

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **26<sup>th</sup> September, 2024**

Report Subject: **Council Chamber Options**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor S. Thomas – Leader / Cabinet Member – Corporate & Performance**

Report Submitted by: **Gemma Wasley, Service Manager Performance and Democratic**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
							26/09/24	Task & Finish Group

**1. Purpose of the Report**

1.1 To outline proposals for Blaenau Gwent Members and Officers to use the Torfaen Council Chamber to hold Council meetings on a hybrid basis moving forward.

**2. Scope and Background**

2.1 Following a recommendation from the Democratic Services Committee, on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024, Council agreed to establish a Member Working Group to consider the requirements, costs and potential alternative options for a Council Chamber, and for the findings to be brought back to Council for consideration and approval.

**2.2 Member Work Group**

The working group was established and first met on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2024. The group was to consider options for the use of a Council Chamber for Council meetings only. All other Democratic Meetings are still to follow the arrangements as set out in the Council's Multi Location Meeting Policy.

2.3 As per legislation, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021:

- Meetings must be capable of being held virtually, but each authority must decide whether their meetings will be held fully virtually, partially virtually (where some participants are in the same physical location, whilst others join the meeting virtually, also referred to as 'hybrid meetings') or as physical meetings (authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings).

2.4 The member working group membership:

- Chair – Cllr John Hill

- Working Group Member – Cllr Lisa Winnett, Cllr JC Morgan, Cllr Sonia Behr, Cllr Jonathan Millard, Cllr Lee Parsons, Cllr George Humphreys
- Officer Support – Gemma Wasley, Service Manager Performance and Democratic

2.5

Throughout discussions a number of potential options were put forward and researched to understand feasibility, these included:

- Use of the Jack Williams Room, General Offices;
- Use of other local authority chambers;
- Using a room at an existing building; and
- New build.

2.6

All options were fully scoped out and costed. Each option highlighted a number of factors that were further discussed with the group. Findings included:

- Use of the Jack Williams Room, General Offices (formally used by the Mass Vaccination Clinic) – an acoustic assessment has been undertaken on the room which raised a number of concerns with the sound in the room. As well as specific acoustic requirements to be undertaken in the room, all of the windows would need to be replaced. A fully operational Council Chamber would need to be established in the room including furniture, electrical work, hybrid system relocation and set up. The room is also subject to specific requirements from CADW as it is a Grade II listed building and no works can be undertaken until their approval has been sought.
- Use of other local authority chambers – discussions took place with Torfaen Council, owing to the current arrangement of sharing a Joint Chief Executive.
- Using a room at an existing building – a number of current buildings were considered but many did not have the required space to house a full Council meeting. It was felt that the optimum size required for a Council Chamber, to house officers, Members, the public and press was a venue which could hold up to 50 people. Some buildings would also incur costs or could not be provided to the Council for use as a Council Chamber.
- New build – if this is feasible it would be in the long term and a shorter term solution would still be required.

2.7

#### **Member Working Group Proposal**

The Working Group is proposing to utilise the use of the Torfaen Council Chamber.

2.8

The Torfaen Chamber is of an appropriate size for Blaenau Gwent Council to hold Council meetings, and is fully equipped with hybrid meeting equipment. Torfaen Council also operates the live broadcasting of meetings which is something that Blaenau Gwent will also be able to utilise moving forward, using a phased approach.

- 2.9 The option would include the same standards for Blaenau Gwent Members as Torfaen Members with dedicated parking for members attending the Council Chamber, ID cards, and use of the Member facilities at the Civic Centre.
- 2.10 Torfaen Council meetings are held on a hybrid basis, where some participants are in the same physical location, whilst others join the meeting virtually. For the remote access Microsoft Teams is used, as is in Blaenau Gwent, and the broadcasting facility is provided by a company called Public I.
- 2.11 If this approach is taken forward, the Joint Chief Executive will develop communications for both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Members as well as the public.
- 2.12 This option is being made available to Blaenau Gwent Council regardless of the outcome of the 'discovery' phase. If Blaenau Gwent Council decides to not continue the joint arrangement with the Chief Executive, it would still be able to utilise the Torfaen Council Chamber if required.
- 2.13 It is proposed that there is a review point with the use of the Torfaen Council Chamber at the end of the current cycle to consider if the arrangement will be continued moving forward.

### 3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 *To include Recommendation(s) / Endorsement by other groups, e.g. CLT/Committees/Other groups)*

#### **Option 1**

Agree to hold every other Council meeting, within the current cycle, on a hybrid basis, in the Torfaen Council Chamber and review this approach at the end of the cycle.

#### **Option 2**

Agree to hold every other Council meeting, in the short term, on a hybrid basis, in the Torfaen Council Chamber. Additionally, maintain the Member Working Group to explore potential longer-term options for a Council Chamber in Blaenau Gwent, with these options brought to Council for future consideration.

#### **Option 3**

Maintain the current arrangement for Council Meetings.

### 4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

- 4.1 Corporate Plan Priority link - An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place.

