RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

29TH JUNE 2021

HYBRID MEETINGS

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, DEMOCRATIC SERVICES & COMMUNICATION.

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 ability to operate through a hybrid approach. These developments aim to encourage engagement and improve public participation in the democratic process.

2. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1   It is recommended that Members:

  (i)   Agree the proposed roll out of the webcasting system and hybrid approach to Committee meetings;
  (ii)   Agree the proposed approach to training and demonstrations of equipment for each of the Committees in respect of the new systems within the Council Chamber
  (iii)   Note the pilot of the Modern.Gov hybrid Voting App to provide an inclusive approach to voting for all Members attending a hybrid meeting.

3. **BACKGROUND**

3.1   A detailed report in respect of webcasting was provided to the Democratic Services Committee on the 10th May, 2021 providing Members details of webcasting, the requirements for the facilitation of hybrid meetings and the developments undertaken to the Council website to assist in the publication of live streaming of Council meetings.

3.2   A similar report was also presented to the Cabinet in respect of webcasting at its meeting on the 24th June, which provided further information in respect of a proposed roll out of the system.

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, Democratic Services, Planning and Development and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. This would include a number of 'dress rehearsal' sessions before using the equipment in a formal setting. The table set below provides an indication of the timeline to be utilised:

Next Steps	Outcome	Scheduled (dates to be confirmed for formal report)
Briefing on new arrangements to Cabinet members and officers	To familiarise Cabinet & SLT with the new operation arrangements for webcast and hybrid meetings	Late June/early July
Briefing on the new arrangements to members of the Democratic Services Committee (DSC)	To familiarise the DSC with the new operation arrangements for webcast and hybrid meetings	Late June/ early July
Briefing on new arrangements to Overview & Scrutiny Committee (O&S) members	To familiarise O&S members with the new operation arrangements for webcast and hybrid meetings	July
Broadcast meeting of Cabinet	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a Cabinet meeting including hybrid attendance	July
Briefing on new arrangements to Planning & Development (P&D) Committee members	To familiarise P&D members with the new operation arrangements for webcast and hybrid meetings	August
Broadcast meeting of Democratic Services Committee (DSC)	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a DSC meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	September
Broadcast meeting of Planning & Development Committee	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcasting a P&D meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	September
Broadcast meeting of Overview & Scrutiny	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a	September

	O&S meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	
Review progress to date	**DSC to review progress and feedback from members**	**September**
Wider briefing on new arrangements to all members, including committee by committee engagement	Subject to review To familiarise members not already briefed on new ways of working (including specific session for Chairs & Vice-Chairs)	September
Wider committee roll-out	Subject to review work towards Implementing webcasting and hybrid arrangements across all functions	September

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 meeting being enabled at the end of this process.

4.5   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. It is therefore proposed for the Democratic Services Committee to review progressing following the summer recess. This review may consider the progress to date and evaluate the operate on these new working arrangements to inform future roll-out plans.

4.6   A full programme of training will be developed for members over the coming weeks to provide the opportunity for members to familiarise themselves with this technology. Again this support would be provided through 'mock' meetings to enable members and officers to become familiar with the arrangement before public use. A video tutorial will also be development to allow members to prepare for future sessions at their own pace and convenience.

4.7   The Council's Rules of Procedure were considered at the Constitution Committee on the 13th May and ratified at the Council's 26th Annual General Meeting to allow for the introduction of hybrid meetings and webcasting. Further amendments to the constitution may need to be taken forward as we still await the publication of the Welsh Government guidance into hybrid meetings. It is also suggested that a multi-location policy is taken forward by the Democratic Services Committee to further support the implementation of hybrid meetings.

4.8   Due to the current Covid restrictions and to ensure Member and Officer safety we will need to ensure that the number of Members that choose to attend a meeting physically does not exceed the recommended Chamber capacity of 26 (socially distanced). This figure will need to include officers from Democratic Services to run the hybrid infrastructure. It is therefore proposed that

attendance will be proportional to the political balance, with Group leaders confirming physical attendance within those numbers in advance of a meeting.

4.9   Going forward, in advance of any hybrid meeting, Members will be asked to attend a meeting at least 30 minutes in advance of the meeting to check for any potential technical problems and to check Members are comfortable with the systems.

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

5   **PRACTICALITIES SURROUNDING THE ROLL OUT OF HYBRID MEETINGS**

5.1   A number of actions are in progress to enable hybrid meeting to be held as outlined below

- Configuration of the Microphone system by the Council Business Unit – this work involves setting committee memberships and both member and officer profiles on to the system. This work will allow for the system to recognise the Member or Officer speaking at a Committee meeting which will also link to the webcasting system and the Members profile on the web.

- Syncing the Webcasting System to the Modern Gov system to allow the public to follow a live stream or to watch a pre-recorded webcast of a meeting and be able to follow the meeting against each of the of the agenda items or to skip to a particular agenda item to see the discussions at that part of a meeting.

