

Finance Committee

FIN(3)-21-10 : Paper 6

Financial Implications of the Local Government (Wales) Measure – Information from the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, Wales Branch

Dear Ms Burns,

I am writing this email to you in your capacity of Chair of the Finance Committee.

The Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, Wales Branch (“ACSeS”) gave evidence recently, alongside WLGA and SOLACE, to Legislation Committee No. 3 about the proposed Local Government Measure. That evidence included some comments on the financial implications of the proposed Measure.

I have recently become aware of your committee’s meeting of 4th November, when the Minister gave evidence of the financial aspects of the Measure. I have been waiting for the transcript of the meeting to be published, but because this has not yet happened, and because your committee may well be preparing its report to the Legislation Committee, I have to rely on the web broadcast of the Committee’s proceedings.

ACSeS is concerned that the committee considers the full requirements as outlined in detail in the Measure, in particular relating to the ‘remote access’ provisions contained in section 4 of the Measure. This section is detailed:-

- It says that the remote member must see, hear, and be seen, and be heard by, both the councillors and the members of the public who are in the meeting room.
- It says that the remote members must be able to hear each other.
- It applies to all meetings – committee meetings and full Council, wherever they may be held.
- It allows up to 50% of the members of a given meeting to ‘attend’ remotely.

If these requirements are not satisfied, then the proceedings of the meeting could be held to be invalid.

ACSeS is concerned that the final impression left upon the committee was of a much simpler requirement than the Measure prescribes and that this was reflected in the exchange between you and the Minister at the end of that section of the meeting:

Q: “(is this) just someone with a camera on a pc at home, streamed into a network to some kind of display in a Council Chamber or committee room – we’re talking about that level?”

A: “Absolutely, and no more than that”.

The evidence given by ACSeS was an illustration of broadcasting by webcast, of the proceedings of a full Council only, i.e., not of its committees, which will increase the

costs further. The cost to Cardiff of this alone was given as £21,000 pa., and needs two members of staff to operate it. This is a system that picks out individual members as they speak – very similar to that operating in the Assembly’s Chamber and the committee rooms. You and your colleagues will be aware of the number of cameras needed for this operation at the Assembly.

However:

- Our examples are only of systems that broadcast outwards – none of these examples represent the two-way system which section 4 of the Measure requires, and ACSes remains of the view that the costs set out in the Explanatory Memorandum are very significantly below what the legislation would require.
- These are costs of broadcasting from one room only – the Measure as currently drafted will require similar facilities to be available in each committee room or place where a meeting is held.
- These figures do not include the acquisition costs of hardware (cameras etc)., which no council has yet incurred.

Whilst the WAG view at Committee appeared to be that we would not need anything as sophisticated as Cardiff’s approach, the fact is that you would need something more sophisticated, with more cameras and screens, probably with additional staff operating the equipment, and that would need to be replicated in every committee room, not just the council chamber.

ACSes feels it important to draw this to the committee’s attention, and I would be grateful for confirmation that this will be done.

Ian Medicott
Policy Officer
Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, Wales Branch