4.2 The proposal supports the requirements as outlined by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

4.3 The proposal supports the move towards joint and collaborative working with Torfaen Council both during and after the 'discovery' phase.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**  
***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

5.1.1 The associated costs for Blaenau Gwent Council to utilise the Torfaen Council Chamber are set out below:

- Public I provide the hardware for the operation of hybrid meetings as well as the recording and live broadcasting of meetings in Torfaen. In order to utilise the same system, Blaenau Gwent Council would require a micro site to be developed so that the broadcasting of Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent meetings remain separate. This is a one off cost of £650 and takes approximately 7 days for the company to develop.
- Payment is made on an annual basis for the hours of recording that are required, with each hour costing £46.50. It is likely that, based on current length of meetings, Blaenau Gwent would not require more than approximately 15hours of recording (if we go over the allocated hours, we would be charged for each additional hour at the end of the year).
- Torfaen Council will charge £1,800 for use of the Council Chamber. These monies will be used for the use, maintenance and cleaning of the Council Chamber. The initial trail will also require additional system support from Torfaen Officers, whilst Blaenau Gwent Officers learn use of the system and become comfortable with its operation. If Blaenau Gwent Council looks to continue use of the Torfaen Council Chamber moving forward, the £1,800 will effectively half as the support required from Torfaen Officers reduces.

5.1.2 This proposal is the most cost effective option available to Blaenau Gwent Council at this time as the meeting hardware and room is already in situ.

***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.2 There is a risk to public perception that Blaenau Gwent Members are operating meetings outside of the County Borough. The location of the Torfaen Council Chamber is in Pontypool which is a neighbouring town a short distance from Blaenau Gwent. A number of Welsh Local Authority members would be required to travel further in order to attend their Council Chamber.

- 5.2.1 The Council is required to offer democratic meetings to be held on a hybrid or remote basis. **Authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings.**

### **Legal**

- 5.3 There is a requirement for all Council meetings to be broadcast live. Currently, Blaenau Gwent Council does not have the necessary facilities to support live broadcasting, and it has proven challenging to achieve with the existing setup. However, this can be facilitated by using the Torfaen Chamber, which already has the required live broadcasting capabilities in place. Therefore, we will be moving forward with holding our meetings live using these facilities.

### **Human Resources**

- 5.5 Democratic Services staff will be required to support the use of the system in the Torfaen Chamber and Torfaen Officers have offered their support in this area.

## **6. Supporting Evidence**

### ***Performance Information and Data***

- 6.1 As part of the Council's performance management information the number of attendees at committees and those attending virtually or physically is recorded. This will continue moving forward and a record of those attending Council meetings physically and virtually will be used to inform the review process at the end of the current committee cycle.

### ***Expected outcome for the public***

The opportunity to attend Multi Location Meetings provides greater participation in meetings by the public and external participants. The public will be able to attend meetings physically or via Microsoft Teams.

The meetings will encourage healthy debate which is open and transparent to the public.

### ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

Multi Location Meetings:

- Make it easy for the public to view and participate in decision making and the democratic process observing discussions, recommendations and decisions are made in a transparent way; and
- Make it easier for participants to take part in meetings when they have employment, family, caring or other commitments.

### ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The proposal supports long term thinking for the Council and provides future proofing for democratic meetings that support digital infrastructure without significant costs.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

The proposal negates the need for a Council Chamber to be established in Blaenau Gwent thus preventing additional costs to the Council whilst we are operating within very difficult financial times.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The proposal supports collaborative working with Torfaen Council which can be continued in the long term if required.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The proposal supports integrated working with Torfaen colleagues and supports learning across the two Council's for their approach to operating democratic meetings.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

- Council meetings will be offered on a hybrid basis, meaning that there can be remote attendance from Members, Officers, the public and press which reduces the carbon footprint of physical meetings.
- Blaenau Gwent democratic meetings do not provide papers for their meetings with all information held online.
- Torfaen is a close neighbouring authority within a short distance to the Council Chamber from Blaenau Gwent.
- Blaenau Gwent Council encourages the use of car sharing and the use of public transport (work has been undertaken to scope the bus routes from Blaenau Gwent to Pontypool)

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) (All decisions, policy reviews or policy implementation will now require a completed Integrated Impact Assessment)***

Alternative options for the attendance at Council meetings is available, supporting those with caring or work needs as well as those who may not be able to attend meetings physically. Reasonable adjustments can be considered, on a case by case basis, to support the engagement and participation in meetings by members, officers and the public.

7. ***Monitoring Arrangements***

7.1 ***State how the work will be monitored e.g. through scrutiny or directorate performance management arrangements***

There will be a review undertaken at the end of the current committee cycle to assess the success of the proposal and whether Blaenau Gwent will continue to utilise the Torfaen Council Chamber in the future.

**Background Documents /Electronic Links**

*Council Report 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024*



MLMP and CC  
Options Covering Rep

## *Member Working Group Scope*



TF Group  
Template.docx