

Report to: Corporate Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 10th April 2013

Lead Member / Officer: Councillor Barbara Smith / Gary Williams

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Title: Webcasting and remote attendance

1 What is the report about?

1.1 This report is about the proposals made by the Welsh Government in respect of webcasting and remote attendance.

2 What is the reason for making this report?

2.1 The report seeks to inform Members of the Committee about the Welsh Government's proposals regarding the webcasting of council meetings and the ability of Members to attend meetings remotely.

3 What are the recommendations?

3.1 That the Committee notes the position relating to webcasting and remote attendance and the suggested next steps.

4 Report details

4.1 The former Minister for Communications and Local Government wrote to all authorities earlier this year indicating that the Welsh Government was making £1.2 million available by way of grant to local authorities in order to assist them in, amongst other things, implementing the webcasting of council meetings and the remote attendance at meetings by Members.

4.2 Each local authority was able to accept a grant of £20k for webcasting and £20k for remote attendance.

4.3 Webcasting

Webcasting of meetings involves the live streaming of sound and images of council meetings. The webcast can also be made available on the Council's website as archived material. This means that members of the public who are not able to attend meetings may either view them live online or at a later time or date via the online archive.

- 4.4 The Welsh Government and WLGA have facilitated meetings with Democratic Services Officers to discuss the issue of webcasting at which a demonstration of one of the systems that are available has been delivered.
- 4.5 There is the facility on some systems to enable members of the public who are viewing a meeting that is being webcast to get involved in discussion forums via social media tools such as twitter and facebook and give their views on issues being discussed. The archived material can be made available for viewing with a linked timeline setting out the items of business and the names of speakers so that viewers may go straight to the item or speaker that they wish to view.
- 4.6 It is possible to webcast in such a way that the viewer is able to access the translator service.
- 4.7 There is no statutory obligation on the Council to webcast meetings. This is however becoming a more common practice among local authorities.
- 4.8 The Council is already obliged by law to hold meetings in public. Members of the public are entitled to attend meetings of the Council, Cabinet and other Committees.
- 4.9 There is not generally a large attendance by the public at meetings and the facilities available to accommodate large numbers of people are limited.
- 4.10 The webcasting of meetings would make meetings of the Council more accessible to members of the public.
- 4.11 There will be a cost to the provision of webcasting and the Welsh Government grant is only available for one year with no guarantee of future funding.
- 4.12 In addition to software licensing fees there may be additional resources required to operate the system in supporting the population of the timeline of archived material.

4.13 **Remote attendance**

S.4 Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 provides that reference in any statute to a meeting of a local authority is not limited to a meeting of persons all of whom are present in the same place.

- 4.14 A member of a local authority who is not present in the place where a meeting of that authority is held is considered to be a 'Member in remote attendance' if a number of conditions are satisfied.

- 4.15 The conditions are that:-

- (a) the member in remote attendance is able at that time:
- (i) to see and hear, and be seen and heard by the members in actual attendance;

- (ii) to see and hear, and be seen and heard by, any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting who are present in that place and who exercise a right to speak at the meeting, and
- (iii) to be seen and heard by any other members of the public who are entitled to attend and are present at the meeting.

(b) the member in remote attendance is able at that time to hear, and be heard by, any other member in remote attendance in respect of whom the conditions of paragraph (a) are satisfied at that time, and

(c) use of facilities enabling the conditions in paragraphs (a) and (b) to be satisfied in respect of the member in remote attendance is not prohibited by the standing orders or any other rules of the authority governing the meeting.

4.16 There is no quorum for a meeting at any time when the number of members in remote attendance is equal to, or greater than, the number of members in actual attendance.

4.17 The local authority must have regard to any guidance given by the Welsh Ministers in relation to remote attendance

4.18 s.4 of the Measure has not yet been brought into force. In his letter the former Minister indicated that the provision would be brought into force later this year.

4.19 There are difficulties associated with the introduction of remote attendance not least of which are technological. It is not clear that a system enabling a large number of remote attendees is feasible.

4.20 There are also governance issues to be considered. These relate to:-

- the confidentiality of Part II proceedings;
- the potential for challenge to decisions if the technology fails and members wishing to attend remotely are unable to attend and vote;
- the potential for inquorate meetings due to the balance between members attending remotely and those physically present at the meeting.

4.21 The Council's standing orders and procedures would need to be amended to make provision for these issues.

5 How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

5.1 The potential for improved access for the public to view Council meetings and engage with the Council via social media contributes to the priority of Modernising the Council to deliver efficiencies and improve services to our customers.

6 What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

6.1 It is anticipated that webcasting will cost in the region of £20k per annum. The cost of remote attendance is not yet known.

7 What consultations have been carried out?

- 7.1 CET have been consulted and are of the view that the question of webcasting be put before members at Council in order that they can decide whether or not they wish to have meetings webcast.

8 Chief Finance Officer Statement

- 8.1 The cost of implementing the proposals should be considered in relation to the funding available. Costs should be contained within the funding available. Any ongoing costs beyond the term of the grant would be a cost pressure for the Council.

9 What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

- 9.1 The risks associated with webcasting are that if it is implemented and the system does not work consistently then the Council's reputation may suffer.

There is a risk that there will be no additional funding from Welsh Government for this system from 2014/15 onwards.

The risk associated with not implementing a webcasting solution is that the Council will be seen to be left behind if other authorities in Wales proceed.

Some risks associated with remote attendance are set out in paragraph 4.20.

10 Power to make the decision?

- 10.1 S111 Local Government Act 1972.