

Multi-location meetings policy

Background

Formal meetings of the Council or its committees are convened in accordance with the relevant legislative requirements for those meetings. These meetings are usually held to make formal decisions and are often held in public. Notice of these meetings is published in advance on the Council's website and includes information about the location, timing and business to be conducted. Previously these meetings would have been held with all participants being in physical attendance at a single venue.

Multi-location meetings offer the Council the potential to update and transform the way it does business. It provides opportunities for the Council to become more flexible and efficient and also raise its profile in the local community and to bring its work directly into people's homes. Public access to multi-location meetings is likely to be significantly higher than the level of audiences of formal meetings when all were held physically. This heightened public awareness and involvement is to be welcomed and further encouraged. While these meetings are still "meetings in public" rather than "public meetings" by and large the public will be able to observe but not participate they provide a crucial opportunity for accountability and transparency, and an accessible shop window for many public bodies.

Arrangements were first made in legislation to allow for "remote meetings" in Section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Welsh Government produced the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020. These established a framework within which all relevant authorities convened meetings by remote means throughout 2020 and part of 2021. Experience of operating meetings under these Regulations has provided relevant authorities with significant expertise in understanding and managing multi-location meetings, now they have been placed on a new statutory footing. The provisions in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021("the 2021Act") can be seen as an evolution of these prior arrangements.

Under the 2021 Act Welsh Government has provided local authorities the power and freedom to convene multi-location meetings which will enable greater accessibility and public participation in local government decision making. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers. Local Authorities are required to:

- a. Broadcast full Council meetings.
- b. Make and publish arrangements to ensure that all Council, Committee and Cabinet meetings may be attended remotely (i.e. enabling persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting) – also referred to as 'multi-location meetings'.
 - 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 (although authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings).
 - Meeting participants must be able to speak to and hear each other; and for meetings which are required to be broadcast (i.e. full Council meetings), participants must also be able to see and be seen by each other.

- c. Publish all meeting documents on the Council's website, including notices, summonses, agendas, reports and background papers
- A note of the meeting, including Members in attendance and decisions made, must be published within seven working days of the meeting.
 - Notice of meetings is no longer required to be posted at the Council's offices. However, copies of agendas and reports must be made available for the public if meetings are held physically.
 - The Council is also required to make public access provision for Members of the public who cannot access electronic documents, for example, by providing access to computers, copies of documents, or making documents available for inspection.

Definitions of words used in this Policy

Generally, the words used in this Policy have the same meaning as they do in the 2021 Act.

A **“relevant authority”** is an organisation which is required to put in place arrangements for multi-location meetings. This covers principal councils, fire and rescue authorities, National parks authorities and port health authorities. It also includes joint committees of these bodies. The obligations of corporate joint committees (CJCs) and of community and town councils are covered in separate guidance.

A **“meeting”** is a formal meeting of a relevant authority convened in accordance with whatever the legal requirements are for such meetings. Formal meetings are usually those where formal decisions can be made; these meetings may need to be held in public and that notice is published beforehand that they are being held. This is not always the case as some meetings, or parts of meetings, are held in private due to confidentiality or exempt issues being discussed. When we talk about these meetings being “convened”, we mean the process involved in organising the meeting and setting and distributing an agenda and reports.

A **“multi-location meeting”** is a meeting of a relevant authority whose participants are not all in the same physical place. In some places these are colloquially described as “remote” meetings. The 2021 Act does not refer to these meetings as “remote”, but that they are attended by “persons who are not in the same place”. At least one participant may be joining the meeting by remote means. For example, this includes meetings of the type described below:

- Meetings of a committee where all participants are in the same physical location except one individual who joins from another location, with a physical public gallery being provided;
- Meetings of a committee where a roughly equal number of Members are present in a physical space and joining through remote means; those joining through remote means may include the Chair;
- Meetings of a committee where all Members are joining through remote means but nonetheless a physical public gallery has been made available in authority premises;
- Meetings of a committee taking place wholly through remote means where no physical arrangements have been made.

Some have described the kinds of meetings described above as “hybrid meetings”.

The statutory guidance and the 2021 Act makes no distinction between meetings where some participants join by remote means and those where all participants do so, but the Council will need to account for the practical differences that different forms of meetings will take, and make plans accordingly.

“Joining a meeting by remote means” is being in a different physical location to that of other participants, and participating through an online meeting platform. Where participants are present in a committee room or other physical space which is publicised (through a formal notice) as being the location of the meeting, those participants are present physically.

