

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 28 JANUARY 2015**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER GOVERNANCE**

SUBJECT: **WEBCASTING OF MEMBER MEETINGS**

1.00 **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.01 For the Committee to give further consideration to webcasting of some Member meetings pursuant to the decision of the committee at its last meeting.

2.00 **BACKGROUND**

2.01 In the last financial year Flintshire and other principal Councils in Wales received grant funding from the Welsh Government to enable them to investigate the use of remote attendance and webcasting of meetings. That resulted in remote attendance and webcasting being trialled at the meetings of the Democratic Services and Constitution Committees held on the 26th March 2014.

2.02 At the end of the meetings held on the 26th March the Members in attendance were asked to complete a short questionnaire on how the arrangements had operated in practice. The results were reported to the committee's last meeting on the 15th October. The views were mixed with no consensus or clear majority.

2.03 On the 15th August 2014 the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) published Guidance for Members on webcasting which was reported to the Committee's last meeting and is attached as Appendix 1. Flintshire is one of the 12 authorities whose webcast is listed on page 9 of the guidance. Whilst most of those have used the same commercial supplier as for the Flintshire pilot, Public-i, a few have developed their own system. The guidance includes a list of what are seen as the benefits of webcasting together with the challenges associated with it.

2.04 At the last meeting of the committee on the 15th October it was resolved that whilst no further action was to be taken at the present time in pursuing remote attendance at meetings the Council should continue to explore the option of webcasting some of its meetings by investigating the financial options available and a further report be submitted to the next meeting of the committee.

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.01 In making the previous grant of £40K to the Council the Welsh Government made clear that it was a one off with no commitment to fund ongoing costs associated with either remote attendance or webcasting. At the committee's last meeting it was reported that the Welsh Government was hoping to work with the WLGA and Local Authorities to secure savings through a joint procurement initiative of webcasting providers. Whilst the Council responded to consultation from the WLGA on this to indicate its interest the Welsh Government subsequently decided joint procurement was not practical due to the need to meeting EU procurement requirements.
- 3.02 With the exception of a few Councils who have devised their own webcasting arrangements the remaining Councils who have introduced webcasting have entered into contractual arrangements with Public-i. The Council's officers have obtained from Public-i quotes for different options for webcasting which have been sent by e-mail to Members of the committee. In view of the commercial sensitivities of this information Members are asked to maintain the confidentiality of the figures quoted. The upfront cost and the service costs for either a year or three year contract could be met from the balance of the Welsh Government grant.
- 3.03 At the last meeting of the committee the Leader asked that officers investigate the arrangements Monmouthshire had put in place that avoided an ongoing revenue cost, who were one of the few Councils who developed their own system. Monmouthshire have explained that they have recently made a major investment in their Council Chamber through the installation of a new and up to date audio visual system which included a number of cameras and technology that could pan to a specific Member when they speak. It was because of this investment that it was more cost effective for them to devise their own system rather than enter into a contract with another provider. Without that investment in their Council Chamber the Public-i contract would have been the most cost effective option. Officers have also made enquiries of the other two Councils that have devised their own systems but officers believe neither provides a better option for Flintshire as the Public-I system is easier for staff and public to use.
- 3.04 As advised at the last meeting of the committee the other main challenge associated with webcasting besides the financial cost is the time required by staff to operate such equipment. Since the last meeting of the committee enquiries have been made of both Conwy and Wrexham of the staffing implications of webcasting their meetings. Both Councils have fixed cameras in their Council Chambers but not in any other rooms. Without fixed cameras the staffing implications are considered too onerous for introduction in Flintshire. For any webcast meeting there will be a need for an extra member of staff to attend to operate the cameras and align the

microphones. In 2014 if meetings of the County Council, Cabinet and Planning had been webcast it is estimated that the staffing impact would have been an additional 152 hours of Committee Officer time. At a time when the review of Democratic Services is proposing to find budget savings through the loss of posts the additional workload involved in webcasting such meetings represents a significant challenge.

- 3.05 It is considered that webcasting those meetings where there is a greater public interest such as meetings of the Planning & Development Control Committee has benefits in terms of public engagement and transparency. Webcasting enables meeting to be viewed by more people than can be physically accommodated in the meeting room and for meetings to be viewed at a time convenient to individual members of the public. As indicated in the WLGA Guidance webcasting is now underway in most authorities in Wales for those meetings which are judged to be of most interest to the public. It also indicates that generally the number of website hits suggests that there is a real ongoing public interest in these broadcasts. It is for Members to consider whether these factors justify the investment in terms of finance and staff time. Any decision to recommend webcasting of meetings would have to be a recommendation to Cabinet.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01 In view of the benefits of webcasting in terms of public engagement and transparency for the committee to recommend to Cabinet the implementation of webcasting for those Member meetings of most interest to the public with officers investigating ways of doing so within available staffing resources.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.01 The Council has previously received a one off grant from the Welsh Government of £40K of which a balance of £37K remains. The upfront cost and the service costs for either a year or a three year contract could be met from the balance of the Welsh Government grant.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

- 6.01 None as a result of this report.

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 7.01 None as a result of this report.

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.01 None as a result of this report.

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.01 Each webcast meeting would require an extra officer to be in attendance and this would represent a significant challenge at a time of reducing staffing resources to find budget savings.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 None as a result of this report.

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 None as a result of this report.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1 – Guidance for Members

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Questionnaires on webcasting arrangements at Conwy and Wrexham Councils.

Contact Officer: Peter Evans
Telephone: 01352 702304
Email: peter.j.evans@flintshire.gov.uk