RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

6TH SEPTEMBER 2021

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

HYBRID MEETINGS – REVIEW OF PROGRESS TO DATE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide Members with details of the meetings undertaken during July – August in respect of the roll out of hybrid meetings and webcasting and to provide the opportunity for committee to review the progress made to date, and determine future arrangements.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that the Democratic Services Committee:

(i) Consider the feedback obtained from the hybrid meetings and demonstrations undertaken as outlined within the report;

(ii) Progress any actions deemed appropriate as a result of the feedback and comments received as outlined within the report.

(iii) Consider whether any changes need to be made to the Phased Roll out approach to hybrid meetings as previously agreed by the Committee and detailed within section 3 of the report.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 On the 29th June, Members of the Committee considered a report in respect of the introduction arrangements to enable the broadcasting of committee meetings and the ability to operate through a hybrid approach.

3.2 At the meeting Members positively supported the arrangements discussed in respect of a phased roll out of the hybrid approach with a series of mock demonstration meetings for the Democratic Services Committee, Overview & scrutiny Committee and the Planning and Development Committee with a planned hybrid meeting of the Cabinet during the month of July.

3.3 The proposed roll out of hybrid meetings agreed by this committee is outlined below:

Next Steps	Outcome	Scheduled	Progress:
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	Complete
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	September	6th September. To be completed
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	Complete
Broadcast meeting of Cabinet	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a Cabinet meeting including hybrid attendance	July	Complete
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	Complete
Broadcast meeting of Democratic Services Committee (DSC)	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a DSC meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	September	Date confirmed: 6th September following Hybrid demonstration
Broadcast meeting of Planning & Development Committee	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcasting a P&D meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	September	Potential Date 4th November (this date will be reviewed and brought forward if appropriate)
Broadcast meeting of Overview & Scrutiny	Utilise the Public-I infrastructure to webcast a O&S meeting including the ability for hybrid attendance	September	Date confirmed 21st September
Review progress to date	**DSC to review progress and feedback from members**	**September**	
Wider briefing on new arrangements to all members,	Subject to review To familiarise members not already briefed on	September	

including committee by committee engagement	new ways 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   HYBRID MEETINGS

4.1   During the months of July and August the following mock demonstration meetings were undertaken:

- 12th July – Cabinet

- 19th July – Overview & Scrutiny Committee

- 20th July – Democratic Services Committee

- 24th August – Planning & Development Committee

4.2   Unfortunately, due to a low confirmed turn out of attendees the mock demonstration for the Democratic Services Committee was postponed until September, after the August recess.

4.3   On the 20th July the Cabinet undertook its first hybrid meeting. This meeting was also webcast although not live streamed. A link to the recording for this meeting can be found here.

4   REVIEW OF THE PROGRESS MADE TO DATE

5.1   At both the Cabinet Hybrid meeting and the demonstration meetings there was a good mix between those Members that attended the meeting virtually, through the zoom platform and those that physically attended the Chamber, adhering to the strict covid safety measures in place.

5.2   In preparation for all meetings the following requirements were necessary

a) Due to Covid Safety Measures, Member and Officer attendance at the Council Chamber was required in advance to ensure no more than the allowed 26 capacity was adhered to.

b) A seating plan was provided in advance to Members and Officers to ensure social distancing requirements and to assist attendees when entering the Chamber with the one-way system. This seating plan was also clearly provided on the door of the Chamber.

c) The Circulation of a Committee meeting Covid Safety Measure document was provided to ensure all Members and Officers were aware of the safety measures needed to be undertaken prior / during and after the meeting.

d) Lateral Flow tests were provided to all Committee Members and Officers for them to utilise if they so wished.

e) A Video tutorial of the new Chamber layout was circulated to all Committee Members to again assist them with the new layout prior to the meeting. https://youtu.be/5uqVqGxDv9g

f) Instruction sheet in respect of the new Microphone system was provided for those Members in attendance at the Chamber

g) Zoom invite details as per the usual process to those Members attending virtually.

5.3 The Mock demonstration meetings allowed Members to utilise the new equipment available in the Chamber, for all Members to see how best to engage in the meetings, for Chairs to gain a better understanding of how to ensure all Members felt included in the meeting, for all Members to test the translation system and for general comments and feedback to be provided.

