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**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE & LEGAL SERVICES**

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**REMOTE / MULTI-LOCATION MEETING ARRANGEMENTS**

**Reason for this Report**

1. To enable Members to consider new arrangements to be made for remote or multi-location meetings under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

**Background**

2. Under the Coronavirus Act 2020, the Welsh Ministers issued Regulations (The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020, 'the 2020 Meeting Regulations'), temporarily relaxing the rules for local authority meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 Meeting Regulations were intended to enable Councils to safely continue to discharge their functions during the pandemic, whilst adhering to public health restrictions and guidance.
3. In May 2020, the Council noted the arrangements being made for meetings to be held remotely using video conferencing facilities, in line with the provisions of the 2020 Meeting Regulations; and in June and September 2020 approved a programme of meetings, to be held remotely until any alternative arrangements may be agreed. Information and guidance was provided for Members setting out instructions on joining and participating in remote meetings. All meetings of Council, Cabinet and Committees have been held remotely, using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software, since May 2020 to date.
4. The provisions of the 2020 Meeting Regulations ended on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021 and have been replaced by new provisions for local authority meetings made under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, which took effect from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2021.
5. A report was presented to Annual Council in May 2021, giving an overview of the new legislative provisions regarding local authority meetings and some of the practical issues raised. As the rules for Council meetings are set out in the Constitution, it was noted that Constitution Committee would be asked to

consider what arrangements should be made for 'multi-location meetings' in Cardiff and to make recommendations to full Council for approval.

6. In the interim, full Council noted that the existing arrangements for remote meetings, agreed by Council in May 2020, would continue, until any revised arrangements are agreed.

## Issues

### The new legislative requirements

7. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 ('the 2021 Act'), Part 3, Chapter 4, requires local authorities to broadcast full Council meetings and to make and publish arrangements to ensure that all Council, Committee and Cabinet meetings may be attended remotely (ie. enabling persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting) – also referred to as 'multi-location meetings'.
8. Meetings must be capable of being held virtually, but individual authorities 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, referred to as 'hybrid meetings') or as physical meetings (although authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings).
9. Meeting participants must be able to speak to and hear each other; and for meetings which are required to be broadcast (ie. full Council meetings), participants must also be able to see and be seen by each other.
10. New provision is also made to make permanent the changes to electronic publication of meeting documentation, which were introduced by the 2020 Coronavirus Meeting Regulations. Under the 2021 Act, all meeting documents, including notices, summonses, agendas, reports and background papers must be published on the Council's website. A note of the meeting, including Members in attendance and decisions made, must be published within 7 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; and 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.)
11. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers. Draft interim statutory guidance was issued in May 2021 (**Appendix A**), and Welsh Government officials have advised that the draft guidance is currently awaiting Ministerial approval and is expected to be issued very soon. Members will be given a verbal update on this at the Committee meeting.

12. The draft statutory guidance indicates that the overall purpose of the new legislation is to give authorities powers and freedoms to convene meetings in a way which achieves greater accessibility and improved public participation in local government.
13. The draft guidance sets out a number of general principles to guide authorities when developing their meeting arrangements, namely, transparency, accessibility, good conduct, Welsh language, local needs and future generations – as detailed in section 2. This sets the framework within which authorities must consider options and decide the meeting arrangements which best suit the authority and the communities it serves. The draft guidance also confirms that the meeting arrangements should be incorporated into the procedure rules set out in the constitution.

#### Policy on Multi-Location Meetings

14. Alongside the legally mandated arrangements that authorities must make for multi-location meetings, the draft guidance says that authorities should develop a wider policy setting out the detailed systems chosen by the authority for the operation of its multi-location meetings. This policy should be developed in consultation with all meeting participants, including the public, and the Democratic Services Committee may take a lead role in this process.
15. Suggested points for inclusion in the policy are set out in the draft guidance (section 4), as well as guidance on various practical considerations, such as:
  - (i) The possibility of taking different approaches for different meetings
  - (ii) The IT platforms to be procured and used
  - (iii) Electronic publication of meeting notices, agendas and reports
  - (iv) Meeting attendance rules (when a participant is considered to be 'present')
  - (v) Support and advice during meetings, eg. chat functions
  - (vi) Supporting participants to take an active part in meetings
  - (vii) Supporting observers (including the public) to access and participate in meetings
  - (viii) Broadcasting of meetings
  - (ix) Chairing meetings
  - (x) Taking of votes
  - (xi) Training, peer support and sharing good practice

### Preparation for Multi-Location Meetings

16. Work has already commenced following a successful bid for grant funding from the Digital Democracy Fund to support the procurement of a Hybrid meeting system for initial use in County Hall. Following testing and implementation of this hybrid functionality, the operational experience gained from this will be used to inform the specification for procurement of a new conference system to support multi-location meetings, including City Hall. Funding of £220k for the new conferencing system has been allocated in the Capital Budget for use during 2021-22.

