



COUNCIL - 7TH OCTOBER 2014

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF ELECTRONIC VOTING AND WEBCASTING OF FULL COUNCIL MEETINGS

REPORT BY: ACTING DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES AND SECTION 151 OFFICER

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek agreement to begin webcasting meetings of full Council.
- 1.2 To approve the draft 'Protocol for Webcasting of Council Meetings' attached at appendix 1.
- 1.3 To implement electronic voting.
- 1.4 That Members consider whether the style of minutes of webcast meetings should continue in their existing format or change to record only procedural matters and decisions made.
- 1.5 To agree consequential changes to the Council's constitution.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Council accepted a Welsh Government grant of £40,000 to implement the webcasting of council meetings and allow Members to attend meetings remotely. The decision to implement remote attendance was a matter for local choice within the provisions of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 and therefore full Council agreed to preclude the implementation of remote attendance on 10th June 2014. The acceptance of the Welsh Government grant is dependant on the implementation of webcasting.
- 2.2 Full Council approved the recommendations resulting from the Wales Audit Office's Report in the Public Interest on 23rd April 2013. To ensure the recommendations were fully implemented, the Council approved an "Improving Governance Action Plan", including the following recommendations:
 - 'The electronic voting system available in the Council Chamber must be used for all council meetings held in the Council Chamber'.
 - 'The Council's intention to start webcasting council meetings is welcomed. In preparation for this new innovation Democratic Services should review its style of recording minutes to ensure consistency. Given the increased transparency that webcasting will provide it is acknowledged there maybe a difference in style between meetings that are webcast and those that are not'.
 - 'Following each meeting of full Council, the voting record (listing the way each Member has voted) must be published on the Council's website'.

2.3 This report sets out the framework for implementing webcasting and electronic voting.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

3.1 To ensure the Council complies with the terms of the Welsh Government's grant for webcasting and remote attendance. The implementation of webcasting will provide improved public engagement opportunities in the Council's decision making process

4. THE REPORT

4.1 A webcast is an unedited audio and visual recording of a meeting which is available via the Council's website to view either live or in an archive format. The Council Chamber has 3 fixed cameras and a new audio visual system which will enable the webcasting of a full Council meeting. The webcast recordings of council meetings will be available in date order on the Council's website for 18 months.

4.2 The Council has let a 3 year contract with Public-i, a leading webcasting supplier, for the hardware, software and electronic storage of webcast recordings. The equipment is installed in the Council Chamber and will be operated by a Democratic Services team member. All parts of a Council meeting will be recorded with the exception of discussions of 'exempt' reports which contain confidential information as defined by Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

4.3 A 'Protocol for the Webcasting of Council Meetings' is attached as appendix 1. The appendix is outlines guidance for those attending full Council meetings (including Members, officers and members of the public) and associated procedures which will be included in the Council's constitution.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF ELECTRONIC VOTING

5.1 Full Council approved a report on 11th March 2008 to amend the Council's Constitution to provide for voting to be undertaken electronically. The hardware and software to support electronic voting was unreliable and as such, it was not possible to implement the decision to move to electronic voting in the Council Chamber. The Audio Visual equipment has recently been replaced, therefore the Council is able to implement it's decision to use electronic voting at meetings of full Council.

5.2 The implementation of the electronic voting system for meetings held in the Council Chamber will improve transparency of decision making. Webcasting will provide a complete and unedited video and audio public record of council meetings where non exempt matters are discussed. The electronic voting system will also automatically display in the Chamber how each Member has voted and generate a hard copy of how each Member has voted. This record will subsequently be published on the Council's website the day after each meeting. Therefore, the minutes of webcast meetings need only to contain a record of procedural matters and decisions made. The current format of minuting meetings that are not webcast will continue unaltered.

6. PROCEDURE FOR VOTING

6.1 Members and Officers benches have an individual control panel containing a microphone, LCD screen and buttons to allow Members to vote 'Yes', 'No' or 'Abstain'. The electronic voting system has been configured such that only Members control panels have the ability to vote.