5.4 As illustrated in the webcast hybrid meeting of the Cabinet, the recording allowed interaction with the agenda items discussed at the meeting and highlighted the names of the Members and officers that spoke when using the Chamber facilities. This interaction is not able to be demonstrated for those Member attending the meeting virtually.

5.5 The feedback detailed in appendix 1 was obtained by Members during the meetings and following the meeting.

5.6 Also being developed are advice and protocols to support good practice moving forward with the implementation of these new working arrangements.

5.7 During the August recess the mutli location policy guidance note has been published by Welsh Government. It will be important for us to reflect on this document to ensure that the practices that we have in place adhere to the guidance.

6 FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS

6.1 Following the review of the work undertaken to date in respect of hybrid meetings, it is considered that the Council is in a positive place going forward and has made steady progress with the introduction of the hybrid meeting approach. Member engagement has been instrumental to the progress made to date, allowing where possible equipment to be refined to suit the Committees needs.

6.2 It is important that this momentum of the introduction of hybrid meetings is not lost and it is proposed that the planned phased roll out as previously suggested is continued, subject to the delay to the roll out of Planning and Development Committee, due to the special requirements needed for the Committee to undertake each meeting - presentation sharing / public speakers and to allow both Members and Officers to become comfortable with the new way of working. At each point, the familiarisation of members and their confidence in conducting their role through a hybrid approach should remain the determining factor for

confirming progress to a formal committee meeting under these new arrangements.

6.3   The resource implications on the Council Business unit to support hybrid meetings has been noted (this point will be considered through the Head of Democratic Services' sufficiency of resources statutory report) and further supports the need for the incremental approach to the roll out of hybrid meetings to continue as planned.

6.4   Voting arrangements will continue to be explored in advance of facilitating a full Council meeting, where an agreed approach will need to be arrived at to secure the smooth running of this meeting.

6.5   In respect of the covid safety measures in place within the Council Chamber and the limited capacity it is suggested that the Council continue a cautious approach with the easing of restrictions from Welsh Government. The Council will still therefore continue to promote the covid safety measures in place which include the reduced capacity in the Council Chamber and the confirmed attendance arrangements in advance of meetings to ensure that these measures are adhered too.

7   EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

7.1   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.

8   WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

8.1   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.

9   CONSULTATION

9.1   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.

9.2 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.

10 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

10.1 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.

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.

12.3 The Council has made good progress with the introduction of hybrid meetings in a short period of time. It is proposed that this progress is maintained through the phased roll out approach previously agreed by the Committee.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEEE

September 2021

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS – none.

Appendix 1

Feedback, observations and good working practices in respect of Hybrid meeting approaches.

1. **Members attending the Chamber:**

a) Members welcomed the new layout of the Chamber – light and welcoming environment. Increased space to allow for accessibility requirements. Provision of charging points for Member's devices. Good viewing access to the hybrid screens.

b) Microphone system was easy to utilise. Members felt comfortable with the audio level of the microphones in the Chamber and were happy to adjust the sound level for the translation. Members liked that the system indicated who was speaking on the microphone panel system.

c) Members felt that the green and red indicator system on the microphones could be confusing at first.

d) Members were happy with the audio and visual feed coming through from those Members attending virtually, although the audio level at the planning demonstration had dropped and officers have since corrected this problem with the service providers

e) The location of the virtual display on the Screen within the Chamber was questioned as to whether this needed to be displayed in the bottom right rather than top right.

f) Occasion where the 2nd camera angle picked up on a speaker, with this view partially blocked by the attendee sat in front.

g) The Chair's felt it was helpful to have an indication of the speaker list displayed on the microphone unit, illustrating those Members wishing to speak.

h) Members requested a short time period to allow for the placing of headsets within the Council Chamber to hear the translation

i) Members queried whether additional screens could be made available within the Chamber

j) Members queried whether the screens in the Chamber could display the virtual feed only, rather than both the virtual and chamber display, as it was felt the Chamber display was not necessary.

k) As Members get use to the hybrid meeting approach and the potential for meetings to take longer than previous to allow for the new way of working it was suggested that improved agenda management be taken forward to prevent meetings from becoming unduly lengthy.

l) Queries where raised in respect of public attendance at the Chamber.

