second graduate officer whose post moved from the Corporate policy and engagement team. The Graduate led on the development of the Members Portal (previously reported to Committee) and the project management of the webcasting provision

The Head of Democratic Services reminded Members of the support provided to the unit via the two dedicated translation officers and advised of the potential need to create additional capacity in this area due to the committed improvements in the democratic process that continue to be taken forward.

Details of the accommodation available to Members was provided although The Head of Democratic Services commented on the need to reflect on the best arrangements for members and Officers of the Council Business, post Covid-19 to build upon agile working and the progress made with virtual meeting arrangements over the last eight months. He acknowledged that the balance members adopted between normal face-to-face interaction and the new agile way, would need to be appreciated and factored into future arrangement planning.

Members conveyed their thanks for the support provided to Members by the Council Business Unit in assisting and equipping Members to undertake their role, with further emphasis on the support provided to Members over the last 8 months to allow Members to conduct their Council business on a virtual basis.

The Head of Democratic Services was queried on the completion of the Council Chamber and the floor space available within the Public gallery following the changes taken forward. The Officer confirmed that the Chamber was due for completion and confirmed that although the space was slightly smaller than previous the floor space was used more efficiently through the furniture installed so capacity wasn't significantly impacted. He also added that with the role out of the webcasting provision, members of the public would be able to watch the meetings live on a virtual basis rather than having to attend the Council Chamber.

The wellbeing and welfare of staff working remotely was also highlighted by Members and the Head of Democratic Services assured Members of the practices undertaken to ensure staffs wellbeing. Members were advised of regular survey's undertaken by the Senior Leadership Team in respect of home working, with feedback indicating staff preferred this way of working and allowed for a better work / life balance. In respect of the Council Business Unit the Head of Democratic Services advised that due to the way the Unit worked, better engagement within the team was being witnessed through the home working arrangements.

Discussions arose regarding the training to Members with the webcasting provision and the Head of Democratic Service commented that training and the undertaking of the webcasting provision would potentially be a resourcing issue for the Council Business Unit, which would possibly highlighted in a future resourcing report to the Committee.

Following discussions Members **RESOLVED**:

- (i) To note the overall support available to elected Members, as set out in section 4 of the report;
- (ii) To note the view of the Head of Democratic Services, as set out in section 6 of the report; and
- (iii) To agree that the levels of staff, accommodation and other resources are adequate at the present time and that a further report be presented to this Committee by the Head of Democratic Services on the sufficiency of resources for Members' support following the Council's Annual General Meeting in May 2021.

(N.B As Councillor Adams and Brencher were not in attendance for the entire duration of the item due to attendance at a previous meeting they abstained from voting on the item.)

41 ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS TO THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

Members were presented with the Head of Democratic Services report which provided Members with an update in respect of the introduction of webcasting and the recently completed access and accessibility improvements to the Council Chamber.

Members were reminded of the benefits provided through webcasting and the Welsh Government support of webcasting to strengthen local democracy and encourage public participation. The Head of Democratic Services commented on [The Local Government and Elections Bill \(Wales\)](#) which also includes promotion of webcasting and the requirement for this provision to be mandatory across all public meetings.

The Head of Democratic Services provided Members with an update on the improvements taken forward with Public-I Group Limited 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. It was added that the webcasting solution would also be fully integrated with virtual meeting software including 'Zoom' and 'Teams'. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and various lockdown restrictions the installation work is now due to be completed towards the end of November 2020.

Going forward, the Head of Democratic Services proposed that the introduction of live webcasting would 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, adding that a comprehensive programme of training would be developed over the coming weeks to provide the opportunity for members to familiarise themselves with this technology.

The Head of Democratic Services concluded his report by advising of the changes that would need to be taken forward in respect of the Council Constitution to ensure the new way of working is reflected in the Council procedure rules.

A member queried when the press and public would be able to attend Committee meetings going forward, commenting that the current recordings

added to the website after a meeting provided a time delay. The Head of Democratic Services referenced the Corona Virus Regulations and the instruction within for Members to be “seen and heard” which provided discretion in respect of the press and public as to how this instruction was provided, adding that the decision was taken to record meetings and publish on the Council website. The Officer commented that going forward under the webcasting provision the press and public would be able to watch the meetings live virtually.

One Member queried the package of hours acquired within the webcasting provision and whether there would be a sufficient number of hours available and also queried which committees would be broadcast. The Head of Democratic Services advised that the intention was to continue to support the existing committees that are currently being recorded and made available on the Council website. The Officer advised that he believed there was sufficient capacity with the number of hours procured to support the calendar of meetings, although the calendar would be reviewed and monitored on a regular basis. Confirmation would be sought on the actual number of hours procured from the project lead officer and Members would be advised accordingly.

The Head of Democratic Services was queried on the virtual meeting systems available and whether there was a preference to any one system. The Officer advised that the zoom system had provided the better option for virtual committee meetings due to the translation function available adding that the system was also compatible with the hybrid approach through the webcasting provision. He added that if Microsoft were to provide a similar option then this would be reviewed, but reiterated that for the reasons set out above zoom was currently the only viable option which was also used in the Senedd as part of their broadcasting arrangements.

The Vice Chair commented on the procurement exercise undertaken and the confidence that she held that a sufficient number of hours had been procured, and proceeded to discuss the Committees to be webcast, commenting that the quazi judicial committees should be given the same priority going forward. The Member also advised the Committee that her and the Chair would be visiting the Chamber on the 11th December and suggested that all Members be provided the opportunity to view the chamber in the New Year, in line with the Covid regulations and restrictions. The Vice Chair commented on the hybrid approach to meetings that could be taken forward adding that the virtual meetings suited some Members while others preferred the physical attendance at meetings. The member concluded by referencing the training needed to staff and the support that would be needed for Members.

Members **RESOLVED:**

- (i) To 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) To support the development of webcasting to further assist with the promotion of public engagement and transparency of decision making by the Council;
- (iii) To note the improvements technology and accessibility which can support diversity and engagement in local government moving forward.

FAMILY ABSENCE CONSULTATION - CHANGES TO ADOPTERS ABSENCE FOR ELECTED MEMBERS

The Head of Democratic Services referred Members to the consultation being undertaken in respect of changes to adopters absence for Elected Members, with a proposed change from 2 to 26 weeks. The officer sought Members views as to whether a Committee response was to be submitted or whether Members wished to respond individually.

Members discussed the importance of the consultation in respect of the strengthened opportunities it provided to families and the settling period needed and also the benefits it created by proactively supporting and retaining Councillors who need to balance their Elected Member duties with family commitments and further removed a potential barrier for any future candidate in their involvement in local democracy through becoming a Councillor.

One Member commented on the importance of the 14 day period prior to placement and sought clarity as to whether this was to be included in the leave of absence period as it was omitted from the statutory guidance that had been drafted.

Following discussions it was **RESOLVED**:

1. That a Committee response to the consultation would be drafted and circulated to Members of the Committee for agreement before submission.
2. That the consultation link would be circulated to all Members for information.

This meeting closed at 5.44 pm

**CLLR M. DIAMOND
CHAIR.**