

**POLICY & RESOURCES
CABINET BOARD**

11TH JULY 2013

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE

**JOINT REPORT OF THE
HEAD OF CORPORATE STRATEGY & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
K. JONES**

AND

**THE HEAD OF LEGAL SERVICES
D. MICHAEL**

INDEX OF REPORT ITEMS

PART 1. Doc. Code: PRB-110713-REP-CE-KJ-J

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Part 1, Section A, Item 1

MODERNISING DEMOCRACY – WEBCASTING, REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT BY COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Purpose

1. To report the availability of specific grant funding to support the development of webcasting and remote attendance facilities in principal councils and the development of websites in community councils.
2. To seek a decision on the use of the grant and the Council's policy in relation to these matters.

Background

The Welsh Government wrote to councils on 21st February 2013 notifying local authorities of specific grant funding that it was making available to modernise democratic arrangements. Specifically:

- To enable councils to make particular arrangements to broadcast council meetings;
- Introduce remote attendance at council meetings; and
- Assist community councils to publish information on and be contactable through the Internet.

The conditions of the grant funding were drafted in such a way that councils would need to deliver on all three of these developments in order to secure any of the grant funding. The total grant available to Neath Port Talbot Council is £49,500.

To secure the grant we would need to:

- Broadcast some/all of the council meetings by 31st March 2014;
- Provide funding to community councils to assist them with the development of their websites by 31st March 2014. A sum of £9,500 has been ring-fenced within the total allocation for this purpose with grants of no more than £500 available to each community council in the Neath Port Talbot area; and

- Arrange for remote attendance by councillors at council meetings by 31st March 2014.

In a subsequent exchange of correspondence with Welsh Government, officers have received written confirmation that it would be possible to distribute the funding to community councils even if this Council were to decide not to proceed to use the funding allocated for broadcasting and remote attendance.

Position

a) Broadcasting

The Council does not currently webcast its meetings. Consequently, if it were decided to introduce these arrangements, the Council would need to procure suitable technology and allocate the requisite officer time to ensure effective arrangements are established. It appears that there is one commercial company currently offering a service the Council could buy into. Costs would depend on the specification that the Council would wish to set, but certainly a **very basic service**, could be afforded within the grant over a short period of time. Beyond that period there is no ongoing budget provision from the Welsh Government which would mean that the Council would need to cut expenditure elsewhere in order to maintain the service.

Examples:

- a) A basic service of 3 cameras in the Council Chamber, with Welsh Language encoder for 60 hours would cost in the region of £17,000 for one year and £37,000 for three years.
- b) The service could be purchased on an event basis (minimum of 4 events) at £3,000 per event. Thus a minimum total cost of £12,000.

Officers have also been asked to clarify the position as to whether broadcasting by other persons at council meetings is permissible. Standing Order 20.2 prohibits the taking of photographs or the oral recording of proceedings, other than the Annual Meeting or where specifically resolved by the Council.

Officers have also been asked to clarify the position on Members using Twitter or other media during meetings. Councillors are not prevented from

“tweeting” or texting details of proceedings held in public during a meeting. However, Members would need to consider the accuracy of any such communications and the consequence of any inaccurate communications if they were to undertake these activities. Clearly, individual Members would be responsible for the content of what is transmitted and any subsequent response to such transmissions.

b) Remote attendance

There is currently no known demand for remote attendance by Members of this council.

Provision to enable remote attendance by Members is contained within the Local Government Measure 2011. However, this is a paving provision, enabling councils to introduce such facilities if they so wish. The provision is not a requirement. There was some confusion as to whether Welsh Government might be minded to require this facility to be made available but correspondence with relevant officials has now clarified the current position and we understand that ministers do not intend to compel councils to introduce facilities to support remote attendance.

The infrastructure to support remote attendance is problematic. There does not appear to be a service that could be readily purchased. Additionally, there are a number of procedural matters that would require careful consideration before such arrangements were introduced.

c) Community Councils

A small number of community councils have already approached the Council to passport their grant on to them. However, in the meantime, the Welsh Government has been having discussions with One Voice Wales to try and obtain maximum benefit for all community councils from the total “pot” available. There appear to be benefits in taking such an approach as individual councils could avoid incurring the same development costs. It is also known that not all community councils have the expertise to undertake or commission such developments. We were therefore asked, by Welsh Government, to hold the funding for the time being until those discussions have been concluded.

On 4th June 2013, further correspondence was received from Welsh Government updating principal councils on this matter. Principal councils are now asked by Welsh Government to either passport the grant on to those councils who wish to avail themselves of the funding, or, more

preferably to seek to establish a collaborative arrangement locally to encourage community councils to work together to establish the infrastructure that will enable them to meet new duties that are being proposed as part of the Democracy Bill currently making its way through the legislative process. A copy of that letter is attached for reference see Appendix 1.

