

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2014**

REPORT BY: **CHIEF OFFICER, GOVERNANCE**

SUBJECT: **REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND WEBCASTING OF**
 MEMBER MEETINGS

1.00 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.01 For the committee to give further consideration to remote attendance and webcasting of meetings in view of the trial conducted at the last meetings of the Democratic services and Constitution Committees and the statutory guidance on remote attendance issued in April.

2.00 BACKGROUND

2.01 Section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 allows Councils to make arrangements for Members to attend meetings remotely. There are no statutory provisions relating to the webcasting of meetings but its use is encouraged by the Welsh Government as a way of making Member meetings more accessible to the public.

2.02 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 26 March.

2.03 At the end of the meetings held on the 26 March the Members in attendance were asked to complete a short questionnaire on how the arrangements had operated in practice. Attached as Appendix 1 are details of the responses Members gave. The views are mixed with no consensus or clear majority.

2.04 On the 4 April 2014 the Council received statutory guidance on remote attendance and this is attached as Appendix 2. The Council had previously been consulted on draft guidance and at its meeting on the 17 July 2013 the committee had decided its response to that consultation which is attached as Appendix 3. Whilst less prescriptive and more permissive than the draft guidance there are still resource implications in relation to officer attendance at the remote location (see paragraphs 7 and 8 of Appendix 2).

- 2.05 Following the March meetings the intention was to present a report to the committee's meeting in July but in a report to the Group Leaders meeting on 3 July it was explained that further work on webcasting was needed in order to present a fuller report to committee.
- 2.06 On the 15 August 2014 the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) published guidance for Members on webcasting and this is attached as Appendix 4. 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 Flintshire a few have developed their own. The guidance includes a list of what are seen as the benefits of webcasting, together with the challenges associated with it.

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.
- 3.02 Whilst Public-i are the commercial market leader in relation to the webcasting of meetings the Flintshire meetings were the first time their technology had been used to provide remote attendance. Notwithstanding their representatives attending for several hours before the meetings to set up the equipment properly there were occasions during the meetings when the Member attending remotely was not able to see Members or be seen by them. The explanation was given that this was as a result of the person attending remotely being in another room in the same building rather than from a separate building. The Council's officers however, believe the risks would be increased rather than decreased if the remote location was elsewhere than in the same building. The Council officers do not believe the remote attendance technology to be sufficiently reliable as presently developed.
- 3.03 Officers also have a concern about the time that would be required by officers in preparing the technology for remote attendance. This is exacerbated by the statutory guidance referring to an officer attending at the remote location. The geographical size of Flintshire is such that the travelling time for Members to attend meetings at County Hall is not a significant consideration. The substitution process enables business to be conducted without effecting political balance notwithstanding the occasional absence of a Member. For the above reasons officers do not consider there to be a need to further pursue remote attendance arrangements at the present time.
- 3.04 In considering the benefits of webcasting the WLGA guidance divides these into those relating to public engagement and transparency and secondly, benefits for the Council itself (see page 5 of Appendix 4).

Officers consider that those benefits relating to public engagement and transparency have more merit than those listed as benefits for the Council itself. Webcasting enables meetings to be viewed by more 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 for those meetings which are judged to be of most interest to the public, particularly full Council, Cabinet and Planning Committee meetings. It also indicates that whilst viewing figures for webcasts vary according to the type of meeting and authority, generally the number of website hits suggests that there is a real ongoing public interest in these broadcasts.

3.05 At least one Council in North Wales intends to free capacity to manage the webcasting technology by reducing the detail of the minutes of meetings that are webcast. Flintshire tends to prepare longer minutes and Members would need to be happy with any such change in style for a similar arrangement to work here. Webcasts of meetings are normally only retained for six months due to storage issues whereas it is a legal requirement to keep minutes for 6 years after a meeting.

3.06 As identified by the WLGA the main challenge associated with webcasting is the cost, not only of the equipment but also the staff time required to operate such equipment. It goes on to indicate that the Welsh Government is hoping to work with the WLGA and local authorities to secure savings through a joint procurement of webcasting providers. The Council has responded to consultation from the WLGA on this to indicate its interest in securing savings through such a joint procurement exercise. Prior to receipt of the guidance from the WLGA the Council had been negotiating with Public-i over the cost of webcasting some of its meetings. In view of the commercial sensitivities this information is being sent separately to Members who are asked to maintain the confidentiality of those costs.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.01 That no further action be taken at the present time in pursuing remote attendance at meetings.

4.02 That the Council continue to explore the option of webcasting some of its meetings by supporting the joint procurement initiative of the Welsh Government and the WLGA with a further report to the next meeting of the committee.

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.

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 Both webcasting and remote attendance involve significant officer time in setting up and operating the systems. Each webcast meeting would require an extra officer to be in attendance and for remote attendance meetings two extra officers.

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

10.01 None

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

11.01 A progress report was submitted to the Group Leaders meeting on the 3 July 2014.

12.00 APPENDICES

12.01 Appendix 1 - Members feedback on remote attendance & webcasting
Appendix 2 - Welsh Government statutory guidance April 2014
Appendix 3 - The Council's response to consultation
Appendix 4 - WLGA guidance for Members on webcasting.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None

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