- Design and Development of a new webcasting area of the website to assist Members of the public in navigating around this area of the site, ensuring the website is available bilingually.

- The piloting of the Modern Gov hybrid Voting app. Installation of the app within the current back office system of Modern Gov used by the Council Business Unit. Work on the system to ensure dual language. The installation of the new Modern Gov App on all Members devices to allow access to the voting tool.

- Development of useful guidance manuals in respect of the Chamber equipment and the hybrid voting app, including a video tutorial.

- Recording disclaimers and privacy notices to be developed in respect of Members and public speakers at meetings and the use of images and recordings.

- Covid Safety Measures – Dependent on the stage of the roll out and the restrictions in place appropriate safety measures will need to be undertaken in respect of every hybrid meeting – Consideration is being given to Covid Safety Checklist on arrival / the need for temperature readings / the need for lateral

flowing testing / provision of face masks / Hand sanitisers. Members views on these approaches will factored into the final working arrangements.

DEMONSTRATION MEETINGS.

5.2 Demonstration and test meetings of the Cabinet, Democratic Services Committee and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee are proposed to be taken forward prior to the August recess, with the intention of webcasting a Cabinet meeting at the end of the July. Planning and Development will be taken forward during August if Members are available.

5.3 In order for this timeline to be a success the practicalities listed above need to have been addressed.

5.4 Consideration will need to be taken forward in respect of the our Chairs of Committees, in order to explore and consider how meetings are to be run in respect of the order of speakers at a meeting and voting arrangements. For example, the microphone system within the Chamber will allow a queuing system for those Members wishing to comment on a matter. Those Members attending the meeting through the hybrid approach will continue with the virtual hands raised approach, as deployed over the last 12months. Such considerations and best ways of working may not become apparent until a number of meetings have been held.

5.5 The new infrastructure within the Council Chamber also allows for digital voting to be undertaken through the Microphone unit for those attending on site. However, again this system would only be accessible to those in physical attendance and those attending virtually would need to continue with the hands raised function. It is felt that operating two methods of voting, may disrupt the flow of a meeting or those attending the meeting virtually feeling disengaged from the meeting. A number of options are being considered from utilising a voting app which could be accessed in the same way from the chamber floor or virtually through to facilitating a 'voting break' at the end of each agenda time to conduct the agreed process.

5.6 Members of the Democratic Services Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be invited to demonstration and mock meetings during July to provide Members with an overview of the equipment. If a Member is not comfortable in attending the meetings at the Chamber or the numbers exceed the required 26 then provision will be made for Members to attend virtually through the zoom platform. Members will be shown how to use the microphones (if on site) and Members can practice using the request to speak queuing system.

5.7 In respect of the voting App, all Members will need to have access to the new Modern.Gov app, and due to recent updates to some Members and Officer Ipads, some Members are already using the new App. It is intended that Officers from the Council Business Unit will provide one to one training sessions to Members on the voting app prior to the first official webcast meeting and it is intended that a demonstration of the voting app will be available in time for the

July demonstration meetings, subject to implementation of the system within required timescales. It will be important that going forward Members are able to access the Modern Gov App whether they are accessing a meeting physical at the Council Chamber or virtually through zoom. Consideration may need to be given by the Democratic Service Committee and Head of Democratic Services as to the suitability of Members devices due to the need to ensure all Members can access the App, especially if they are already using their device to access the zoom meeting.

5.8   A date for the demonstration to the Democratic Services Committee will be advised upon at the meeting. Due to the business of the committee calendar in July, this demonstration meeting may need to be conducted during an afternoon session, although all future meetings will continue at 5pm as scheduled.

6   EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

6.1   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.

6.2   The provision of an online voting app will help ensure the accessibility and inclusion of all Members in the democratic process regardless of their location. Where a member is unable to access the Modern.Gov app an alternative provision of a manual hand raising will need to be taken forward for those Members.

7   WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

7.1   The developments within the Council Chamber and webcasting infrastructure will further strengthen the welsh language within the democratic process. Members of the public will be able to live stream meetings or watch pre-recorded meetings and choose the floor language used.ie When Members / Officers converse at a meeting through the medium of welsh they can either choose to hear these discussions in welsh or the alternative of the English translation, which is currently unavailable through the current zoom recordings.

7.2   Due to the importance of the Welsh Language the Council have opted to take forward the piloting of a bilingual voting app.

8   CONSULTATION

8.1   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.

8.2   Promoting public engagement in the democratic processes, including webcasting, has also been discussed in the recently 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. Additional funding has also been sought from Welsh Government in respect of further advancements with webcasting equipment as outlined within the report.

10.   LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

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

10.2   The implementation of webcasting require amendments to the Council's Constitution which were taken forward at the Council's 26th Annual General meeting

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   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.

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.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, DEMOCRATIC SERVICES & COMMUNICATION

ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN DEMOCRACY