

Meeting of:	COUNCIL
Date of Meeting:	22 NOVEMBER 2023
Report Title:	MULTI-LOCATION MEETINGS POLICY REVIEW
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CHIEF OFFICER, LEGAL AND REGULATORY SERVICES, HR AND CORPORATE POLICY
Responsible Officer:	RACHEL KEEPINS DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER AND HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	If approved, the policy will be published on the council's website.
Executive Summary:	<p>Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, local authorities are required to put in place, and publish, arrangements for multi-location meetings, that is, formal meetings where meeting participants may not all be in the same physical place.</p> <p>The Authority's Multi-location Meetings Policy was approved by Council in June 2022 with the proposal that this be reviewed in 12 months' time.</p> <p>This report presents suggested amendments to the policy for consideration and approval by Council, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removing reference to the pandemic and the requirement for any social distancing; • The request for all participants of meetings to keep cameras on for the full duration of the meeting; • Clarification on the Chair's responsibility for any voting process during multi-location meetings; • Clarification on the process for Members declaring prejudicial interests during multi-location meetings; • Clarification of officer support arrangements; • Updated guidance for participants joining a remote meeting; and • Updated guidance for Chairs.

	It also asks Members to consider whether a more flexible approach would be acceptable when considering which meetings should be entirely remote in line with the policy itself.
--	--

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide full Council with proposed amendments to the Multi-Location Meetings Policy for approval as part of a policy review.

2. Background

- 2.1 Section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 makes provision to allow for “remote meetings”. At the outset of the Covid-19 Pandemic in March 2020 the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 enabled local authorities to convene meetings by remote means.
- 2.2 Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, local authorities are required to put in place, and publish, arrangements for multi-location meetings, that is, formal meetings where meeting participants may not all be in the same physical place. The meeting arrangements are comprised of the rules and procedures adopted by the local authority in accordance with the statutory requirements, and should be reflected in the Council’s Constitution.
- 2.3 Alongside the legally mandated arrangements that authorities must make for multi-location meetings, authorities should develop a wider policy setting out the detailed systems chosen by the authority for the operation of its multi-location meetings.
- 2.4 At its meeting on 15 June 2022, a Multi-location Meetings Policy was approved by Council that took account of interim statutory guidance issued by Welsh Government (WG), which set out a number of guiding principles to be considered in developing multi-location meeting arrangements, as well as practical considerations. The guidance also listed suggested issues to be included in the policy but indicated that the exact contents of the policy will be agreed at local level.
- 2.5 The report also proposed a review be undertaken after 12 months from the implementation of the policy.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 The WG guidance says: ‘A multi-location meetings policy may make provision that different kinds of meeting be convened, by default, with all participants joining through remote means, or with some arrangement being made for people to attend and participate and observe in person. Policies should recognise that the Act requires participants to be able to join meetings through remote means for all formal meetings. It will not be permitted for relevant authorities to decide that all meetings will be held entirely physically. Physical meetings should not be seen as representing the “gold standard” with multi-location meetings being second best. Physical meetings may be convenient and effective for those most familiar with and comfortable with how they work – but they may also be inaccessible and impractical to many.’

- 3.2 Following the approval of the Multi-location Meetings Policy and new equipment and systems being introduced in the Council chamber, Multi-location, or 'Hybrid' meetings commenced in October 2022.
- 3.3 Overall these meetings have been successful and have allowed for Members, Officers and the public, to access Council and Cabinet meetings either in person, in the Council chamber, or remotely from various locations.
- 3.4 In light of the review, it was felt an opportune time to update the policy with slight amendments relating to both the changing circumstances of the Authority and the pandemic, as well as clarification for various circumstances.
- 3.5 The updated policy is attached at **Appendix A** with proposed changes incorporated. These include:
- Removing reference to the pandemic and the requirement for any social distancing;
 - The request for all participants of meetings to keep cameras on for the full duration of the meeting;
 - Clarification on the Chair's responsibility for any voting process during multi-location meetings;
 - Clarification on the process for Members declaring prejudicial interests during multi-location meetings;
 - Clarification of officer support arrangements;
 - Updated guidance for participants joining a remote meeting;
 - Updated guidance for Chairs.
- 3.6 The Democratic Services Committee met on 26 October 2023 to discuss the proposed amended policy. The Committee made the following comments and recommendation:
- Members were very supportive of keeping cameras on in meetings. This was particularly the case when it came to contributing to discussions and important meetings involving votes. This was an issue of transparency and accountability.*
- The Committee therefore recommended that in support of the policy, cameras remain on for all meetings with exception being given to circumstances where there are possibly network issues, with notification and agreement of this with the Chair. It was noted that where network issues were consistent for an individual Member, provision of additional ICT support would be considered.*
- 3.7 Within the policy and Welsh Government guidance it is referenced that there is no requirement for each meeting to be held in the same way every time it meets. The Council may decide to hold some meetings entirely remotely and others as multi-location meetings with a number of councillors (or most councillors) present in the Chamber.
- 3.8 Whilst attendance of Members in person for meetings was considerably high following the commencement of multi-location meetings in October 2022, and remains as such for meetings such as full Council and Development Control

Committee, there have been dwindling numbers since this time for many other committees and on numerous occasions there have been no more than 3 Members attending in person.

3.9 The policy states that: *'In determining which meetings may be held wholly through remote meetings and for which physical arrangements might be made available, the Council will consider:*

- *The general circumstances of participants. Participants' needs and preferences may change over time. This Policy allows for arrangements to change where this happens.*
- *The subject matter, and number of participants attending, certain meetings. This may relate to the general matters usually under discussion at a given committee (or other body) rather than the specific agenda for an individual meeting.*
- *The need to ensure that meetings are fully accessible to both active participants and to observers. Accessibility may under certain circumstances require physical provision. Connected to this, whether physical provision for a public gallery, or for the attendance of certain participants, is necessary if the majority of a meeting's participants are joining through remote means'.*

3.10 The Democratic Services Committee briefly discussed the flexible nature of hybrid meetings and whether some committees could go fully remote in some instances, broadly supporting the practice followed by Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council, where Members were canvassed in advance about whether they would be attending a meeting in person or remotely. The Democratic Services Manager agreed to research other local authorities' approaches and report back to the Committee for consideration.

3.11 Given the resource intensive nature of supporting multi-location meetings, Democratic Services will continue to monitor the numbers of Members attending hybrid meetings in person over this municipal year with a view to reviewing this at the Annual Meeting of Council in May 2024.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations Implications and Connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 The well-being goals identified in the Act were considered in the preparation of this report. It is considered that there is no significant or unacceptable impact upon the achievement of well-being goals/objectives as a result of this report.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There are no Climate Change implications as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 There are no Safeguarding or Corporate Parent implications as a result of this report.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 There are ongoing discussions and improvements that are being considered for the Council chamber to assist with hybrid meetings, the costs for which will be considered by the Chief Officer - Finance, Performance & Change and the Head of Partnership Services. The only potential cost arising directly out of this report and the proposed changes to the policy relate to the possible provision of additional ICT hardware that may have to be purchased should some Members persistently struggle with internet connection when keeping their cameras on. These will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis with a clear business case provided by the Democratic Services Manager, approved by the relevant Business Manager and Finance Officer, and funded from within the existing Democratic Services Budget.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that Council:

- a) Note the comments and recommendation of the Democratic Services Committee at paragraph 3.6.
- b) Approve the proposed amended Council's Multi-location Meetings Policy attached at Appendix A;

Background documents

None