- 6.2 To ensure there is a consistent approach for the operation of electronic voting, it is recommended that the following procedure is adopted by Council:
- a. The Chief Executive or Monitoring Officer will confirm the motion to be voted upon and declare the outcome of the vote.
 - b. The vote will be open for 20 seconds and Members must cast their vote in this time. Members can change their vote while the vote is open, however, their vote cannot be altered once the vote has been closed.
 - c. The Chief Executive or Monitoring Officer will announce that the vote is closing and confirm the vote is closed after 20 seconds have passed.
 - d. The outcome of the vote will be displayed on television screens in the Chamber. The Chief Executive or Monitoring Officer will check the number of votes cast does not exceed the number of Members in attendance and then announce the outcome of the vote. The vote will only take effect once the outcome is confirmed by Chief Executive or Monitoring Officer.
- 6.3 Should the electronic voting system be unavailable or breakdown during a meeting, voting will revert to being undertaken by a show of hands.
- 6.4 The Mayor shall have the casting vote in the event that the vote is tied. The Mayor's casting vote shall be made verbally.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 An additional member of the Democratic Services Team will be required to operate the electronic voting and webcasting systems. These duties can be absorbed from the existing staffing compliment.

8. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Approving the recommendations of this report supports improved accessibility of Council proceedings for members and the public, regardless of individual circumstances and backgrounds. This report therefore supports the Council's Strategic Equality Objectives 3, 4, 5 and 7 (Physical Access, Communication Access, Engagement and Participation, Corporate Compliance).

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 A Welsh Government grant of £40,000 has been received to assist with the implementation of webcasting. The grant is sufficient to meet the costs of webcast for 4 years. It is expected that the ongoing costs associated with webcasting will require additional resources.

10. CONSULTATION

- 10.1 This report was considered by Democratic Services Committee on 17th September 2014. The Committee endorsed recommendations a, b, c and e below. The Committee discussed whether the style of minutes of webcast meetings should record only procedural matters and decisions made. Changing the style of minutes to only record procedural matters and decisions made would ensure that there is no discrepancy between the written minutes and the webcast recording. That said, Members expressed concern that the change would not reflect debate and as a result be an incomplete written record of proceedings. It was moved and seconded that minutes of webcast meetings should continue in their existing format and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.
- 10.2 There are no consultation responses that have not been included in this report.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 That Council approve:

- a. The implementation of webcasting meetings of full Council. It is anticipated that the system is tested over the next 2 months and implemented thereafter.
- b. The draft 'Protocol for Webcasting of Council Meetings' and in particular the change to the Council agenda, notices to be displayed inside and outside of the Council Chamber and the Mayor's announcement, attached at appendix 1.
- c. The implementation of electronic voting begins at the same time as webcasting begins subject to a successful trial over the next few meetings. In the interim, a trial of electronic voting is undertaken at meetings of full Council, however, Members continue to make decisions by a show of hands.
- d. That Members consider whether the style of minutes of webcast meetings should continue in their existing format or change to record only procedural matters and decisions made.
- e. Consequential amendments to the Council's constitution arising from the implementation of electronic voting and webcasting and delegate this responsibility to the Monitoring Officer.

12. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 To implement electronic voting and webcasting of meetings of full Council.

22. STATUTORY POWERS

22.1 Local Government and Housing Act 1989, the Local Government Act 2000, Local Government Wales Measure 2011.

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David Thomas, Senior Policy Officer (Equalities and Welsh Language)
Cllr Keith Reynolds, Council Leader
Cllr C Forehead, Cabinet Member for Human Resources and Governance/Business Manager
Members of the Democratic Services Committee

Background Papers:

Cabinet Report dated 16th April 2014 entitled 'Renewal of Audio and Visual Equipment for the Council Chamber

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Protocol for the Webcasting of Council Meetings