



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

27TH SEPTEMBER 2021

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY FUND

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 digital democracy fund that was awarded to RCT and the progress made to date.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that Members:

- (i) Consider the advancements made with webcasting and hybrid meetings by the Council and the future use of the digital democracy fund to assist in these advancements
- (ii) Acknowledge the support provided to Community and Town Councils with the roll out of hybrid meetings.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The roll out of webcasting and hybrid meetings has been proactively endorsed by Members of the Council and regular updates in respect of progress have been provided to the Democratic Services Committee.

3.2 The Democratic Services Committee undertook its first successful hybrid meeting on the 6th September and a link to the recording is provided here. [English](#) / [Cymraeg](#)

3.3 To enable the Council to undertake this new and statutory required approach to meetings, a new webcasting system has been procured, which has been funded through 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 through the Digital Democracy Fund.

4. DIGITAL DEMOCRACY FUND

4.1 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)

4.2 On the 10th March, the Head of Democratic Services received notification that the Council had been successful with each of the bids submitted.

Expansion of the Webcasting infrastructure (Bid 1)

4.3 Our first bid recognised that the Council's current investment in the webcasting infrastructure would only support webcasting of Council 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. It is was therefore proposed that funding be ascertained to take forward a further purchase of webcasting infrastructure within our smaller committee room settings. The bid also recognised 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, 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.

4.4 Public I have visited the Committee Room and undertaken a survey of the room and provided a business case for requirements which officers within the Council Business Unit are currently working through to ensure that the provision of equipment is fit for purpose, especially following the recent comments brought forward by Members as part of the recent hybrid demonstrations meetings (detailed within section 4.7)

4.5 Alongside this the Council have utilised part of the funding to procure a 'speaker management system' to assist the Chair in the managing of hybrid meetings. Currently, when a Member in attendance at the Chamber wishes to speak at a meeting they need to activate their microphone which places them in a queuing system. A member's microphone is then activated by a Member of the Council

Business Unit following direction from the Chair. From recent meetings it is felt that this system can delay the interaction at meetings and therefore the newly procured system will allow the Chair to independently bring in Members to speak at their discretion. It is felt that this will help chairs manage meetings more effectively and keep the debate 'live' with no unnecessary delay to discussion and debate.

- 4.6 As part of good health and safety practice and especially in light of the covid pandemic, alternative headsets for the Council Chamber have been purchased and are awaiting delivery. The headsets are more amenable to the sanitation process that is undertaken and was previously undertaken in advance of meetings when translation was being utilised.
- 4.7 Following recent demonstrations of the hybrid approach to meetings, Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Planning and Development Committee, Democratic Services Committee and Cabinet put forward a number of suggestions to better the hybrid experience including the accessibility and placement of the screens within the Chamber. The Council Business Unit are taking forward discussions with Public I to see what alternative arrangements are possible, the logistics that might need to be considered and any financial implications aligned to any suggested solutions.
- 4.8 The Head of Democratic Services has advised of the Council position in respect of usage of the funds and the potential delay with Committee room 1 including the potential for some of the fund to be used to ensure that the arrangements within the Council Chamber are suitable for Members. The Head of Democratic Services has received a positive response to the Councils use of the funding from Welsh Government.
- 4.9 Welsh government have advised that they will be using the recent link of the recorded hybrid cabinet committee as a form of good practice and demonstration of how the fund has supported Councils with the requirements placed upon it.

Strengthening of the Members Portal and voting Apps (Bid 2)

- 4.10 The Second bid looked to further improve the facilities within the Members portal which is being developed for the benefit of Members. Through the current virtual meetings arrangements taken forward by the Council it was considered that the Members Portal could also serve as an important area for a voting system to be developed, integrating the system with the Modern.Gov system, utilised by the Council. The need for an online voting system would be instrumental to the continuation of Council business in a timely and proficient manner, preventing a role call basis as currently utilised. This system will ensure accessibility and equality without any discrimination for those outside of the Council Chamber.
- 4.11 Since the application for the bid further work has been undertaken in respect of voting arrangements. Possibilities include using the bilingual voting app within the Modern Gov system which is utilised by Members to view Committee

papers, the use of 'polls' within the zoom platform, using the public I voting system within the Council Chamber and of course the current system of a Committee roll call. The Head of Democratic Services will be working with Members of the Democratic Services Committee and Group Leaders to discuss the best approach to take in respect of these developments.

- 4.12 As Members will be aware, the reason for this change in approach is that members have identified a wish to defer proceeding with a 'one-size-fits-all' voting arrangements until a time when members are all familiar with hybrid meeting arrangements. The Head of Democratic Services has again communicated this change in direction with the voting app and has requested that the funding be allocated towards any additional costings arising from the other Council bids, to which Welsh Government have agreed.

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

- 4.13 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.

- 4.14 The Council has already supported one of the Councils Community Councils by providing digital advice and support at their first hybrid meeting, reviewing the arrangements in place and producing digital options for consideration, which was discussed at a meeting of the Clerks on the 27th July. Each Community Council was asked to consider their requirements going forward as to how the Council could best support them digitally. Since then each Community Council has come forward with requests for support packages to be in place which we are currently processing and we are looking to split the funds equally between each of the Councils, and then compliment this with corporate IT support over the coming year to facilitate practical implementation.

It is anticipated that these funds will be allocated by the end of September at the latest.

5 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 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. 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 WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 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 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 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.
- 7.2 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.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 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.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

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

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

10. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

10.1 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.

10.2 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.

11 CONCLUSION

11.1 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.

11.2 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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