



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL

30TH JUNE 2021

ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN DEMOCRACY

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) 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) Note the development of webcasting to further assist with the promotion of public engagement and transparency of decision making by the Council;
- (iii) Note the decision of the Democratic Services Committee in respect of the meetings that are proposed to remain as virtual meetings and those that will be facilitated through a future hybrid approach, subject to the caveats outlined within the report
- (iv) Note the meetings that will be webcast and live streamed through the Council website and the roll out of such meetings.
- (v) Note the move to the Modern.Gov system to publish information to the Council website, including Member attendance details.
- (vi) 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 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 meetings 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 On the 15th April 2021, following significant delays to the implementation of the webcasting equipment due to the covid pandemic, the webcasting equipment within the Council Chamber was signed off and the Council Business Unit, along with colleagues from ICT and the Welsh Language Unit undertook socially distanced training on the new equipment at the beginning of 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 Potential options to roll-out this new technology and new committee working arrangements have been discussed with the Chair of Democratic Services County Borough Councillor Lewis Hooper and County Borough Councillor Maureen Webber as the Cabinet Member responsible for Council Business. Cabinet Committee has also received an update on the proposed approach to be adopted.

- 4.4 The Democratic Services will consider the practicalities to enable the roll-out proposed and the associated support to be made available for members and officers, on the [29th June](#).
- 4.5 The proposed 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 O&S meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance | September |
| Review progress to date | DSC to review progress and feedback from members | September |
| Wider briefing on new arrangements to all members, including | Subject to review To familiarise members not already briefed on new ways | September |

| | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| committee by committee engagement | of working (including specific session for Chairs & Vice-Chairs) | |
| Wider committee roll-out | Subject to review work towards Implementing webcasting and hybrid arrangements across all functions | September |

- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 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.
- 4.9 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. Again this support would be provided through 'mock' meetings to enable members and officers to become familiar with the arrangement before public use.
- 4.10 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.
- 4.11 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.
- 4.12 In respect of the Covid Safety Measures and practicalities that need to be considered for Members attending the Council Chamber, it will be dependent on the stage of the roll out and the restrictions in place. Consideration would need to be given to the possibility for 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.

- 4.13 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.
- 4.14 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 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 accessibility 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 only support webcasting of Chamber 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 would require regular reconfiguration. This funding will take forward a further purchase of webcasting infrastructure within our smaller committee room settings. The bid also recognized 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 public 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. The need for an online voting system when undertaking hybrid meetings will be instrumental to the continuation of Council business in a timely and proficient manner, preventing a roll call basis as currently utilised. An online voting system for all Members to utilise regardless of their location at a meeting will ensure accessibility and equality without any discrimination for those outside of the Council Chamber and preventing any members who are attending a meeting virtually from feeling disengaged from the voting process. Through the current virtual meetings arrangements taken forward by the Council it had been considered that the Members Portal could serve as an important area for a voting system to be developed. Since these initial discussions, the facilitators of Modern Gov has since developed its own online voting system integrated within the Modern Gov App, which Members utilise to access Committee papers. The use of this voting system within Modern Gov is considered to be the best way forward in respect of voting at Committee meetings, promoting Members use of the Modern Gov app to access Committee papers and ensure ease of access for all Members.

Support framework to further assist Town and Community Councils with the implementation of the Local Government & Elections Wales Act. (Bid 3)

- 5.7 The third bid looked at supporting Community and Town Councils in responding to the Local Government & Elections Wales Act, particularly in respect of public engagement to assist in the diversity in democracy agenda. The bid included

the development of a digital support framework to assist in the delivery of virtual and hybrid meetings and strengthen the opportunity such meetings will have in the diversity of democracy agenda and public engagement. Through the use of the digital support fund the Council would look to further support our Town and Community Councils with digital engagement as we recognise that Community and Town Councils offer a means of connecting with residents at a local level. This work would promote participation within communities and support broader diversity in terms of engagement and representation at a Community Council level. As a Council we feel we would be able to provide and work with Community and Town Councils to identify digital solutions to assist their democratic processes and respond to the Act. This funding will enable practical support to be provided to support Town & Community Council Clerks to develop their digital environment, ensuring that their Elected Members can represent and communicate with residents in a digital way. This funding would enable 'good digital working practices' to be shared with our respective town and community councils. Through this support we would provide access to training available to principal council members.

- 5.8 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 Modern Gov to pilot the voting facilities and to take forward any bespoke requirements potentially needed.

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 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 has been necessary for RCT to push the Modern.Gov system 'public', which was taken forward on the 14th June. Previously, the Council had 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, 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. Previously 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. Committee agenda's, minutes and things such as Member attendance details will be available on the system prior to the 14th June, 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 Design and Development will also need to be taken forward in respect 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.

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 At the Democratic Services Committee meeting on the 10th May, Members supported the proposal 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 was 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 was 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.
- 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 inclusion of the online voting system will need to be in place prior to the roll out of hybrid and webcasting meetings.

9 **TRAINING**

- 9.1 Members have previously positively 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.
- 9.2 Training to Chairs and Vice Chairs of Committees will also be provided to assist in the chairing of hybrid meetings.
- 9.3 Once in place, training will also be provided on the voting app that will be available for Members to utilise through the Modern.Gov app.
- 9.4 Development of useful guidance manuals in respect of the Chamber equipment and the hybrid voting app, including a video tutorial

10 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 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.

11 WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 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.

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.
- 12.3 A further report regarding the practicality issues in respect of Hybrid meetings it to be considered by the Democratic Services Committee on the 29th June.
- 12.4 A demonstration on the layout and functionality of the Council Committee pages was provided to Members at a recent Members coffee session and a demonstration is to be presented at Democratic Services Committee.

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 require amendments to the Council's Constitution which were taken forward at the Council's 26th Annual General meeting

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.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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