



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNCIL

CABINET

22nd September 2021

Report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services Craig Griffiths

Matter for Decision

Wards Affected: All

Purchase of Hybrid Meeting System and Refurbishments to Council Chamber

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek approval from members to purchase a hybrid meeting system and to agree refurbishment of the Council Chamber to facilitate the attendance at such hybrid meetings.

Background

2. In 2019 and 2020, the Democratic Service Committee commenced a programme of work to look at public participation in decision making, namely the concept of webcasting of Council meetings and work was undertaken by a Task and Finish Group to investigate the process of webcasting meetings and the level of work that would be required to facilitate this.
3. Democratic Service Committee approved on the 3rd March 2020:
 - (a) That the Democratic Services Committee recommends to Council that meetings of the full Council and Planning Committee meetings be webcast on a pilot basis for a period of 12 months commencing October 2020.

- (b) That the Democratic Services Committee recommends to Council that the cost of the pilot project be met from the Member Development Specific Reserve.
- (c) That the Democratic Services Committee recommends to Council that the Head of Democratic Services be authorised to enter into contract for the provision of a suitable service to support the pilot project.
- (d) That in providing advice to Council, the Committee recommends that training for Elected Members and officers be arranged and delivered prior to the pilot project commencing.
- (e) That the Procedural Rules and Terms and Conditions of viewing a Webcast (included at Appendix 1) be commended to Council for approval to support the proposed pilot.
- (f) That the Head of Democratic Services be asked to make representation to the WLGA, providing the full anticipated costs for webcasting all meetings for this council.
- (g) That the Democratic Services Committee considers the findings from research conducted to date by the Task and Finish Group into ways that public participation in the democratic function might be organised and provides a steer to the Task and Finish Group on areas of focus for the next phase of the Group's work.

Covid-19 Arrangements

4. Following this meeting, a period of national lockdown commenced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and in order to facilitate Council decision making and scrutiny since March 2020, all Council meetings have been held remotely via Microsoft TEAMS.
5. As a result of this all Council meetings (including Cabinet/Cabinet Boards/Scrutiny and Regulatory Committees) have now been held virtually and subsequently uploaded to the Council's YouTube Channel for members of the public to view.
6. In order to comply with social distancing rules, these arrangements will continue pending the current restrictions that are in place by Welsh Government being reviewed. There have been occasions where the Chairs and Vice Chairs of particular meetings have been present in the Chamber. This has been arranged on an ad hoc basis to provide suitable support to members where necessary. Full risk assessments have been undertaken to allow for this to happen.

Legislative Arrangements

7. It is important to note that changes in legislation will take place over the coming year in respect of Council meetings. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 will make new arrangements for meetings that will come into effect in May 2022.
8. These arrangements include (amongst others):
 - (a) The requirement for principal councils to make, and publish, arrangements that ensure that the proceedings of certain types of council meeting are broadcast electronically in a way that allows members of the public, not in attendance, to see and hear proceedings. The proceedings must be broadcast live (subject to any exceptions that may be specified in regulations) and they must be available electronically after the meeting for a period specified in regulations. Clarification has yet to be provided as to which meetings will be covered by this but at this stage it is envisaged it will be Full Council and possible Cabinet/Cabinet Board meetings
 - (b) local authorities must make arrangements that ensure their meetings can take place in a manner which enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting. The authority must publish these arrangements, if the arrangements are revised or replaced the new arrangements must also be published. This requirement though does not however require meetings to be held in a certain format. Whether they are held fully virtually, partially virtually – whereby some participants are in the same physical location whilst others join the meeting virtually – or as physical meetings will be a matter for those responsible for arranging the meetings.

Recent Steps

9. One of the determinations that will require to be made is the holding of local authority meetings going forward in light of Covid-19 and the new legislative arrangements that the Council must comply with.
10. In order to obtain the views of elected members, a member survey was recently undertaken asking a wide range of questions in order to ascertain how members would feel about the hold of such meetings.
11. The following themes were identified:

- (a) the majority of members have felt that the meetings over the last year have worked well
- (b) the overwhelming majority of members have felt able to participate in remote meetings
- (c) the majority of members have seen a benefit in remote meetings and have found them a somewhat positive arrangement
- (d) members would wish to have a variety of options for attendance at meetings but would welcome the opportunity to attend face to face meetings
- (e) members feel a hybrid policy in attendance could be appropriate
- (f) members would wish all meetings to be held in a hybrid way though feel that Full Council is best being held in person
- (g) Chairs and Vice Chairs would wish to have the opportunity to attend in person in order to receive appropriate support
- (h) Members are concerned about IT reliance and connection issues.