Going Forward

m) Members are reminded that they can adjust the height of the microphone to suit their own requirements, although it is advised that Members do not speak closely into the microphone system to prevent any interference on the audio feed of the recording. A test of the microphones within the Council Chamber

will be provided prior to the formal commencement of all hybrid meetings to allow Members and Officer to feel comfortable with the microphone levels.

n) Members need to wait a few seconds before their microphone is activated to allow for cameras to adjust to the new position.

o) Work needs to be taken forward by the Council Business Unit to ensure the camera angles are accurate for each seat within the Council Chamber.

p) The virtual display of the zoom attendees has been modified following Member discussions. Further discussions are ongoing to see if the Chamber view can be removed from the Chamber screen, however currently this is the view that is pushed to the live stream for recordings, hence why both the Chamber and Virtual feed are necessary.

q) Members need to ensure that they turn off their microphone when they have finished speaking to allow the camera to adjust to the next speaker or to take the view back to the default meeting view.

r) A display pad is to be procured for the Committee Chairs to utilise during the meeting to allow the Chair to manage the speaker list within the Council Chamber rather than this being managed by the Council Business Unit, following direction from the Chair.

s) Members wishing to utilise the translation facilities are reminded to advise the Chair when commencing their address that they would like to converse in welsh to allow Members sufficient time to access headphones.

t) Discussions will be taken forward with the service provider regarding the size of the screens and placement of screens within the Chamber and the costs associated will need to be considered.

u) At the Council AGM Members agreed to allocate a published indicative time-allocation to agenda items of business tabled for consideration at a Full Council meeting. It is suggested that similar arrangements may need to be taken forward with Planning and Development Committee meetings, to ensure agenda's are not overloaded. This indicative duration would not be prescriptive and flexibility would continue to be available to the Chair, to enable them 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.

2   **Members Attending Virtually**

a) No difference was noticed by Members or Officers attending the meeting virtually, as same process utilised as previous through the zoom platform.

b) Members were happy with audio feed coming through from the Chamber although it was noted that if an attendee in the Council Chamber spoke without their microphone on or spoke to the side of the microphone then no audio would come through.

c) Although the visual feed was good from the Council Chamber, Members were unaware of who was actually in attendance within the Chamber, unless that Member / Officer spoke at the meeting.

d) Members felt included in the meeting with appropriate interaction between virtual and physical members, due to the role and participation of the Chair.

e) The use of 'spotlighting' of virtual members was tested during one demonstration meeting and it was established that this view was unnecessary. Members preferred the gallery view and a switching to speaker view when a member attending virtually spoke on an item.

f) Members queried whether the default view of the Chamber could be reviewed – current view is of the top table

Going Forward

g) For the benefit of the Members in attendance and the public viewing the meeting the Chair will commence all hybrid meetings by listing the Members in attendance, in both the Chamber and virtual attendance.

h) The Council Business Unit will, whenever possible, change the virtual display between gallery view and speaker view throughout the meeting to allow the public to view all Members attending virtually and to also assist the Chair by illustrating who had indicated to speak through the raised hands function, whilst also allowing the virtual speaker to be seen on screen when called forward to contribute to the meeting

i) Work will be taken forward in respect of the Chamber default view, however it is felt that the default of the top table is the better option, as other camera angles would only pick up partial views of the Chamber which may not be accommodated with Members

3   Other General Points to Be Considered

a) Going forward, the hybrid meetings will be synced to the Mod Gov system to allow for further interaction with the business being considered through the agenda item stamping and Member interaction – linking to Member's profile on the website. Unfortunately, the linking to Member's profile will not be linked when a Member who has attended virtually Is speaking at the meeting.

b) It will be for each Committee Chair to establish the best approach for hybrid meetings, and how they ensure virtual attendees are included in the meeting and the speaker list is equally distributed.

c) How Public speakers will attend and contribute at the Chamber will need to be considered. Currently, due to covid safety measures only Members and Officers are attending meetings at the Chamber.

d) Consideration will need to be given to the recording of voting during hybrid meetings to ensure accuracy of recording and publication of the decision taken for those viewing the meeting.