A **“participant”** of a multi-location meeting is a person who takes an active part in that meeting. They might be a Member, a person giving evidence to a committee as a witness, an appellant or claimant on a regulatory matter, someone presenting a petition, or taking part formally in another way.

An **“observer”** of a multi-location meeting is a member of an audience, or otherwise spectating, a multi-location meeting. They might be in the same room that a meeting is taking place or they might be observing by remote means.

“Meeting arrangements” are the rules and procedures that relevant authorities adopt to act on their statutory requirements relating to multi-location meetings, and to act on the recommendations in this guidance.

The benefits of multi-location meetings

The Council convened all its meetings by remote means throughout 2020 and 2021 and has subsequently been operating hybrid arrangements. Whilst this has been challenging it also resulted in a number of benefits

- Enhancing and supporting local democracy. Having the flexibility to convene meetings in this way will reduce the barriers that might previously have been in place for explaining and demonstrating how relevant authorities do business.
- Working more productively. When participants come together by remote means, they have often been able to get more done. Multi-location meetings have also resulted in a dramatic reduction in the amount of paper needed and produced.
- Making it easier for the public to observe meetings.
- Making the Council more resilient and sustainable in how it carries out its work. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires relevant authorities to think about, and act on, long term needs in the way that policy is developed and made. Multi-location meetings reduce the carbon footprint of physical meetings (although digital activity is not of course carbon-neutral). They can also help relevant authorities to reduce the risk of future unexpected events, such as extreme weather, which could in future present a challenge to in-person meetings. Issues of sustainability are explored in more detail below.
- Reducing the need for travel. Significant time and cost savings for councillors, officers and other participants have arisen. In turn, this makes it easier for participants to take part if they have professional and caring commitments potentially removing some significant barriers to standing for public office.
- Better support for Members from diverse backgrounds, including support that recognises the social model of disability. Just as barriers are being removed to public participation, multi-location meetings have made it easier for care providers, or disabled people, or people with other protected characteristics, to engage on an equal footing. In some cases, participants

have found the formality of physical meetings to be off putting, and multi-location meetings have removed this factor.

General Principles

The Council will be guided by the following principles when making arrangements for multi-location meetings:

Transparency

Formal meetings of the Council will be spaces in which democratic debate and decision-making happen. It is fundamental that these meetings are held in public (subject to the specific exceptions available), and that the public are able to access and engage with them.

Accessibility

Meeting arrangements will need to have regard for the protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, including ensuring that accessibility is considered in the context of the social model of disability, and for ensuring that the impact of its decisions on democratic arrangements are understood from these perspectives.

Good conduct

In line with the Nolan Principles, multi-location meetings, as with any other public meeting, should demonstrate high standards of conduct. The Council will have regard to the Model Code of Conduct when making meeting arrangements. Meeting arrangements shall account for the need to entrench more positive behaviours, particularly where these meetings involve a number of people together in a single physical location, where different dynamics may arise.

Use of English and Welsh Languages

Adherence to legal requirements relating to the use of the English and Welsh languages is a legal requirement. It is a fundamental element of the obligations attached to public bodies in Wales – separate legislation and guidance exists. The Council will take account of its individual Welsh Language Standards and ensure that English and Welsh are treated equally and the Welsh Language is supported and promoted.

Local Needs

The Council is a democratic institution. Decisions about local democracy and the best approaches to promote and encourage engagement in local democratic systems are best made at a local level. The Council's approach to meeting arrangements will be aligned with its plans for ensuring public participation in accordance with the 2021 Act and understanding the specific needs of a wide range of local people will be part of this.

Future generations

In agreeing arrangements for meetings, the Council will have regard to the well-being goals and ways of working as set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and ensure that the principles under the Act are actively embedded in arrangements for meetings. Digitisation has the potential to significantly reduce the Council's carbon footprint and the reduction in travel will also add to the reduction in the carbon footprint.

Meeting Environment in the Council

The Council's Chamber at Civic Offices, Angel Street will have the ability to fully support multi-location meetings. Any multi-location Committee meeting will be facilitated by the Democratic Services Team who will use the control systems to ensure that the full range of meeting facilities and functionality can be co-ordinated and integrated for all participants and observers to deliver effective meeting support. The control systems will provide and co-ordinate cameras, audio inputs and outputs, simultaneous translation (where requested), speaker queues, electronic voting, integration with the Council webcasting provider and to support participants and observers.