Development of Hybrid Meeting Arrangements

- 12. In order to reflect the legislative arrangements that will be implemented in May 2022 and to reflect the results of the member survey, officers have now been working to establish whether a hybrid setup can be facilitated in the Council.
- 13. Two streams of work will be necessary to meet these requirements, namely:
 - a. Works to the Council Chamber to accommodate the new technological requirements
 - b. The purchase of suitable equipment to enable webcasting and hybrid meetings to be facilitated.
- 14. Because of time constraints and the financial commitments necessary (as detailed in this report), it is proposed that at this time, the Council Chamber be the sole room refurbished to enable hybrid meetings to take place, due to its size and also the public access that is available. However, if proposals are approved by members a feasibility study will be commenced to determine whether other rooms within civic buildings in Neath Port Talbot could be developed for hybrid meeting policies in 2022.

Work to Council Chamber

15. In order to implement a hybrid system, certain structural work will need to be undertaken to the Council Chamber.
 - (a) Isolate and remove existing lighting.
 - (b) Removing and cart away existing interlocking ceiling tiles.
 - (c) Install a new ceiling
 - (d) Install new LED energy efficient light fittings which will also increase the light levels.
 - (e) Run cable containment to each set of fixed seating for new power and data cables.
 - (f) Install new USB charging points.
 - (g) Reduce the gradient of the access ramp, entrance lobby and public gallery area to ensure greater access to the building
 - (h) Create a one level gallery area to facilitate easier access for members of the public.
 - (i) Fit new access doors with vision panels to ensure compliance with legislative requirements.
16. Discussions with the Council's Property and Regeneration Section have confirmed the anticipated amount of these works is approximately £60,000

Purchase of Equipment

17. In order to achieve a hybrid solution, it will be necessary to update the Audio and Visual equipment within the Council Chamber. This includes replacing the current microphone system, screens and installing cameras and a Hybrid Dual Language webcasting solution. The provision of such items will enable clearer and crisper image when webcasts. The provision will also enable the Council to meet its Welsh language translation requirements, with simultaneous translation being able to be prepared for Full Council meetings. In addition, as the Council embarks on its public participation programme, through the development of public speaking at Council meetings and the use of petitions, simultaneous Welsh language translation will be made available to assist in promoting access to meetings through the medium of Welsh.
18. Equipment to be purchased will include:

- (a) 4 x 98" Flat Panel Displays including wall mounting brackets, enabling all in the room to clearly see displayed images and video
 - (b) Conferencing system - Wired system in the Chamber for 75 delegates, options for voting and identification at seat. The system has been designed so it has capacity to add audio/ video sources and playback if there is ever the need for it. Voting licences will be applied to the system allowing members to vote on key issues at the touch of a button. The ability will exist to enter vote topics and options into the management software and initiate, sending them to every active delegate units. Votes are cast by selecting the relevant option on the touch screen.
 - (c) Audio system with digital processor. The system has a range of accessibility features to support those with visual or hearing impairments - Headphone connectors and volume control to turn up the meeting audio along with touchscreen and Haptic feedback (a small vibration) on the touch screen to confirm actions such as casting a vote
 - (d) High definition video distribution system to all monitors.
 - (e) Touchscreen control system with system pre-sets to recall different uses for the room (for example, pressing 'council meeting' would turn on all TV's, and set the audio system appropriately.
 - (f) Cameras to cover the room to record and stream over the internet Council meetings which can be displayed on external monitors. It has been developed with public sector clients for the sole purpose of live and on demand streaming. Content will be relayed to the public via a microsite styled with NPT Council's corporate branding.
19. The proposed system will also link with the Zoom Platform which has recently been acquired by the Council to facilitate its virtual meetings and to ensure greater access to meetings by members of the public and those who are to be in attendance at Council meetings. The Council has paid the sum of £12,960 per annum for the next three years for such usage.
20. A recent quotation has confirmed the costs of such equipment as being the following:

Item	Cost
Televic Single Units (g) Delegate/Chair with built in speaker x 75 (h) GSM Gooseneck Microphone x 75 (i) Translation Desk	£70,539.33
Voting and Seat Identification Options (j) Voting Licence x 75 (k) ID Licence x 75	£9,859.72
Video Switching, Distribution and Control (l) Control Processor (m) 7in Table top Touch Screen	£5,623.45
Christie 98" 350Nit Screen x 4	£41,079.45
Infra-Red Option for Gallery/Translation Hearing Assistance (n) IR Radiator (o) 5 x Neck Loop and 5 Transmitters	£4,636.64
Webcasting Hybrid Dual Language Hardware (including all installation) (p) Fixed 850 Dual Encoder (q) 4 Avionic HD Cameras	£40,942.22
Webcasting Annual Costs ¹ (r) 50 Hours of live webcasting, along helpdesk support and maintenance with Public-i	£15,682 per annum
Total:	

¹ At this stage legislation will only require full council to be live webcast, though all meetings will be made available for the public to view following the meeting. If members of the public wish to attend any meeting, they will be able to request access at any time.

