



Discussion Paper for Multi-location Meetings

April 2023

Introduction

The Welsh Government Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales states that a policy on multi-location meetings which is distinct and sitting alongside the mandated arrangement of the legal “meeting arrangements”, will make it clear to those involved where processes are put in place because of legal requirements, and where local decisions have been made about the operation of multi-location meetings.

The policy should set out more detailed procedures to ensure that multi-location meetings work effectively and reflecting the consideration of local circumstances in deciding what approaches are ultimately adopted. The process should be led by those involved in participating in meetings and supporting those meetings’ operations – always informed by the needs and expectations of the public. The guidance states: *‘For local authorities The Democratic Services Committee is expected to lead this process.’*

Types of Meetings

The Welsh Government Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales describes a “multi-location meeting” as *‘a meeting of the relevant authority whose participants are not in the same physical place’*, stating that *‘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.*

Ceredigion County Council Categories of Meetings

Section 15.15 of the guidance, states that this guidance and Section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 *‘makes no distinction between meetings where some participants join by remote means and those where all participants do so, but meeting arrangements will need to account for the practical differences that different forms of meetings will take, and make plans accordingly’*.

For the purpose of this policy, and to make a distinction between the two types of meetings noted above, Ceredigion County Council will refer to a meeting where some participants join by remote means as **‘hybrid meetings’**, and those where all participants do so as **‘remote meetings’**.

The requirements of the first 3 examples above are best met via a **hybrid meeting**. This means that all participants and observers are able to attend the meeting in a committee room, namely The Council Chamber in Penmorfa, Aberaeron or via an online meeting platform. The requirements of the 4th example is best met by via a **remote meeting**. This means that the meeting will only be available via an online meeting platform.

Benefits of multi-location meetings

The guidance outlines the following benefits resulting from multi-location meetings:

- Enhancing and supporting local democracy, reducing barriers that might previously have been in place
- Working more productively. When participants come together by remote means, they have often been able to get more done.
- Making it easier for the public to attend meetings, with public attendance via multi-location meetings reportedly higher than previous via in person meetings, and examples where the public have found multi-locations meetings to be less intimidating, and having the potential to encourage more people to stand for public office.

The guidance also states that for some, *'multi-location meetings will also present challenges – for example those with poor broadband connections or disabled people unable to access meetings over the internet for other reasons'*.

Considerations for deciding on the type of meeting

In deciding which meetings are best met via a hybrid style, and which are best met via a remote style, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which requires relevant authorities to think about, and act on, long term needs in the way that policy is developed and made
- The reduced carbon footprint
- Reducing the risk of future unexpected events, such as extreme weather, or equipment failure
- Making the use of the Welsh language much easier
- Reducing the need for travel and associated costs and time pressures, especially where relevant authorities cover large geographical areas
- Making it easier for participants to take part if they have professional and caring responsibilities, potentially removing some barriers to standing for 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

- Better behaviour, making it easier for the Chair to understand who wants to make a contribution, although it is harder to read body language

In addition to this, supporting hybrid meetings is very resource intensive, requiring 2 Officers from Democratic Services to attend each meeting.

Below is a table which provides data for attendance at meetings between May 2022 and end of March 2023, which shows the percentage of members that attended each meeting in person, remotely and how many noted their apologies:

	No. of meetings	No. of members	In person	Remotely	Apologies
Council	10	38	72.03%	17.68%	10.29%
Cabinet	11	8	81.82%	15.91%	2.27%
Democratic Services Committee	3	6	38.89%	38.89%	22.22%
Development Management Committee	9	15	54.81%	30.37%	14.81%
Licensing Committees	4	11	40.48%	45.24%	14.29%
Ethics and Standards Committee	3	9	59.26%	25.93%	14.81%
Governance and Audit Committee	5	9	11.11%	73.33%	15.56%
O&S Coordinating Committee	8	10	58.75%	28.74%	13.74%
Charity Trustee Committee	2	10	50%	25%	25%
O&S Corporate Resources	5	13	44.44%	39.68%	14.29%
O&S Healthier Communities	4	13	51.92%	40.38%	7.69%
O&S Learning Communities	4	13	48.08%	30.77%	21.15%
O&S Thriving Communities	5	13	41.54%	47.69%	10.77%
Language Committee	2	6	50%	33.33%	16.67%

Recommendations for hybrid meetings

The Cabinet has seen the highest percentage of attendance in person. This committee, together with the Council and the Development Management Committee have the authority to make decisions, and as such members of the public may wish

to attend in person to hear the deliberations, even though they cannot take part in the proceedings of the Council or Cabinet meetings. The Cabinet and Council meetings are also live-streamed, and can be viewed at a later time, however taking everything into consideration it is recommended that these meetings continue to be operated as hybrid meetings.

Members of the public are able to participate in the following meetings:

- Development Management Committee
- Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee
- Overview and Scrutiny Corporate Resources
- Overview and Scrutiny Healthier Communities
- Overview and Scrutiny Learning Communities
- Overview and Scrutiny Thriving Communities

Taking into consideration the needs of the local community, it is recommended that these meetings continue to be operated as hybrid meetings in order to allow for an option to attend in person or remotely.

The Charity Trustee Committee is constituted from the same membership as that of the Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee, as it is usual practice for this meeting to be held immediately following the coordinating committee meeting, therefore for practicable reasons, it would be reasonable to apply the same arrangements for this committee.

It should be noted however that it may be necessary in certain circumstances for hybrid meetings to be held by remote means only, such as extreme weather when travelling to attend meetings in person presents risks to those taking part in the meeting, and to officers and translators who support the hybrid system. Where this is deemed necessary, all efforts will be made to notify all participants, and any members of the public that have informed the Democratic Services Officers of their intention to attend in person.

Recommendations for Remote Meetings

Taking into consideration the resource-intensive nature of holding hybrid meetings in addition to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the reduced carbon footprint, the reduced risk of future unexpected events such as extreme weather or equipment failure, the reduced travel costs and impact upon the budget and time pressures, and greater accessibility for individuals that may have professional and caring responsibilities, it is proposed that the Council carries out a pilot exercise in relation to one Committee for a period of 18 months whereby this committee is held on a remote only basis.

It is proposed that this exercise is carried out in relation to the Democratic Services Committee and the Governance and Audit Committee for the following reasons:

Democratic Services Committee

- This would provide this committee with a direct insight into the pilot exercise;

- The number of members attending in person compared to remotely is circa 50:50;
- Members of the public cannot contribute to this committee;

Governance and Audit Committee

- The majority of Members currently attend remotely (almost three-quarters);
- Members of the public cannot contribute to this committee;
- Membership of the Committee includes Lay Members and there is no requirement for Lay Members to live within reasonable travelling distance of the Council Chamber;
- The Chair of the Committee is a Lay Member, and all Committees held between May 2021 and March 2022 were Chaired remotely;
- Meetings are attended remotely by Audit Wales.

Subject to approval by Council, the Chair of each Committee will be notified of the decision, and following the pilot period, a report will be presented to the Democratic Services Committee to include feedback from both Committees to consider whether it wishes to extend the provision of remote meetings to other committees, or to revert to supporting all Committees in a hybrid manner.

All work-shops and training activities will be supported as remote meetings, unless there is specific justification for attendance in person or via hybrid means.