Multi-location meeting platform

The Council's technology platform has been arranged in line with ICT and Procurement policies and provides for the following:

- The ability for participants to be able to see and hear each other, and the facility for outbound and inbound video and audio to be switched on and off either by a participant themselves or potentially also for a meeting organiser.
- The ability for participants to be named / labelled so that others can easily identify them.
- The ability for participants and observers to be able to join via mobile, or tablet, without losing significant functionality.
- The ability to provide for simultaneous translation (upon request).
- The ability to both record and broadcast the meeting and for participants and observers to know when recording and broadcasting is taking place.
- The ability to caption or subtitle, either live (which may be partially or fully automated) or through editing after the meeting has taken place.
- A "chat" facility visible only to meeting participants, and which can be turned off by the meeting organiser if necessary.
- Sufficient security measures to ensure that the meeting cannot be accessed by unauthorised persons, and to ensure that unauthorised persons can be ejected from the meeting where necessary.

The Council will continue to use Microsoft Teams as its primary remote meeting platform. This will be used by Elected Members from their Council provided devices to ensure effective security. Non-Council devices may be used although the functionality available when using these "guest" devices may differ from that provided by the Council. Other participants are able to join meetings using links provided by the Council contained within the meeting invitation.

Determining the type of Meeting

The Statutory Guidance identifies that the needs of local democracy and the needs of the public in engaging with multi-location meetings are a paramount consideration in deciding where and when meetings will be convened partially or wholly by remote means. The intention of the 2021 Act is to help the public to be able to access and engage with local democratic systems. The convenience of participants and the efficient operation of the

Council is important but the needs of the public will come first when these decisions are being made.

The Council has the following committees which support its statutory, regulatory and governance arrangements and all meetings must be able to operate as multi-location meetings to ensure that participants are able to attend remotely:

- Appeals Panel
- Appointments Committee
- Cabinet, Cabinet Committee - Corporate Parenting, Cabinet Committee -Equalities
- Council
- Democratic Services Committee
- Development Control Committee
- Governance and Audit Committee
- Licensing Act 2003 Committee, Licensing Act 2003 Sub Committees A & B
- Licensing Committee, Licensing Sub Committees A & B
- Rights of Way Sub Committee
- Standards Committee
- Town and Community Council Forum
- Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committees 1, 2 and 3
- Public Service Board

There are also joint committees administered by the Council.

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. 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.

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. All meetings that meet the required communication and quorate arrangements have equal status under the law.

Notice of meetings

Public notice of all meetings is published on the Council's website with the agendas and reports published at least three clear days before the meeting. The notice will include details of how to access the meeting if it is being held by remote means only and the place in which the meeting is being held if it is partly or wholly taking place physically. The requirement of

hard copy material being on public deposit has now been removed however the Council will put in place facilities for members of the public who are not able to access the documents electronically.

The names of those who attended the public meeting alongside apologies, declarations of interest and decisions made will be published on the Council's website within seven days of the meeting taking place.

Attendance

The attendance of Members and participants will be recorded by Democratic Services. This will be by recording their attendance on a sign in sheet at a physical meeting or using the attendance record from the software to confirm remote attendance. These records will be combined and added into the minutes of the committee meeting.

Participants attending the meeting remotely should ensure that they have appropriate internet connectivity to join and maintain their attendance throughout. Guidance for joining a remote meeting is available at Appendix 1. The Monitoring Officer will provide consistent advice to the Chair over whether a Member should or should not be regarded as "present". This will be particularly important for the taking of votes but is also relevant for participation in meetings more generally. It will have relevance for determining whether a Member has attended a council meeting in the past six months in accordance with Section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972. All Elected Members are encouraged to physically attend at least one meeting every six months for each committee to which they are appointed.

Where a Member is in the "waiting room" on an online platform they will not be considered as "present" as they cannot be seen and heard by others, cannot see and hear others and can play no active part in the meeting.

External participants (invitees, officers, members of the public asking questions in accordance with the Constitution and Rules of Procedure) will be contacted by Democratic Services to confirm their attendance and will be advised how they join the meeting either as a physical or remote participant and the meeting procedures. If they are joining the meeting remotely an electronic meeting invitation will be sent.

Members of the public will be able to attend the physical element of multi-location meetings from the public gallery.

Webcasting

Webcasting provides transparency, governance and accountability by giving members of the public, Elected Members, officers and other parties the opportunity to observe meetings without having to attend in person and for the Council to have an official audio and visual record of its decision making process.