Item	Cost
Initial First Expenditure:	£188,362.81
Future years:	£15,682 per year

21. It is proposed that the Council will commission Public-i Group Limited to undertake this work utilising a competitively procured framework agreement led by Braintree Council which enables an award of contract to be made directly. The framework agreement was advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), notice reference 2016/S 235-428428 and complies with relevant EU procurement regulations. The companies on this framework were selected following a formal tender and evaluation process. Public-i have the experience and engineering skills to install and test to the standards required to ensure the conference system, room acoustics and a simple user control interface system is correctly configured. Furthermore, Public-i and Modern.gov developers work closely together sharing API information for the purposes of synchronising. Many features of the Public-i web and audio Connect” streaming software are automatically integrated with the Modern.gov committee management system saving content duplication. From placing the order, Public-i have indicated an 8-10 week lead time, with works being completed over a 2-3 week period.

Alternative Options

22. Members should note from a legislative perspective, the Council is obliged to put a remote attendance in policy in place. As an alternative to implementing the aforementioned enhancements and service provision, the only other possible way to implement the same would be to continue with the remote attendance process that the Council currently has in place where members utilise platforms such as MS Teams or Zoom with the majority of members signing in remotely and the option for a limited number of members to attend a meeting in person. The negative aspect of this though is that if members wish to attend a meeting in person in the Council Chamber they will be required to utilise headsets and the risks of sound feedback and poor quality of meetings will be a risk going forward.

Financial Impacts

23. Members will recall that in setting the 2021/22 Budget it was reported in Appendix 3 Budget Pressures funded from Specific Reserves (CORP38) that if there was no grant funding available then the cost of implementing webcasting of Council meetings and associated tasks would be funded from the Corporate Contingency Reserve. It is therefore proposed that the funding of the Council Chamber structural improvement work of c£60k and the c£189k for the digital equipment be funded from the Contingency Reserve. A new budget pressure for the annual running costs of the equipment and Zoom licence totalling c£29k will be built into the 2022/23 base budget.
24. As part of the Welsh Government Digital Democracy Grant Programme in Spring 2021, the Council was successful in obtaining a £30K contribution from Welsh Government to meet such costs. All other sources of funding have been explored with Welsh Government and to date no other sums are, at present, available.

Integrated Impact Assessment

25. A first stage impact assessment has been undertaken and is appended as to assist the Council in discharging its legislative duties (under the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The first stage assessment has indicated that a more in-depth assessment is not required for the reasons identified in that assessment.

Valleys Communities Impacts

26. Although no direct impact on valleys, a remote attendance system would have the potential for those members who are based in valley communities to participate in decision making processes without the need for travelling arrangements which could prove a detriment to them.

Workforce Impacts

27. Consideration will be given as part of this work programme as to the impact on the Council's Democratic Services and Digital Services team as a result of the new requirements that will be implemented. Ongoing consideration will be given to this by officers and reports brought to members with any impacts if identified. A report will shortly be produced to Democratic Services Committee who have oversight of such arrangements to highlight the resources that will be necessary to meet these requirements. Given the added requirements for this service, additional staff will be necessary to ensure all procedural requirements are met. This will aim to be met from additional budgets or in accordance with the budget pressures referred to above.

Legal Impacts

28. Local authorities must make arrangements for hybrid meetings in accordance with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Local Authorities must make arrangements that ensure their meetings can take place in a manner which enables persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting. The authority must publish these arrangements, if the arrangements are revised or replaced the new arrangements must also be published. This requirement though does not however require meetings to be held in a certain format. Whether they are held fully virtually, partially virtually – whereby some participants are in the same physical location whilst others join the meeting virtually – or as physical meetings will be a matter for those responsible for arranging the meetings.
29. It is proposed that the Council will commission Public-i Group Limited to undertake this work utilising a competitively procured framework agreement led by Braintree Council which enables an award of contract to be made directly. The framework agreement was advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), notice reference 2016/S 235-428428 and complies with relevant EU procurement regulations. The companies on this framework were selected following a formal tender and evaluation process. Public-i have the experience and engineering skills to install and test to the standards required to ensure the conference system, room acoustics and a simple user control interface system is correctly configured. Furthermore, Public-i and Modern.gov developers work closely

together sharing API information for the purposes of synchronising. Many features of the Public-i web and audio Connect” streaming software are automatically integrated with the Modern.gov committee management system saving content duplication.

30. Following installation, a hybrid meeting policy will be prepared and placed before Full Council for adoption.

Risk Management Impacts

25. Failure to ensure a suitable hybrid system is in place would render the Council in breach of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Consultation

26. There has been no requirement to externally consult on this matter.

Recommendations

27. It is recommended that having due regard to the Integrated Impact Screening Assessment, that
 - (a) Members approve the upgrade to the Council Chamber in the manner set out in paragraph 18 of this report.
 - (b) Members approve the entering into of a contract with Public-i Group Limited for the purposes of purchasing and installing a hybrid meeting system (as identified in paragraph 20 of this report)
 - (c) Members agree to the establishment of a feasibility study to consider alternative venues that could also be adapted within Civic Buildings for the further accommodation for hybrid meetings

Reasons for Proposed Decision

28. To ensure compliance with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

Implementation of Decision

29. This report is proposed for implementation after the three day call in period.

Appendices

30. Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Screening Assessment

List of Background Papers

31. None

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