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Powys County Council – Covid-19 learning and recovery – Observations from online committees and meetings

Background

- 1 This work is undertaken to help discharge the Auditor General's duties under section 17 of the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004, section 18 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and section 15 of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. Further information about our [work](#) and our [privacy notice](#) is available on our [website](#).
- 2 In Spring 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our communities and public services. Councils have a key role to help keep staff and residents safe, adapt their decision-making arrangements, prioritise services and collaborate with partners to try and limit the spread and impact of the virus.
- 3 Powys County Council (the Council) invoked their business critical continuity plan on 18 March 2020 (the Social Services department invoked theirs on 16 March), which enabled the Council to focus on business critical activities. This limited the number and format of committees meeting. With the introduction of [new regulations from the Welsh Government](#) towards the end of April 2020, provision was made for council meetings during the pandemic. From May 2020, the Council began to hold a number of cabinet, scrutiny and other committee meetings online.
- 4 In addition to this document, Audit Wales has produced a blog on "[Local council democracy – coming out of lockdown.](#)" which gives a picture of how scrutiny and other formal meetings are being re-introduced across Wales.

Summary of observations

- 5 For the purposes of obtaining information to inform the Auditor General's work, we have observed the council's online meetings including cabinet and scrutiny since May 2020. The following sets out a summary of practices and information based on the limited examples and activities we have observed to date.

Democratic structures have been re-introduced relatively quickly

- 6 The Council in Powys were able to make use of technology quickly through the use of Microsoft Teams live events and meetings to allow councillors, officers and members of the public to join and/or view public meetings. With reference to the above blog covering the

national picture of council democracy, Powys, in comparison with some other councils acted quickly to reintroduce a number of meetings. In Powys it was the re-introduction of these meetings over a breadth of committees including cabinet and scrutiny which is notable compared to some other councils in Wales, who may have only restarted a more limited number of meetings.

- 7 We have observed that the online meeting technology has sat alongside existing and widely used systems for publication of documents, agendas and minutes on the council's website. This includes accessing agenda items before a meeting and accessing minutes and decisions following meetings. This has meant there is a system in place to provide a transparent record available online to the public about decisions taken by the council and its performance during lockdown.
- 8 The live viewing of meetings has the potential to encourage and help ease of access for public awareness and engagement with council activity. The Council's online meetings show the Council taking steps to involve the wider public in the activities of the council, informing the public of progress on decisions and being accountable to the public. Through Teams' events and meetings, the public have been able to access online meetings live and view recordings. Our observation of this system is that it seems a simple and easy way to access meetings without onerous steps to gain this access.

Formal scrutiny of decisions and services has been re-instated early at the Council

- 9 By mid-July half of council in Wales will have held virtual meetings of scrutiny committees. Powys Council have put in place arrangements for formal scrutiny sessions including finance; health and care; learning and skills; and economy, residents, communities and governance. Furthermore, the Council are at a point where they have had several meetings of these committees since May 2020.
- 10 The scrutiny arrangements the Council has put in place seem to give members the opportunity to gather information and challenge officers and cabinet members around business critical activities as well as some information around wider service activity and recovery work. This also provides an opportunity for the public to observe decision-making, including scrutiny of decisions.
- 11 During this period, we observed an example of arrangements in place for a scrutiny chair to feedback a scrutiny committees' views to cabinet on a key decision. The scrutiny chair had an opportunity to provide a response to proposed plans, provide recommendations and raise questions. The online attendance and input from a chair of scrutiny to a cabinet meeting suggests independent challenge on decision making from scrutiny during the lockdown period. The example seems to show the relationship between cabinet and scrutiny in a transparent way that indicates clear roles for scrutiny committees in helping to shape decision making.

There are opportunities to maintain the momentum and learn from ‘digital democracy’

- 12 Looking towards the future, there might be opportunities to learn from the experiences of holding meetings online and to consider this learning to shape future practices. The Council has shown that virtual meetings can work well, and there might be financial, time and environmental benefits to providing online meeting facilities in the future. All of which might have the potential to improve value for money.
- 13 Many councillors have shown their ability to embrace the use of technology for online meetings. There may be further opportunities to gain insights from members on any member development and training that may help them to participate more effectively in online meetings.
- 14 There are some challenges in holding formal meetings exclusively online, at this stage there may be opportunities to gain insights about the effectiveness of these arrangements. Further engagement with the public to gather views about their experiences of observing meetings during this period could also help to provide timely feedback on the effectiveness of these arrangements from their perspective.