All of the formal committees outlined above will be either streamed live or recorded for subsequent upload onto the Council's website after the meeting.

Use of cameras during remote meetings

The Local Government and Election (Wales) Act 2021 stipulates that participants of meetings that are broadcast must be able to "speak to and be heard by each other" and "to see and to be seen by each other". Members attending remotely are required to keep their cameras on for the duration of the meeting in order to maintain the integrity of the decision making process.

There may however be occasions when a remote participant may need to disable their camera in order to stabilise their connection to the meeting due to internet issues or because they have been temporarily interrupted by events at their location. If this occurs the participant should inform the Chair and Democratic Services via the hands up function.

The taking of votes

The voting arrangements will reflect the requirements in the Council's Constitution.

Immediately before the vote the Chair will need to determine that all Members continue to be "present".

To negate the need for a formal vote, the Chair may seek a consensus from the meeting participants. In person, the Chair is able to get a sense of whether consensus exists.

Special care will be taken

where participants are joining through remote means to ensure that consent is present to move on without a vote. If however, there are objections the Chair will instigate a vote.

The Council will ensure that all voters have the same opportunity to vote through the same process whether attending remotely or physically.

There are a number of different options when it comes to recording votes:

- A verbal roll call of those Members entitled to vote. The Democratic Services Officer will ask each Member individually if they are for or against the recommendation or if they wish to abstain from the vote. If a Member cannot be contacted to provide their vote, the Officer will continue with the roll call vote and return to those participants who have not responded. If the Member cannot be contacted after a second attempt and there is a quorum in attendance at the meeting the participant will be considered as not in attendance. When all of the Members in attendance have given their vote, the Democratic Services Officer will collate all of the responses and inform the Chair of the outcome of the vote and in way that it is understandable to those who may be observing the meeting.
- Dedicated voting software incorporated into the Council's platform.

Exempt matters

The Council will need to consider exempt matters in private. This may be for a range of reasons which are set out in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. When such information is to be considered at a formal meeting, the agenda will schedule those items at the end of the meeting so as to minimise any inconvenience to observers who will be required to leave the meeting.

The meeting recording and webcasting will be paused and in the physical part of the meeting any observers will be requested to leave the room whilst the exempt information is being considered.

When consideration of the information has been completed and there are further public items to be considered, the recording and webcast will resume and observers or participants attending the physical meeting will be invited to return into the meeting venue by Democratic Services.

Elected Members who are attending the meeting remotely must activate their cameras for any exempt items. Those members must ensure they are at a location where they can participate in the meeting privately and that the meeting cannot be overheard.

Prejudicial Interests

Where a participant has declared a prejudicial interest in an item they will be required to leave the meeting for the duration of the relevant item. If the participant is physically present they will leave the room entirely while the discussion is underway.

If the participant is joining by remote means and has declared a prejudicial interest, they should leave or be removed for the duration of consideration of that item. Participants with prejudicial interests are required to not observe the broadcast of the meeting while outside.

Once the matter has been concluded, Democratic Services should immediately notify the participant so that they can re-join the meeting, and the meeting should not continue until they have re-joined (otherwise they shall be marked as not present for any further items).

Training

All Members will be provided with an appropriate induction to enable them to actively participate in meetings. This will include the use of the software for joining and participating in physical and remote meetings, meeting procedures and any committee specific procedures.

A guide to joining formal meetings remotely is available at Appendix 1.

Officer support arrangements

Different meetings will require different kinds of support from Democratic Services, and others. Primary support for multi-location committee meetings will be provided by Democratic Services and technical support may be provided by ICT Officers to ensure that the technology used during meetings operates effectively and that the meeting can be progressed as planned.

Council Officers who support committee meetings, such as Legal, Planning, Licensing will be provided with technical training to ensure they can support the meeting Chair if necessary.

Chairing Meetings

Chairing a multi-location meeting is very different to chairing a face-to-face meeting. Chairs will need to be supported to carry out their role in specific ways. The role will be particularly challenging where a meeting is being carried out in a physical space with only some participants joining through remote means.

Guidance for Chairs is available at Appendix 2.