Following a recent community council liaison meeting, officers will write to each community council notifying them of the availability of the grant and the associated grant conditions. Those community councils wishing to access the grant will be asked to sign a suitable grant agreement with this Council to ensure that, in the event any grant needs to be repaid, the liability rests with the community council concerned.

Recommended

1. Officers advise that Members do not proceed with webcasting or remote attendance at this time as there is no recurring additional funding available to support these activities and Council budgets are already under significant pressure.
2. That Members consider whether to amend Standing Order 20.2 to permit the taking of photographs or the recording of meetings from the public gallery.
3. That the arrangements made to offer Grant Aid to Community Councils for the development of websites be noted.

Reason for Proposed Decision

To determine the utilisation of grant funding made available by the Welsh Government to support the introduction of webcasting of council meetings, the availability of remote attendance facilities for council meetings and the development of web sites by community councils.

List of Background Papers

Welsh Government Correspondence of the:

21st February 2013

Award of Funding in relation to Broadcasting of Council Meetings and Community Council Websites

4th June 2013

Community Council Websites

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Letter of the 4th June 2013(Community Council Websites)

Wards Affected

All

Officer Contact:

Mrs K Jones, Head of Corporate Strategy and Democratic Services. Tel: 01639 763284 or e mail k.jones3@ npt.gov.uk

COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

Modernising Democracy – Webcasting, Remote Attendance and Website Developments By Community Councils

(a) Implementation of Decisions

The decisions are proposed for implementation following the three day call-in period.

(b) Sustainability Appraisal

Economic Prosperity	-	No Impact
Education & Lifelong Learning	-	No Impact
Better Health & Wellbeing	-	No Impact
Environment & Transport	-	No Impact
Crime & Disorder	-	No Impact

Other Impacts

Welsh Language	-	No Impact
Sustainable Development	-	No Impact
Equalities	-	No Impact
Social Inclusion	-	No Impact

(c) Consultation

This item is not subject to external consultation.

APPENDIX 1



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

To Chief Executives and Heads of
Democratic Services, County and
County Borough Councils

Cc WLGA
OVW
Socitm Cymru

Eich cyf. Your ref :
Ein cyf. Our ref :

4th June 2013

Dear Colleague

Community Council websites

In March of this year, grants were paid to each County and County Borough Council in Wales in respect of the *Broadcasting of Council Meetings and Community Council Websites*. Some councils have already taken steps towards using these funds to help in the process of broadcasting meetings as well as arranging to pilot remote attendance at council meetings.

To date, both principal and community councils and their organisations have been advised that the funding in relation to websites for town and community councils should be held pending discussions as to the most effective use of the funding. As we have received a number of queries relating to this matter, I am writing to suggest how to move forward on this.



BUDDSODDWR MEWN POBL
INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Parc Cathays
Caerdydd
CF10 3NQ

Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Ffôn • Tel: 029 2082 3094
GTN:

Ebost • Email: Frank.Cuthbert@wales.gsi.gov.uk

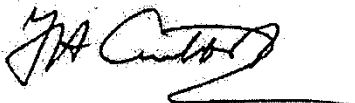
It is important to stress that the end beneficiaries of these funds must be the community councils in each county area. Principal councils could, therefore, simply pass on the funds to their community councils. However, even if this were done, it is important to note that no more than £500 can be provided to any individual council and that it may only be spent on development of a website. Community councils who already have websites cannot be excluded from this. The Local Government (Democracy) (Wales) Bill, currently under consideration in the National Assembly, contains provisions which would require each community council to publish information on a website and the grant is to be used to help them prepare for this.

I would, however, urge Principal Councils to adopt a more collaborative approach. It might be preferable, if you have not already done so, to arrange to meet with your local councils to discuss whether some of the funding might be better spent on organising training or towards setting up or improving a hosted or joint website if that seemed advantageous. We know of at least one county in which this approach is already underway. You may also wish to discuss any collaborative proposals with One Voice Wales who may be able to help facilitate or support such developments.

Given the levels of funding, we have sought to keep the monitoring arrangements to a minimum, however, before issuing funds to community councils, an exchange of correspondence will be required which indicates the readiness of the community council(s) to accept the funding. Principal councils will need to ensure that each community council taking receipt of payment provides them with an account of how the funding was used before the end of the financial year, so that, in turn, principal councils can provide Welsh Government with an account of how the overall grant was used. The funding needs to be used during this financial year and I would therefore ask that you arrange for it to be made available to community councils, whether singly or collectively, by 19th July.

There may be some areas where broadband access makes the introduction of websites difficult. If so, I would ask Principal Councils to let me have detail of this as it may influence commencement of the Bill provisions, assuming they are approved in the summer.

Yours sincerely



Frank Cuthbert
Head of Scrutiny, Democracy & Participation Team