### IT Platforms

17. Although Microsoft Teams has been used for remote meetings during the pandemic, it is currently unable to effectively support dual language meetings. Microsoft has indicated that a multi-language capability should be available by the end of June 2021, but it is uncertain if this will be delivered. Initial preparations have been made to utilise the Zoom software, now that its security concerns have been addressed and it has proved to be effective for dual language Local Authority meetings.
18. It is being planned that the dual language meeting software (Microsoft Teams or Zoom) will be rapidly progressed in July with the intention to integrate the software with the hybrid meeting equipment and develop the essential procedure in August. This is anticipated to provide a fully integrated meeting system which will support multi-location meetings, following a period of Elected Member training in the use of the systems early in September.
19. Please note the number of attendees who may be physically present at these meetings, will necessarily be limited by the number of people the room can accommodate while meeting any ongoing social distancing requirements. It is proposed that the Chair of the meeting together with essential officer support for the Chair are given priority, and any remaining spaces will be allocated to the political groups in accordance with political balance. It is anticipated that the political groups will give priority to any members who have difficulties with their broadband connection.

### Electronic publication of meeting documents

20. The electronic publication of the meeting agenda and reports is supported by the use of Modern.gov software which includes publication of key documents in Welsh, in accordance with the Welsh Language Standards. The contract for Modern.gov is in place until June 2023.

### Broadcasting of meetings

21. The live-streaming, recording and broadcasting of Cardiff's formal meetings is provided by Public-i. The current contract is in place until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 and enables 200 hours of meetings to be broadcast each year. In 2020-21 a total

of 105 meetings were live-streamed or broadcast equating to approximately 203 hours. Additional hours can be purchased should more meetings need to be broadcast provided there is sufficient budget allocation.

#### Meeting Procedures and Support

22. Many of the points identified in paragraph 15 above, which need to be included in the multi-location meetings policy, relate to meeting procedures which will need to be developed further. This is likely to include: support for the chairperson to effectively manage remote and hybrid meetings, the support necessary to give external participants confidence to join and participate in a remote or hybrid meeting, and the development of an electronic voting system which can be used for all types of meetings.
23. A suite of procedures and support will be needed for inclusion in the Multi-Location Meetings Policy which will require a significant resource from Democratic and other Services to develop the software, hardware, meeting procedures and subsequently provide appropriate training to Elected Members and Officers to ensure that the intentions of the legislation are met.

#### Way forward

24. Members are invited to consider the issues set out in this report and the draft statutory guidance attached as **Appendix A** and provide views on:
  - (i) the arrangements and policy to be adopted for multi-location meetings, in particular, on the issues listed in paragraph 15 and 19 of this report and section 4 of the draft statutory guidance; and
  - (ii) an appropriate engagement process for seeking the views of Members, other meeting participants and members of the public on this matter.
25. Officers will then prepare draft proposals, reflecting the views expressed, which will be presented to Committee for further consideration, prior to making recommendations for approval by full Council.

#### **Legal Implications**

26. Relevant legal provisions are referred to in the body of the report.

#### **Financial Implications**

27. There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of the report. The report provides details of costs and sources of funding for remote / multi-location meeting arrangements and any further associated costs will require identified funding sources.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the information set out in the report and the draft statutory guidance, **Appendix A**;
2. Provide any comments on the arrangements and policy to be adopted for multi-location meetings, and the engagement process for seeking the views of Members, other meeting participants and members of the public;
3. Instruct the Director of Governance and Legal Services, in consultation with the Chair, to prepare draft proposals for multi-location meetings, reflecting the views expressed, for further consideration by the Committee; and
4. Receive a further report on this matter in due course.

**DAVINA FIORE**

**DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE AND LEGAL SERVICES AND  
MONITORING OFFICER**

15 June 2021

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A	Welsh Government's Interim Statutory Guidance on Multi-Location Meetings, draft May 2021
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### **Background papers**

Remote / Multi-Location Meeting Arrangements, report to Council, May 2021  
Governance report to Council, May 2020