Appendix 1 - Guidance for participants joining a remote meeting

- ✓ Make sure that you set up your device in an area which is secure so that no disturbance occurs during the course of the meeting as it is important to ensure a degree of formality in the proceedings. . Remember that you should be the only person able to hear any confidential or exempt items being discussed and this includes any verbal contribution you make to the debate or vote.
- ✓ Ensure that your internet connection is sufficiently strong in that location to join and remain connected for the full duration of the meeting. If your broadband signal is weak you may wish to consider attending the physical meeting location. The legislation requires that you are able to be seen and heard.
- ✓ Ensure that you have the Council's Corporate background and there is nothing that can be seen when you are on camera which may compromise your privacy or challenge your professionalism.
- ✓ If you are joining a meeting from your car, you must not be driving and must be stopped in a safe environment where you can concentrate on the call. Pulling over does not reduce the risk unless you are in a safe place. You should decline the meeting and follow up with the Democratic Services Team if you don't feel safe.
- ✓ Turn your microphone off, but be ready to activate it if you are called to speak. You should deactivate it when you have finished speaking to lessen background noise/interference for others.
- ✓ Turn off any noisy gadgets which may be distracting to yourself or other participants.
- ✓ Ensure that your device is connected to the Council's Network between meetings to enable you to receive and manage the latest software and security updates.
- ✓ Check that Microsoft Teams is installed and you are able to connect to others.
- ✓ Check that your microphone is working and that the settings are correct. Too loud and there may be some feedback - too quiet and you and the observers won't be able to hear you. Consider using headphones or earphones (with a microphone).
- ✓ Ensure that the camera is positioned to provide a clear, front-on view of your face. If your camera is active during a meeting the "observers" may still be able to see you when you are using other applications on the same screen and you can't see them.
- ✓ Fully charge your equipment and ensure that you have easy access to charging facilities as remote meetings have a higher than normal power consumption.
- ✓ Ensure you know how to mute/unmute your microphone and to switch your camera on and off.
- ✓ Familiarise yourself with the Democratic Services contact details should you have any difficulties during the meeting.

- ✓ When reading the reports consider whether you have any “Declarations of Interest” that you will need to be made at the meeting. Inform Democratic Services of any declarations that you need to make (as these will be read out at the start of a remote meeting) or contact the Monitoring Officer well in advance of the meeting if you need advice. Do not wait until just before a meeting as this will be problematic to provide you with the appropriate advice. Once you have received any advice please ensure you let Democratic Services know if you will be declaring an interest.

Appendix 2 - Guidance for Chairs

Chairs have a particular responsibility to prepare for the meeting, probably in a more planned and directed way than might be necessary for a physical meeting. The following principles are reproduced from the Statutory Guidance on multi-location meetings and incorporates Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Guidance.

Prior to the meeting the Chair should:

- confirm the purpose and outcomes for each item on the agenda.
- ensure that any information essential for consideration at the meeting, is made available to participants.
- identify where participants may wish to contribute in the meeting.
- ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to support effective participation.
- confirm that all participants (which may include external participants and Members of the public or others) fully understand their role and how they can actively contribute to the meeting.
- ensure that they are aware of which participants are joining remotely.
- consider the accessibility of the meeting to the public, ensuring that observers are welcomed and that the business of the meeting is explained in a way that is understandable, including the operation of the multilocation meeting itself.
- ensure that they are prepared for the meeting in a logistical sense by being aware of which Members and other participants may be joining by remote means.
- provide a reminder of meeting arrangements and policies, particularly relating to conduct and behaviour, and any advice on voting arrangements.
- introduce themselves, the committee, officers present and other participants to ensure that those watching or listening to a broadcast are aware who is in attendance at the meeting.
- identify how a support officer or other Member may bring their attention someone wishing to make a comment through remote means or in the committee room.
- occasionally confirm throughout the meeting that no one has been ‘lost’ due to technical issues and provide support to Members experiencing challenges although additional support may be needed from supporting officers.

During the meeting the Chair should:

- brief participants on expectations.
- frame the meeting with reminders of the purpose of each agenda item, summarise decisions and actions for each item and again at the end of the meeting.

- plan for the debate to be themed or otherwise structured rather than inviting comments generally, to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute.
- develop an understanding the motivations and objectives of individual participants on specific agendas items and a sense what they may want to say and ask.
- avoid people speaking over each other or long silences, ask each Member in turn for their contribution to an item, based on an understanding of what Members wish to contribute
- ensure that breaks are taken at least every 90 minutes. Breaks should be for a minimum of 10 minutes.
- check that all Members are content, that they have been able to contribute, and if necessary, provide a reminder of any voting arrangements.